



## LEARNING FROM COUNTRY EXHIBITION

Fisher Library, University of Sydney, 15 May – 31 July 2017

### CURATORIAL ESSAY

Country — or *ngurra*, in the local Luritja language — was the first word I learned in the Aboriginal community of Papunya when Ken and I went there in the winter of 1998.

We had been invited to work in the school by its Principal, Diane de Vere, who had recently encouraged the Anangu<sup>1</sup> staff to develop their own curriculum, known as the Papunya Model of Education. This is a curriculum model that places Country at the centre of all learning. Although it reflects the educational principles that Anangu have practised since the time of the *Tjukurrpa* (Law), it could be used to include the contemporary curriculum content of literacy, numeracy, science and so on. (I think of it as a lens, through which anything can be viewed.)

As well, the community had developed its own Vision for the education of its children, which was represented in a painting with accompanying text. This was displayed in the staffroom and also as a mural in the playground. For Ken and me, the crucial part of the Vision Painting was the lower right-hand corner, in which were depicted two white semi-circles (symbolising whitefellers) sitting outside and behind the dark symbols representing Anangu. This showed us that our role was to sit outside the circle, supporting the Anangu to bring their wisdom forward.

In 1998, the Papunya Model of Education was still very new, and while the school's Anangu staff and Elders had the knowledge needed to teach it, there were no resources for passing on this wisdom in the classroom. That was why Diane had brought Ken and me to the school: to help the Aboriginal staff and students to make curriculum resources. For Diane, my professional experience as a writer and Ken's practice as a painter were not in themselves the important thing: we were invited because both of us draw the inspiration for our work from place. *Ngurra* or Country, you might say. For all three of us, the visit was a leap in the dark.

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<sup>1</sup> *Anangu*: Literally meaning 'People', this is the collective word used by Aboriginal people in the Central and Western Desert. It includes many nations, including the five nations who live in Papunya.

At the end of those three weeks, when the Anangu staff invited us to come back next term and work again with them, it was the beginning of a journey. Over the coming four years, we went to Papunya for three or four weeks in every school term, and we spent a considerable part of our Sydney time preparing materials for our visits. Our brief continued to be the development of resources for the Papunya Model of Education, under the direction of the Anangu staff, and with the support of Diane de Vere and the school's teacher linguist, Jenny Wilson. It is important to stress that we did not go to the school in order to make the *Papunya School Book of Country and History*, or indeed any book. This came along at a later stage, and only after a lot of ground work had been done.



As I think back to our preparation for the *Papunya School Book of Country and History*, the most important thing, of course, was developing relationships with people. However, in practical terms, there was something significant for each of us. For Ken, it was to do with developing a palette of colour that came out of the *ngurra*, the Country. For me, it was about finding a written voice that could authentically express what Anangu wanted to say, and at the same time meet literacy standards both in English and in Luritja (the community language used in Papunya School).

During our first visit, Ken spent most of his time going around the community, drawing on site with the *wati* (young initiated men) from Wanatjiti class. As a whitefeller, Ken neither painted in the traditional style nor directed Anangu when they did so. However, the school's Anangu staff asked him to show the students how to make images look 'right way' in the whitefeller style of art, when it was appropriate to work in that style. Once the Wanatjiti students had done their individual drawings of Papunya's homes and public buildings, Ken worked with them to incorporate painted versions of these images into a large circular collaborative depiction of the community, with everything placed according to its compass-point orientation.

In his free time during this visit, Ken did some oil sketches from inside the yard of the house where we were living, and on weekends he went into the nearby *ngurra* and painted the landscape. As he did these paintings, he started to develop a palette of the colours needed to express the desert *ngurra* of the West MacDonnell Ranges. One day in the final week, a small group of senior painting men asked to see Ken's pictures, in order to establish whether Ken's work was 'right way'. Once these

Elders gave their approval, Ken had freedom on subsequent visits to move around the community and paint wherever he wished.

Meanwhile for me, the crucial thing was learning to write collaboratively. By this, I don't just mean writing in consultation with Anangu (although that was part of it), but learning to express communal experience and opinion through the use of the pronoun 'we'. Like most things I learned in Papunya, this seemed to happen naturally, stemming from the way Anangu had been doing things for millennia.

In my first week at the school, I worked with Ngaya class (upper primary girls) on developing a collaborative *yara* (story) drawn from the material of the girls' journals. Although these accounts were individual, the journals tended to record the same experience because children and families did many things together. For our collaborative *yara*, which we made in the form of a 'journey map' on a long roll of brown paper, we chose the story that all the girls had written after the previous weekend's bush trip to nearby Warumpi Hill to get *tjupi* (honey ants). Sitting on the floor and using a texta-colour to write the words that the girls read or said to me, I acted as scribe, taking down dictation of a story that began: '*On Sunday after church we all went for honey ants.*' As I hastily scribbled the words, the girls (seated on both sides of the rolled-out paper) illustrated the journey map.

With this process, I was introduced to the writing role I would have at Papunya over the next four years. I also had my first attempt at writing in a collective voice.



Over the many visits to come, I did a lot of this sort of writing in my day-to-day work with students. However, the first sustained piece of this kind was the text for the prototype version of the book, *Going Bush*. This came about after Ken and I went out one Friday on a science excursion with the upper primary girls and boys, who were studying different desert *ngurra* (habitats or environments). During the course of this one-day bush trip, led by Pastor Murphy Roberts and the Anangu teachers, plants were collected and their various uses as food and medicine were discussed (all in Luritja, naturally). One of the thrills of the excursion was a high-speed chase for a goanna — which soon found its place on the barbecue. After lunch, Ken and I distributed charcoal and paper, and all the adults and children settled down and did drawings of what they had seen so far on the trip. Then Pastor Murphy laid out the

plants I had collected, and sat us all down for a revision session. On the way home, there was even a chance to catch another goanna.

During the weekend that followed, as Ken and I looked at the drawings and photographs from the bush trip, it was obvious to us that an account of the excursion could be put together into a book, which could be a classroom resource for literacy as well as science. It was important that the children themselves should own the book, through the process of making it. So over the course of the next week, primary students and their Anangu teachers came in small groups to the school's kitchen, where Ken and I set up a production workshop each morning after the breakfast program was finished. As the only technical equipment available in the school was a black-and-white photocopier, we started to develop the technique of blowing images up and/or reducing or multiplying them, to get different effects. Children then coloured in the photocopies. (This also got around the problem of blurring the charcoal originals, or the alternative of using chemical fixatives.)

While the artwork from the bush trip was being worked on, the *yara* was simultaneously developed by way of a collaborative journey map, with me again acting as scribe for a text that I then typed on the computer in the school's Literacy Centre. Although the narrative of the journey was expressed in English, the plants and habitats were given their Luritja names; this reflected the 'two-way' philosophy of all the resources we produced in Papunya. Lacking any graphic design software (as well as the knowledge of how to use such a thing), the only way I could get the words onto the page was to photocopy the printed text onto a transparent overlay. Using a light-box, students were shown how to arrange text blocks and images onto the book pages. After five hectic days, the finished templates for the pages were brought back to Sydney and 'published' on a colour photocopier, in an edition of three A3 big books, and a class set of A4 books.

Overall, this prototype version of *Going Bush* was produced in a traditionally collaborative style, with children and adults working together on each other's images, with no sense of individual ownership. This would later become one of the hallmarks of the production process of the *Papunya School Book*.



After Ken and I had been working at Papunya for a couple of years, and had gone through a full cycle of the curriculum, it was again time for the module of ‘Country and History’. Although all the students knew the *ngurra* (homeland) from which their ancestors came, and they all spoke their traditional language at home, many did not know how and why their families had ended up in Papunya as recently as the 1950s. This was a cause of concern for the Anangu staff and some of the community Elders.

