“We never had any photos of my family”: Archival return, film, and a personal history

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Abstract
The film Remembering Yayayi emerged from a project to return raw 16mm film footage shot in 1974 at the early Pintupi outstation of Yayayi, near Papunya, by filmmaker Ian Dunlop, with Fred Myers as translator and consultant. Two subsequent remote Pintupi communities, Kintore and Kiwirrkura, were involved in the footage’s return. The material had not been available for research (or other) purposes until 2005, when VHS copies were made from the workprint deposited in the National Archives of Australia. In 2006, Myers and Stefanoff took this rare historical visual material in Pintupi language to Kintore and Kiwirrkura, showing it to individuals and family groups and holding community screenings. Responses were overwhelmingly positive. The tapes quickly became regular entertainment for patients undergoing lengthy renal dialysis sessions and Myers received multiple requests for copies. Over several years, one of Myers’ long-term Pintupi friends, Marlene Spencer Nampitjinpa, came to provide a moving personal commentary on the footage, enabling a feature documentary to be produced from it. This chapter draws on a conversation between Stefanoff and Myers to reflect on how the repatriation project became a catalyst for memory and produced new Pintupi community historical knowledge, particularly about outstation life, early efforts at developing local forms of self-determination and the transformation of lives and wellbeing over a 40-year period.

Keywords: Pintupi, memory, archive, repatriation, film
Fred Myers:

Archival returns have many forms and functions. They can be highly personal, interpersonal, collaborative or contested, and the materials can be various. The project we discuss in the interview below relates to the return, in 2006, of film footage that was shot by internationally renowned Australian filmmaker Ian Dunlop in 1974 at the remote Northern Territory Government–supported Yayayi outstation. The footage was returned to Pintupi communities whose members had been the subjects of the filming, but who had never seen it. This footage was very meaningful to me, as I had been living at Yayayi, undertaking my doctoral fieldwork, when it was shot. Forty-three years later, in 2017, Lisa and I recorded a conversation exploring how and why repatriating this material had led to the production of the documentary film *Remembering Yayayi* that I co-produced in 2014, and the value of this film as a Pintupi perspective on Pintupi history.

*Remembering Yayayi* was one product of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage grant ‘Pintupi dialogues: reconstructing memories of art, land and community through the visual record’. Initially, it was called ‘the Yayayi Footage Project’, and became known officially as ‘Pintupi Dialogues’ in grant-writing. The ARC grant and a separate AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) grant funded my collaboration with the mainly Pintupi Aboriginal–owned artists company, Papunya Tula Artists Ltd, Peter Thorley of the National Museum of Australia, and Nicolas Peterson and Philippa Deveson of the Australian National University (ANU). Our collective undertaking aimed to use film and photographic records “to animate historical consciousness” by using visual records to reflect with members of the remote Western Desert Pintupi communities of Walungurru (Kintore) in the Northern Territory and Kiwirrkura in Western Australia on a pivotal period in the history of the Pintupi people with whom I began research in 1973. The ARC grant extended from 2010 to 2013, but the project began much earlier. It involved not only returning to my earliest ethnographic work in Pintupi communities (see Myers 1986), but also looking further into the historical context of the policy of self-determination in Australia as it was elaborated in the early 1970s. There were further historical significances to the return of the visual materials: in 1964, a decade before he shot the Yayayi footage, Ian Dunlop, accompanying then patrol officer Jeremy Long, had photographed Pintupi people as being among the last Aboriginal people still living a nomadic life in Australia’s Western Desert. And, at the other end, while working on the return of this archival material, I became engaged in consulting on another project of archival significance, on the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) collection of early Papunya paintings and the restrictions of what can be shown (Myers 2017a).

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1 We acknowledge the support of the Pintupi communities of Walungurru (Kintore) and Kiwirrkura in this project, as well as Papunya Tula Artists, the National Museum of Australia, and the Australian National University. Thanks to Ian Dunlop, Pip Deveson, Peter Thorley, and Nic Peterson for their many contributions, and to Howard Morphy, especially for housing this project at the ANU and helping with legal support. Grant support is acknowledged elsewhere, where appropriate.
Lisa Stefanoff:

Fred co-supervised my graduate studies at New York University (NYU) in the late 1990s and then also my PhD fieldwork in Central Australia at CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, 2002–2006). In 2000, we sat down together in the NYU Program in Culture and Media’s then-new digital editing suite with some of Fred’s 1970s fieldwork photographs and some High-8 video footage taken at the landmark Asia Society exhibition of Aboriginal art in New York.2 The footage showed Papunya-based artists Michael Nelson Jagamara and Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri creating, consecrating and performing yinma ‘ceremony’ around a beautiful ground painting constructed on site using sand mixed with red cement, brought in from Long Island. This was combined with footage Fred shot that same year with painters at Yuendumu, Kintore and Kiwirrkura to show how Aboriginal life and culture had made its way to New York.

Together, we edited a little film called From the Dreaming (or Tjukurrjanu in Pintupi), with the subtitle ‘Aboriginal art comes to New York’, meant to highlight ‘culture-making’ (Myers 1991, 1994) and draw attention to the movement of culture through what Myers was analysing as different “regimes of value” (Myers 2001). The Asia Society material captured the artists’ improvisational energy in a new and unconventional ceremonial environment and also provided a small window onto some of the transactional social exchange between them and a host of non-Aboriginal people and circumstances. Our small early editing experiment included a clip of Michael and Billy explaining to the female anchor of the US PBS MacNeill/Lehrer NewsHour TV program that they were sharing tjukurpa through the exhibition, and that all of the work in the exhibition was tjukurrjanu.

In a sense, the film Remembering Yayayi should be understood as one outcome of another, further experiment in returning to archival material – a series of research activities to construct history, and more fully to document participants’ storied recollections of lively lived memories. This project aimed to generate historicising reflections through a cultural-history-making practice of repeated looking at, listening to, and talking about footage of past times and places.

I was thrilled when Fred invited me to help him and Ian Dunlop take some of Ian’s never-seen 1970s footage to show people in Kintore and Kiwirrkura in 2006. I was just finishing my fieldwork at CAAMA and was attuned to the value of desert audiovisual archives as precious community history and cultural property. Sadly, Ian wasn’t able to make the repatriation journey due to an accident that made lengthy car travel difficult. He missed the direct experience of hearing Marlene Nampitjinpa Spencer and her family exploding with joy upon seeing some of Ian’s old footage on the small laptop the team had set up on the dining table in the Finke River Mission house, where we had been given lodging in Kintore. Likewise, indelibly burnt into my memory was the sense of the whole Kiwirrkura community and all its dogs coming together in their freezing cold hall to watch the footage projected as large as we could make it, two nights in a row. The kids’ exuberant shadow play play across scenes full of their elders and ancestors seemed a vital and possessive claim (see Figure 1). The footage clearly mattered, in ways that were yet to be revealed.

2 This exhibition was Dreamings: The art of Aboriginal Australia.
Fast-forward a decade, to 2017. Remembering Yayayi was completed and had received a great reception in New York, and the wonderful Tjunguṉutja exhibition on which Fred had been a consultant was about to open in Darwin (where I was living and he was visiting). We sat down on 30 June and recorded about an hour of conversation about the making and impacts of the film. The text presented here is an edited version of that recording.3

Conversation

I started by asking Fred to explain the origins of the project.

Fred: I’ll explain what the footage was, first. I was a PhD student from 1973 to 1975, in Yayayi, one of the first small breakaway outstation communities in Central Australia. The community had moved away from Papunya under the framework of the new federal policy of Aboriginal self-determination. After I had been there almost a year, Ian Dunlop – who was already known to me as a very distinguished filmmaker who had made a wonderful award-winning film called Desert People [1967] about Western Desert people – came to Yayayi with the idea of perhaps making a film with people he had met 10 years before, when he was doing research for that film. Many people at Yayayi were among those whom he’d first seen coming in from the bush. He wanted to follow up what had happened. When I say “coming from the bush,” they were people who had been living a traditional hunting and gathering life, who were

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coming to live in the government settlement of Papunya. So, Ian came out there, I agreed to help him in some way, and then he came back in June that year [1974]. He shot maybe 12–13 hours of colour 16mm sync-sound footage with the idea that he would make a film, but he couldn’t really figure out what the film would be. It didn’t turn out that what people were doing was something that he had hoped to see – the situation [at Yayayi] was a little rougher and more complicated. He couldn’t figure out what the narrative would be. I went to Sydney with two Pintupi men, friends of mine, and we translated all 12 hours of the footage, and that was it.4 We never made a film.

I stayed friendly with Ian for a long time. We used to talk about that material. I always wanted to see it again. I wanted to take it back to the community, but it was too expensive to take it, and it only existed as a workprint, which wasn’t easy to screen. Then, in the early 2000s, after Ian had retired and given his material to the National Archives [of Australia], they transferred it to video and then eventually to a digitised [format]. He called me and told me. I got access to the material [through him], and he and I decided that we would love to take it out and show it to the community because it was now more portable and possible to show. So, we arranged this trip; it was all set up. It wasn’t that easy, but it was set up. You, Lisa, and Basil, your then-fiancé, were going to be our helpers in driving out there [from Alice Springs]. Ian broke his hip and he couldn’t go. We went out anyway. We took the digitised material to Kintore and Kiwirrkura. We screened it on two nights at Kiwirrkura. People were incredibly responsive. They loved it. They were very excited. They wanted to keep it. We left copies with Sister Annie [Dixon] at the clinic. By the time we got back to Alice Springs, we were getting messages about how people were responding to it. At that point I thought I really needed to do something more with that material.

I went back out to Kintore the following year,5 and started to make some plans. We got money, first from the National Museum of Australia [NMA], to re-digitise the original footage. We got [other] grants. The idea was to take the film footage back. I was really interested in people’s memories of that time, because in Australia by 2007 the period of self-determination and the policies of Aboriginal self-determination had come under really severe criticism by conservatives and others as a failure. I felt, in reading this material, that people had not actually been there, they didn’t understand what it was like, how much it [self-determination] meant to people.6

Yayayi – the community where I had lived – was the first of the communities to be created under that policy. I thought if we could develop that film [material] and people’s response to it [i.e. the documentation project, not the ‘film’ we ended up making] and their understandings of self-determination and their lives at the time, that would be some kind of

4 The two Pintupi men were Freddy West Tjakamarra and George Yapa Yapa Tjangala.
5 For the opening of a new art studio in that community, for Papunya Tula Artists, the artists company that began the acrylic painting movement (see Myers 2002).
6 This period and the Pintupi case are discussed in Myers (2016). The article and book (Peterson & Myers 2016) were part of the results of a Pilot and Linkage grant from Australia Research Council (2010–2013), and an earlier research grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2009), both entitled ‘Pintupi Dialogues’.
a documentation of what it really was, as opposed to the ideological positions.\textsuperscript{7} That was the political and anthropological take. But secondly I also had really strong memories of that time, and my friendships with people there and the sociality, the nature of everyday life, which I never felt I could capture in print. I always wanted a film [a documentation] that allowed you to listen to people talking. I loved the elegant ways in which people spoke Pintupi, the way they interacted with each other and I thought, “Wow, in this film you could see it.” That would be something that really squared the circle for me about my experience and my sense of life in an Indigenous community. Those were the goals, but it was a lot harder to carry it out. Also, I should say that we didn’t set out to make ‘a film’. We set out to produce historical documentation of people’s understandings and attitudes of the time and what their responses were. They were people who, for the most part, did not have visual records of their own lives and their past, so this was also an attempt to see what a visual archive could mean for a community that hadn’t had the experience of that. It was a kind of exploration of memory and what memory could mean and what it meant to people there, so it was a kind of open-ended project to go back out there. Thus, the title of our chapter, from the words of our main narrator, Marlene Spencer Nampitjinpa: “We never had any photos of my family, there, at Yayayi.”

Although Ian was unable to travel, he was very interested and supportive of this venture. His former brilliant editor and research assistant, Pip Deveson, who was based at the ANU, became my film partner in this. We also collaborated with Peter Thorley, a curator of the National Museum of Australia whom I had first known when he was a teacher-linguist at Kintore in 1988. Peter was also, therefore, able to mediate this work and material to the Australian archival and museum world. The final part of this plan was to work with the National Museum: I hoped it could offer a means through which the Pintupi archive and materials would have a permanent location that people could continue to access. These are remote communities and they have limited resources, so even if I were to give them [Pintupi communities] the material, they would have no place to store it. The museum seemed to be a proper storage place with responsibilities to the community where this material could be lodged when we were done.\textsuperscript{8}

Lisa: This project of repatriation generated a new film based on the old material. Let’s talk about how that unfolded.

Fred: The ‘film’ was an issue for us – whether we would actually make a ‘film’ – because the project was really envisioned as returning the raw footage and documenting people’s understandings of it as history. When we did return it, people watched it [from] beginning to end, saw pictures of themselves. As part of the documentation project, we worked with four different [Pintupi] consultants initially,\textsuperscript{9} to comment on the film and to re-translate parts and to talk about what they saw [see Figure 2]. As a result of that, we arrived at several themes that

\textsuperscript{7} A significant example of the criticism of the self-determination policies and outstations was Hughes (2007), but see Altman (2012), one of the strongest defenders of remote communities.

\textsuperscript{8} In fact, we did give communities copies of the footage more than once, as well as digitised collections of my own photographs taken over the years.

\textsuperscript{9} The consultants were Bobby West Tjupurrula, Jimmy Brown Tjampitjinpa, Irene Nangala and Monica Robinson Nangala.
all consultants independently saw in the material. But we couldn’t figure out, really, if there was a way to link things together in a shorter version that might be easier to have available for people, and to circulate more broadly in the world, if that were possible.

On our first trip, in 2006, on our way back from Kiwirrkura, we stopped at Kintore and I bumped into a woman who had been in the film, who was a very good friend of mine, Marlene Spencer Nampitjinpa. She wanted to know if we had any pictures. I said, “Well, I have this film footage, but I’ll show it to you in the house.” She brought all her relatives over, all these young kids and her husband and other people. We sat down with the laptop and watched it [see Figure 3]. It was just extraordinary to watch how people were energised by looking at it and seeing who people were. Marlene saw herself as a young girl, and she explained to the younger kids who the people in the film were and their relationship to them. Then I thought, “Wow, she is just an amazing presence.”

Lisa: You had the foresight to quickly set up a small video camera on a tripod behind that viewing. People can actually see those precious moments in the new film, which is quite extraordinary.

Fred: Yes, it was. It was very poor quality. You need to have more than one person if you’re really going to be engaged in a project like this. And you were knocked out with a migraine that day!

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10 There were four themes articulated: (1) the significance of relatives, (2) the health of the people, (3) the strong leadership indicated by meetings in the community where the elders “spoke strong” and “looked after” people, and (4) sharing or exchange.

11 This is the trip Lisa shared. It was a personal journey on my part, not supported by research grants but nonetheless passed through NYU Human Subjects research ethics review.
Fred: So, we had this new footage. But Marlene is very busy and we never could find a time in the first three years of the project to talk to her. I always wanted to interview her more formally and to talk to her about it, because I was always very drawn to her as a person and to her family.

Towards the end of the project, Pip and I flew up to Alice Springs. We knew where Marlene was staying there. She had come to work with the renal dialysis project and she was in town for a board meeting. So, we met in a hotel room and we videotaped a conversation with her, with the material, in one day. All in one day. We set up the camera, she looked at the camera, and we said, “Just start telling us who you are.” She looked at the camera, and she said [in English], “My name is Marlene Nampitjinpa, and I was born in the bush.” I just felt the hairs on the back of my neck tingle. We had just started this conversation and I felt that her memories and her explanation to me and Pip, as her interlocutors for this moment, was a thread to tie the film together. The other people we had videotaped and interviewed were informative and very interesting, but they didn’t have the same screen presence. Marlene has real presence. She is used to talking to people. Even when she was a young woman and she was still breastfeeding a child, she was a person who was mediating for her community. Pip and I then realised that we had a film, and that Marlene’s subjectivity, her memories, her way of talking about what she saw, drew people into a Pintupi presence, and what it meant to people who were of that community and that time. Many things in the old footage perhaps

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12 The ‘Purple House’ Western Desert Dialysis Project, or Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tjuṯaku, ‘to keep our relatives healthy’ in Pintupi-Luritja, that was first developed through the initiative of the Pintupi communities at Walungurru and Kiwirrkura, and Papunya Tula Artists in 2000.
look to outsiders as signs of an impoverished community, and people living on the edge of a modern world, but you don’t feel that from Marlene. You feel her family, you feel her presence. In the footage, you hear people joking and teasing each other. They are aware of the camera. Marlene’s pleasure in the presence of her past and present relatives in these scenes is palpable.

Lisa: You also recorded interviews with other people, about what they could see in the old footage.

Fred: They were all taped with the idea that if it worked out, the ‘interview’ might be employed in ‘the [new] film’. We had four other Pintupi consultants, and we also interviewed all of the non-Indigenous people who had been present in the community and were in the film, to have their memories. These recordings were often very interesting, but they became something that was more important as research documentation. Really, the film is ‘remembering Yayayi’. It is Marlene’s memories. Other people’s memories are very interesting and they’re now in the archival record, but they seemed much less important than the local point of view.

Lisa: How did you and Marlene communicate throughout the research and production process? What did it mean for the project that you each held memories of the same past places, times and people, connected through shared language?

Fred: I had several conversations with Marlene, beginning with showing her and her family some of the raw footage in 2006. Then, at the opening of the new art studio in Kintore in 2007, and the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the founding of Wulungurru [2011], we watched the footage together again. Since it has been some years since I spoke Pintupi regularly, Marlene and I speak in Pintupi-Luritja and English, as we needed clarifications. Recording with her in Alice Springs in 2013 for the film, she and I spoke in Pintupi-Luritja mostly and she moved back and forth between English and Pintupi to include Pip in the conversation, often repeating in English what she said to me in Pintupi.

A good deal of the conversation that I had with Marlene during the filming was built around our shared memories and histories of people and events. I cannot separate the results from our shared experiences, stand outside of our mutual knowledge. The recording is undoubtedly mutually produced. Her explanations and discussions usually assume I know who the people are and what the events might be, as when she discusses the meeting about alcohol use when the Yayayi leaders go to Papunya. You can see her nodding and looking for my acknowledgment at various times in the film. Pip was watching me and Marlene to decide when fragments were completed or we were moving on to a new topic. One of Marlene’s gifts is her ability to recognise what her listeners may not share as background, not always a common quality. Marlene was pretty good at making sure Pip was following, quite amazing, really. In fact, her on-the-spot translations for Pip are very important for the film, since the most likely audience might be non-Pintupi speakers.

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13 These included Jeffery Stead (then the community advisor), Ken and Leslie Hansen (linguists from Summer Institute of Linguistics and long-time residents), Terry Parry (Yayayi schoolteacher), Dick Kimber (local historian and once-manager of Papunya Tula Artists), Peter Fannin (manager of Papunya Tula Artists in 1974), and Ian Dunlop himself.
I think I mention in the film that when we returned a year after the initial screening of raw footage, I learnt that the copies of the footage were being watched continuously by patients having renal dialysis at Kintore, as part of the then-new program of remote dialysis. The nurses recognised me from the footage, and told me how much the Pintupi patients enjoyed watching their relatives and hearing their language. The language spoken by most of the people in the film is actually an older variant of Pintupi, spoken by that senior generation. