The Western Australian coast is rich in significant shipwreck sites. Many of these wrecks were discovered by intrepid individuals, often accidentally, and often unrelated to any institution. Once a wreck is discovered it is then left to maritime museum staff to painstakingly document the find before the results are made public. We have come to expect this type of archaeological work to be based on evidence and the evidence to be scientifically authenticated.

To subscribe uncritically to these expectations would be somewhat naïve. The history of archaeology is replete with archaeological creations that have little to do with either science or scholarship. This is because archaeologists most often deal with fragments of the original objects, and are required to make speculative statements based on limited evidence; the smaller the evidence base the more flexible is the story that can be made from it. In this context, archaeology is arguably closer to art and fiction than to science; it can be more discursive and textual than logical, more reliant on rhetoric and hermeneutic devices than on deduction and material evidence. In this perspective the discipline of archaeology can be quite charming and creative, ever ready to invent yet another good story full of secrets, mysteries, treasures and indiscretions that we, the readers, readily admire and desire.

For all these reasons, archaeology can also be a fertile ground for passionate disagreements. The less evidence there is the more intense these arguments can be as there may be nothing in the evidence itself that can hold back extreme positions. When evidence is minimal the contested positions can become a contest of power. In such a contest the powerful invariably hold an advantage as their influence is pervasive and widespread. Very often this influence is rendered invisible because it is dispersed among the many cultural institutions and practices on which the discipline of archaeology rests, including the educational system, curriculum content, awards, funding regimes, rules, regulations, refereeing and peer groups, administrative functions, associations, sponsor and mentor groups, to name a few.

Such an arrangement constitutes a complex system of discursive inclusions and exclusions which defines who can speak and who is excluded from speaking within any discipline. The system is policed by educational and cultural practices, by qualifications, by laws, rules and regulations and in the end by crude force if necessary.[1] As abroad generality those who are drunk, unemployed, transient, poor, mad, damaged, criminal and hysterical cannot readily speak. Predictably, those that legislate and are educated, awarded, honoured, appointed, commissioned, rich and powerful do speak – either directly or indirectly through their minions.

This interconnected system of discourse is self-sustaining and in this system the “performance of truth” often has as much currency as the truth itself. Spin is one manifestation of such discursive performances in public life. A clever use of spin can make the invisible visible and the visible invisible – if you repeat something often
enough in a public sphere, it can become the “truth”. Some would argue that we already live in a post-truth “theatre state” in which the performance of truth has replaced the assembly and presentation of evidence. One could go so far as to say that with an appropriate context the powerful can say almost anything and expect to be believed.

What many are reluctant to accept is that similar discursive distortions are at play in activities that we normally consider scientific, objective and evidence based. In holding to such a pristine perspective we tend to forget that evidence is often indirect and often endlessly deferred by chains of references, institutions, specialists, experts, and authorities that are all potentially subject to distortions of power. In this perspective institutions such as museums and places of learning are themselves invisible expressions of the dominant and dominating discourse.

In these circumstances, the influence of the powerful may well appear accidental and arising from reality itself – as an unspoken precondition for accepted knowledge. Because we are imbedded in our “reality” it is difficult to see these preconditions of accepted knowledge as anything but the truth. Hence the proposition that the western cultures are civilized and indigenous cultures are primitive would have been considered as self-evident to many Western Australian colonialists not that long ago. It is in this seemingly benign form of scholarship that archaeology stands as one of the most compromised of sciences and the most compliant to the wishes of the powerful. In the West Australian context this viewpoint made it possible for the pastoralist, graziers, miners and pearlers to mistreat the local Indigenous population and bring many of them close to extinction. Indigenous Australians are all too well aware of the self-serving proclamations of many western sciences and cultures. In their short post-Contact history they have had to put up with a rogue gallery of anthropologists, archaeologist, social scientists, colonialists, pastoralists, theologians, pimps and policemen all wanting to tell them about their rightful place in the civilized world.

Contemporary archaeologists are familiar with the past misuse of their discipline and they tend to be reluctant to ascribe such indiscretion to the practice of archaeology today and especially when it involves the seemingly culturally inert field of study such as marine archaeology. What, for example, could be more straightforward and simple than discovering a wreck and identified it objectively on the basis of material evidence?

To subscribe to this optimistic viewpoint would also be rather naïve and would miss the point that “objectivity” in the field of discourse – like “truth” – is always forged somewhere and cannot be too readily accepted or taken for granted. The discursive manipulation of evidence is arguably at the foundation of all knowledge but is most evident with sciences such as archaeology, anthropology, ethnography, humanities and social sciences where the so called evidence is always fluid and always provisional.

In the first paragraph of the 1997 paper “The Engendering of Archaeology” Alison Wylie summarises this problem:
In the last fifteen years archaeologists have been drawn into heated debates about the objectivity of their enterprise. These are frequently provoked by critical analyses that demonstrate (with hindsight) how pervasively some of the best, most empirically sophisticated archaeological practice has reproduced nationalist, racist, classist, and, according to the most recent analyses, sexist and androcentric understandings of the cultural past. Some archaeologists conclude on this basis that however influential the rhetoric of objectivity may be among practitioners, the practice and products of archaeology must inevitably reflect the situated interests of its makers.[2]

The problems of archaeology are not only found in gender-based archaeology but are endemic to all archaeology because they are endemic to knowledge itself.[3]

This is not to suggest that archaeology is impossible or altogether fanciful but that its pronouncements need to be interrogated exhaustively on an ongoing basis and with the assumption that the status of evidence and the role of the speaker are intertwined. In particular it is necessary to interrogate the principles by which a person is permitted or excluded from speaking on a particular subject.

Analysing communication and discourse of this kind is often closer to examining a crime scene in which motive, means and opportunity should preface every discursive artefact. It is possible to derive much insight from an act of communication by asking: Who gains? Who speaks and why? By whose authority?

But not all discursive frameworks are so intentional or purposeful. Distortions can arise from any activity based on limited evidence. We can never know everything and what is known can be arranged across many perspectives by appropriate sets of exclusions and inclusions. Descriptions based on an absence of evidence always present us with discursive traps even when these traps arise accidentally and unconsciously.

Analysing discourse traps of this kind is often not easy. Discursive interventions can take place in the timbre of the voice, in the silence of a response, in the butt of a joke. Action of this kind is difficult to document or interrogate. Official reports, in contrast, offer a more stable and hence excellent terrain to investigate discursive interventions and slippages as well as the perspectives these support. It is in the small slippages and errors, in these official pronouncements and reports, that we can see manifest evidence of discursive forces in action.

The official report on the wreck presumed to be the Stefano provides a good example of seemingly “objective” activities undertaken by marine archaeologists becoming distorted by a range of discursive exclusions and inclusions. This wreck was discovered 20 years ago in 1997 and it is timely to review the archive associated with this find. The writing that follows is the first of a series of discursive explorations of archaeology that gave rise to our understanding or misunderstanding of this shipwreck and of people and events associated with it.

Many types of discourse analysis are possible. One relevant approach is to treat the documented archival itself as an archaeological monument in need of excavation – layer by layer.
It is appropriate that the first layer of the archival monument to be excavated is the role of the writer of this publication.

**The Stefano shipwreck: Disclosing devices**

The writer’s interest in the *Stefano* story began with the publication of the book *The Wreck of the Barque Stefano off the North West Coast of Australia in 1875* by Gustave Rathe.[4] Rathe was the grandson of Miho Baccich one of the only two survivors of the *Stefano* shipwreck. He based his book on his grandfather’s 1876 manuscript that had been kept secret for over 110 years.[5]

In 1997, after the wreck presumed to be the *Stefano* was discovered by the Western Australian Maritime Museum (WAMM) divers, the Korcula–Fremantle Charter of Friendship Committee invited Gustave Rathe to visit Fremantle, which he did in 1998.[6] In Fremantle members of the Committee accompanied Rathe to the Western Australian Maritime Museum to see some of the artefacts recovered from the wreck site. We also accompanied him to the Fremantle Town Hall Centre where he was honoured with the plaque of the City for his contribution to the Fremantle’s history and culture. In 2000, the author completed a three-screen documentary triptych on Rathe entitled *The Resurrection of the Barque Stefano*. More writing on the *Stefano* shipwreck followed and my engagement with the *Stefano* shipwreck story inevitably grew.[8]

Some years later in 2011 these *Stefano*-related activities lead to the formation of a not-for-profit Barque *Stefano* Yinikurtira Foundation with the aim of establishing a Heritage Trail along the Ningaloo coast where the shipwrecked *Stefano* mariners had travelled.[9] Another aim of the Foundation is to safeguard the integrity of the *Stefano* story.[10]

My longstanding engagement with the *Stefano* story made me very familiar with the details of the wreck presumed to be the *Stefano*. The same familiarity also led me to question the wreck’s identification. After an extensive review of the available archives, I became quite convinced that the wreck found by the museum divers in 1997 is most probably not the *Stefano* but the wreck of another vessel described by Pemberton Walcott in the original 1876 report on the *Stefano* wreck site at Point Cloates.[11]

This publication presents reasons for these convictions.

What was most interesting about this archival review was to discover that the language used by the marine archaeologists, when describing the *Stefano* shipwreck, tended to foreground some historical documents and avoid others that were just as important in the chain of evidence. This skewing of historical accounts by the language of the archaeologists is what caught my attention when researching the *Stefano* archive. How the language of archaeology and the discourse of archaeology can distort documented evidence frames this four-part publication.
Notes and References

1. The inspiration for this writing comes mostly from the French philosopher Michel Foucault whose oeuvre includes texts such as *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, *The Order of Things*, *History of Madness*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *Discipline and Punish* to name a few. His inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970, gives a particularly insightful summary that is relevant to this writing. In it Foucault offers three principles of exclusion that guide the societal use of force. These principles are based on three dualities: reason/ unreason, truth/ untruth and lawful/ unlawful. This lecture was published in French as *The Order of Discourse* (*L’ordre du discours*) and can be found in the appendix to the American edition of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.


6. The Island of Korcula, in Croatia, was the originating home of the larger Baccich family.


10. The website of the Barque Stefano Yinikurtira Foundation that will oversee the construction of the Trail can be found at: [http://bsyf.com.au](http://bsyf.com.au), accessed April 2017. Yinikurtura in the Foundation title is a reference to the Yinikurtira nomads who helped the two shipwrecked Stefano mariners survive.