To address this gap in the students’ historical understanding, we decided to make a big timeline of the history of Papunya community, which could be displayed as a ‘print walk’ along the wall of the primary classrooms, so that children could read their history as they made their way into class. This time, Ken and I worked with the school’s secondary-age students from the young women’s class (Kanyala class) as well as the fellers of Wanatjiti class.

In this history project, it was not appropriate for Ken or me to engage with the *Tjukurrpa* — the Creation-era when the Law of the land and its people came into being. This was represented in the timeline in a series of concentric circles in the Aboriginal flag colours, which then swirled out in a snake-like motion through the decades of post contact history. The continuation of the *Tjukurrpa* into the present day was reinforced by the inclusion, throughout the timeline, of circles of traditional art, produced by the *kungka* (young women) of Kanyala.

Furthermore, as this was the history of Papunya, it was not necessary to include the establishment of the colony of New South Wales. For the Anangu, the invasion began in the decade of the 1860s, with the arrival of the explorer Stuart in the Central Desert. The timeline went on to show the establishment of the Lutheran mission at Ntaria (Hermannsburg) in the 1890s, the growth of the township of Alice Springs in the 1920s, the hard years of drought and death in the 1930s, and the establishment of Papunya in the late 1950s, when the people of five desert nations were forcibly brought there as part of the Assimilation Policy of the federal government. After this, the timeline moved on into the history of the community, and of Papunya School itself.

In preparation for the timeline project, I had spent a few hours photocopying historical photographs in the Alice Springs library. At the school, students began to colour these black and white images with pencils and paint. Through this process, we hit upon a way to avoid the cultural taboo of including recognisable images of people who were *kumuntjayi* (who had passed away).

After a full term of work (including time when the students were supervised by staff while we were back in Sydney), the fifteen panels of the completed timeline were assembled along the school's first-floor veranda.



Once we had done the work on the timeline, it seemed a waste not to put the material into an accompanying resource. And so on our next visit we worked again with Kanyala and Wanatjiti classes and the Anangu staff and community Elders to produce the prototype *Papunya School Book of Country and History*.

Following the method we had used with the *Going Bush* book, we took over the kitchen every day after breakfast. Through the four weeks of this production process, three Anangu staff members — Mary Malbunka, Punata Stockman and Elva Poulson — worked with us full time, as did *kungkas* from Kanyala. Ken also worked with some of the fellers from Wanatjiti, and with their Anangu teacher, Amos Egan. Linda Anderson and Charlotte Phillipus acted as translators and intermediaries with the community, and set me on the right way with the history. Throughout the process, we were all supported by the school's 'cultural ambassador', Emma Nungarrayi — one of the senior women in the community. Emma was a constant visitor to the kitchen/workshop, making sure everything was *palya* (good), and also producing a painting of her own *ngurra*, Karrynyarra, for inclusion in the book.

With the *Papunya School Book*, the text was considerably more complex than the *yara* of a bush trip, but I followed the same method, with the fifteen panels of the timeline providing the journey map. Although I used my experience as a historian to research facts and dates, these were only relevant if they were what the Anangu wanted to express about their history. Working on the computer in the Literacy Centre, I had the great asset of community members and Elders frequently popping into the room to use the telephone, so I was able to read out bits of text and check it with the owners of the story. (Although to whitefellers, the facts of history might seem non-copyright material, Anangu regard some parts of history as belonging to certain families. For each of these parts of the story, I needed to ask the right owners.) This process of continual consultation meant that, while I personally was not part of the 'we' to whom the story belonged, I felt as if I was again taking dictation from the collective Anangu of Papunya.

Meanwhile in the art and design workshop of the kitchen there was a veritable *tjupi*-hive of activity, with the workers (both students and teachers) often painting through their lunch hour, and younger children coming in to visit and adding their art to the collective whole. In addition to the images for the book, each page was hand-coloured. I decided to use a colour code to differentiate the three text-types of general historical narrative, attributed oral history, and what I called ‘date boxes’. Once text was finalised and approved, I photocopied it onto transparencies, which were then placed onto the light-box, so that we could decide where pictures and blocks of words would go.

As with *Going Bush*, the templates for the forty-eight pages of the original version of the *Papunya School Book of Country and History* were brought to Sydney and ‘published’ by colour photocopying.



After the *Papunya School Book* and its accompanying timeline had been successfully used in the school for some months, Ken and I received a phone call asking if we thought people ‘down south’ might like to read it — not just Aboriginal people, but whitefellers as well. I said I was sure many people would love to read it, but I did not know if anyone would want to publish it. Although I had produced books in a range of genres with a number of publishers over two decades, I had never done a book like this on a commercial basis. Indeed, I had never even *seen* one. And although Ken had illustrated a little novel of mine (in black and white line drawings), he had never illustrated or designed a picture book.

For Australian publishers, producing any book with colour images is a very costly exercise, and to take on a book such as this with an inexperienced team was a big risk. Nevertheless, Erica Wagner, publisher of books for children and young adults at Allen & Unwin, was enthusiastic about the project from the moment we showed her the original photocopied book. All three of us knew that to produce the book on a commercial basis would mean doing a new version, in a somewhat different format. However, it was crucial that the book should be made by the school, with Ken and me in our customary roles of sitting outside the circle, and providing a way for the Anangu to tell their own story. Reflecting this communal ownership, copyright in the book would be vested in the school, which would also receive all the book’s royalty income.

Once the contract was signed, it was back to the kitchen workshop for the dedicated team of Papunya staff and students. This time, Ken painted the pages for the spreads in a background colour either of skin or earth. This mimicked the original background of Western Desert art, which was done either on the body or on the *ngurra* — the Country itself. While some of the art from the first book could be recycled, a lot of new work needed to be produced. Some of the text also needed rewriting, to make it suitable for people outside the community.

In addition, this time a more comprehensive process of asking permission was required, because the book would be travelling beyond the community. As my Luritja was not nearly good enough for this task, I made a storyboard for the book on a long roll of paper, and stuck on black and white photocopies of images we hoped to include. This storyboard was deliberately very rough, so that people would feel comfortable about saying *wiya* (no) about any material they did not want to make public. Then Diane invited the community to a barbecue and music night, and everyone was able to see what was going into the book, with Linda again acting as translator. I was on tenterhooks until Emma Nungarrayi seemed to signal community approval by giving me a necklace of seeds and painted gumnuts that she and some of the other women had made for me. Finally, on the last day of that visit, there was a lengthy discussion in language at a school meeting, before everybody in the Publishing Committee signed off on the written and visual text.

Although that was a great relief for Ken and me, it also put a great burden of responsibility onto us. When we got back to Sydney, the community let us know that they expected us actually to design the book, rather than giving this job to an outside designer. Book design is a very different thing from illustration, and for us both it was a big learning curve. Although by now (this was the year 2000) there was already the possibility of computer design, our process (which took over twelve months) continued to follow the hands-on method we had used in Papunya with the self-published books. Overall, while the finished book reflected the collaborative production process that had gone into it, Ken's strong design held the many different styles together within the hand-coloured pages that reflected the desert *ngurra* from which the story had come.

*The Papunya School Book of Country and History* was launched at the Yiperinya Festival, Alice Springs, in 2001 by Manduwuy Yunupingu, former principal of the school at Yirrkala in Arnhem Land and a long-time friend of Papunya

School. Acclaim was instant, across Australia, and the next year the book went on to win the Eve Pownall Award in the Children's Book Council of Australia Awards, the History for Young People section of the New South Wales Premier's History Awards, and the Australian Award for Excellence in Educational Publishing.



