

BOOK REVIEW

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Miyarrka Media, *Phone & Spear: A Yuṭa Anthropology*. London: Goldsmiths Press, 2019. 272 pp.

Collectively authored by seven members of the Northern Australian-based Miyarrka Media, *Phone & Spear* is one of the most creative and unique anthropological texts to be published in recent memory. Proposing a Yuṭa, or “new,” anthropology from Yolngu perspectives, the full color photo quality pages interweave a discursive collage of images, artwork, commentary, dialogue, and analysis that is simultaneously ahead of its time and long overdue.

The two most prominent voices in the book include Yolngu elder Paul Gurrumuruwuy and Jennifer Deger. Their decade of collaboration—culminating in various art installations, films, and this book—is described by Gurrumuruwuy as a Yuṭa anthropology that aims to “bring different worlds into relationship,” rather than what they note is the more common ethnographic goal of “revealing one world to another” (11). Deger states that at its core, this project is about how “my Yolngu friends and family use mobile phones as a technology with which to tap into—and amplify—the push-and-pull of life” (9). Crucially, she asserts that it “is a book that performs its argument; it does not simply analyze relations, it seeks to make them” (20).

Thus, the form and content of *Phone & Spear* are deeply intertwined. While it could certainly be described as both multi-modal and polyvocal, it also pushes the boundaries of these approaches. Indeed, Deger notes that her own role more closely resembles curation than writing. While originally imagined through a dialogic structure, she describes how the book organically emerged into a Yolngu anthropological experiment in which images, textual analyses, and authorial voices are not simply juxtaposed, but

remixed and *remediated* (19). The repetition of images within cell phone screens and the stylized “text as image” patterns used for interstitial sectional transitions have echoes of pop art, while remaining fresh and original. To help readers navigate the book, each of the seven authors are associated with a color that is meaningful to them. These are used to signal individual voices through font hue and color bars along the vertical edges of textual pages. To a remarkable extent, the authors largely achieve their ambitious and admirable goal of producing “an artful anthropology... that does not expect to extract itself from the circuits of obligation, care and reciprocity through which these images were made to move... deploying images as agents of social transformation in ways that expand the possibilities of both anthropology and Yolngu art practice” (17).

The pairing of phone and spear provides an agile dyad for sustaining conceptual and aesthetic coherency throughout. The authors note that in some ways this connection is not an obvious choice, but an artistic one, with Gurrumuwuy stating that people “can understand if they think about it” (153). The authors make the case for parallel roles and functions of phones and spears; both are individualized and mobile, can be used for protection and to acquire food, and are able to quickly connect people with their environment and broader kinship networks. One of the Yolngu authors, Meredith Balanydjarrk, notes that this text itself is “like a mobile phone—everyone will connect through the book” (153).

Phone & Spear is divided into two parts. The first, titled “A Yuṭa Anthropology,” provides a thorough overview of the book’s various goals. This clear distillation informs the highly creative second part, “Participatory Poiesis,” which provides the majority of the text. Rather than a linear narrative or other traditional structures, it is organized around artistic themes including “Call and Response,” “Worry,” and “Alive!” Within these sections, the authors foster nuanced dialogues around unexpected questions such as whether a book can hum, or if love can provide a touchstone for overcoming anthropological distancing. While such engagements could easily veer into ethereal and theorized abstraction, they remain grounded by their integration within collaborative art and collective discussion. This articulates with Enid Gurunulmiwuy’s assertion that the “Yolngu way of life is to make it real. Not talk-talk. Action has to happen. To make it alive” (134). Indeed, while “talk-talk” is necessarily central to the book format itself, this text remains driven throughout by a kinetic and tactile sense of artistic production that expands the imaginative limits of scholarship.

The authors note that this book is explicitly *not* about the pitfalls of technology or the broader politics of Aboriginal suffering that have saturated the Australian mediascape in recent decades. At the same time, they remain self-aware of the complexity of making these choices in light of the profound challenges within Yolngu communities today, especially in the afterward section. Throughout the text, the authors trace their aesthetic, ethical, and technological decision processes, spanning from photo resolution and formatting to the shifting cultural protocols around portraying images of the deceased. This book is often at its best when Deger and Gurrumuruwuy are engaged in such meta-discussions on the project's emergent process.

As facilitator and translator to balanda (non-Aboriginal) audiences, Deger remains remarkably vulnerable and reflexive, without navel-gazing. She portrays a refreshingly frank account of the limitations of anthropologists, even for those with as much experience as herself. She does so not in service of stoking representational crisis, but more generatively as a humble acknowledgement of the modest capability of any single individual, as well as the power of collaborative intellectual production. Deger's own role exemplifies a core tenant of this project, which is to show how Yolngu and balanda people can engage productively in a way that is "together, but not mixed up" (56).

There may be some readers who at times find the avant-garde spirit of *Phone & Spear* to be disorienting and lacking the structure that one normally expects from an ethnographic text. However, the authors remain cognizant throughout of the promises and risks of this experiment. Indeed, its limitations are the shadow of its highest virtues. In light of what is ventured and gained in the process, it is a journey that is absolutely worth taking for anyone interested in the anthropology of media, visibility, and collaboration. It also serves as essential reading for those invested in creative ways of reimagining the nature of anthropological research and the ethnographic text itself. Miyarrka Media have not only succeeded in forging a Yuṭa anthropology, but they have also produced a critical and aesthetic model of collective anthropological engagement for the coming decades. ■