By the time these accolades were given, Ken and I were involved with a couple of other books, both of which further expressed the Learning from Country principle that is central to the Papunya Model of Education.

One of these projects was mentoring Papunya teacher, Mary Malbunka, through the production of her beautiful picture book memoir, *When I was Little, Like You*. To work on this book, Mary came and stayed at our home in Sydney, together with Emma Nungarrayi and Jenny Wilson. Over our years in Papunya, Mary and Ken had developed a close working relationship while going out into the *ngurra* and painting together. Mary had also told me bits and pieces of her childhood story, which she told me again on tape in preparation for the book. The next step was to put this into a storyboard, so that Mary could see how the *yara* would unfold over thirty-two pages (the standard length for a picture book). Later this storyboard was re-made as a dummy book. Although the text of Mary's memoir is written in English, it reflects the two-way Papunya model, with spoken dialogue being written in Luritja. The book also combines the language of Western Desert art with western art.

The other project we worked on at around the same time was the picture book, *Walking with the Seasons in Kakadu*. In this case, I mentored the author, ecologist Diane Lucas, who had worked as a schoolteacher with Gundjehmi people in Kakadu and who had permission to write about some of the seasonal knowledge she had learned from them. Ken spent time with Diane on site in this amazing floodplain country, and did the artwork and design for the book.

Once again, for these books, both of which were published in 2003, we received the support of Erica Wagner and her editorial and design team at Allen & Unwin.

In 2005, Ken and I seized an opportunity to try out the idea of Learning from Country in a very different *ngurra*, and with a very different group of children. Invited by the principals of eight schools in Sydney's suburban south-west

to devise a project that would promote harmony and simultaneously provide a focus on writing and art, we decided to try to do what we had done at Papunya School with the *Going Bush* book. But would it be possible, in such a different Country?

Of the eight schools in the Harmony project, two were Muslim (one Shiite, one Sunni), two were Catholic, four were public. The sixteen students, from Year 2 to Year 6, came from many different cultural backgrounds, including one boy from the Wiradjuri nation of western New South Wales. Unlike the Papunya children, who intimately knew their desert environment, only three of these children had ever been in any bush, anywhere in Australia. Most did not know a paperbark tree from a wattle, or a magpie from a kookaburra. To make things harder, we were to work with the children only one day a week for six weeks (later extended to eight).

After a single orientation day, we took the children for a walk through the Wolli Creek Valley, which runs through the suburbs of Turrella, Earlwood and Bardwell Park. Although there is bush in the valley, it is surrounded by housing and factories, and the creek runs alongside the railway line; aeroplanes fly overhead. The story of that walk is told in the book *Going Bush* (published by Allen & Unwin in 2007), while the process of Learning from Country (in the classroom as well as in the bush) is documented in the eight charts of the Learning Journey that were displayed on the wall of the classroom that was our *ngurra* (home) for the time of our project.

The making of this urban version of *Going Bush* essentially followed the same method as that of the prototype book we made in Papunya. At the end of the Wolli Valley bush walk, the children collaboratively made three Journey Maps as a record of what they had done and seen. These provided the narrative structure both for the published book and for the little books that each child individually made. Again, I borrowed a collective ‘we’ voice from the children’s collaborative narrative. Where possible, Ken included the children’s artwork in the publication, and we also showcased the children’s poems and their writing about history and science. Although in the final stages we worked intensively with an Allen & Unwin designer who performed high tech magic, every image and every page was initially hand made.

While the book was later acknowledged with a Human Rights award and a Wilderness Society award, for us its success was the fact that it proved that Learning from Country provides a way for developing harmony between children whose families come from very different geo-political countries.



Meanwhile, I had pitched to Erica Wagner the idea of doing a history of Australia for young people. As with the earlier books, my aim was to put Country at the centre of the story. However, unlike the *Papunya School Book* and *Going Bush*, this *yara* was going to cover the many *ngurra* of the continent of Australia. And unlike those books, I would not collaborate with anyone — except with Ken, as illustrator/designer. It would not be written in the ‘we’ voice, but in the standard third person narrative of the history genre. It didn’t take long for the project to head off in a different direction.

As part of my research for the Aboriginal part of the nation’s history, both before and after the invasion, I read a couple of hundred memoirs (whether transcripts of oral history tapes or published texts) by Indigenous Australians. This material was so moving and so fascinating, and the voices were so individual and so authentic, that I did not want to paraphrase these stories. As well, it would have been historically inauthentic to try to collapse together these histories from different Aboriginal countries. At the same time, knowing how hard it had been for me to find most of these sources (many were out of print or held only in specialist collections), I wanted to make them available to young Australians and their teachers. So I went back to Erica and asked if I could put the history book on the backburner, and compile these accounts into an Indigenous narrative about the right way of learning — with a focus on Learning from Country.

This compilation would become the book *Playground — Listening to Stories from Country and from Inside the Heart*. For this, I had the historian, Dr Jackie Huggins, as my Indigenous Consultant, and I also received a great deal of support from my dear friend, Kevin Cook, formerly director of Tranby Aboriginal Co-operative College. I also had Ken as illustrator and designer, and a very thoughtful editor in Nan McNab.

Although this was not a collaborative book, it had the direct input from twenty five Indigenous Elders and young people whom I interviewed, ranging from school students to Linda Burney, at that time my local member in the New South Wales Parliament. It also had the input from the other eighty or so Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose stories and art form the basis of the written and visual text of the book. Just as I had used different coloured text blocks in the *Papunya School Book*, here I differentiated between my voice and that of the Indigenous

contributors through the use of colour. Ken's artwork provided continuity, and his multi-layered cover expressed some of the very different *ngurra* from which the book's contributors came.

Needless to say, the copyright permissions process for *Playground* was a mighty journey in itself, but it gave me the great privilege of corresponding with and even talking with people such as Ngarrindjeri artist, Ian Abdulla, and Paakantyi artist, Badger Bates. From start to finish, I was aware of working in the tradition of the Papunya Model of Education. Indeed, the words from Charlotte Phillipus's curriculum statement provide the book's subtitle, and Linda Anderson's account of learning her mother tongue is one of the interviews in the book.

Finally, however, when *Playground* was done, it was time to get back to the book I was meant to be writing...



I always knew that, like the Papunya timeline, my history of Australia would begin with the *Tjukurrpa*, the time when the land came into being and the people began to live with the land. But at what point in history would I end my narrative? I did not know.

And then in 2008 an Australian prime minister at last said Sorry to the nation's Indigenous people for the wrongs done to them since 1788. As I listened to the radio news that morning, I knew that the story would go from the Ice Age to the Apology. It was later that the book acquired the title, *Australians All*. Ken's cover image — set in a busy suburban street — shows the cultural diversity of the nation's people, while placing the First Australians in the foreground. Its focus on young people also shows that this is a book not only *for* young Australians, but also *about* them. It is a history of growing up, told through eighty mini-biographies of children and families, which are framed within the overall narrative of the nation's history. Each of these individual stories places the historical character within the Country — the part of Australia — that was their *ngurra*, their home. There is also a strong focus on the environmental history of the land itself, of its use and its misuse.



While *Australians All* brought to an end the series of books about Learning from Country, Ken Searle and I remain as committed to the idea. Indeed, just last year we used an adaptation of the Papunya Model of Education when we worked with children from Kindergarten to Year 6 at the public school at St Peters — a Country and community that is at the heart of Sydney’s crowded inner west.

And also, of course, this exhibition itself is testimony to our belief that — no matter who you are or where you are — the ‘right way of learning’ is to start with Country.

Nadia Wheatley, 2017



### **Acknowledgements:**

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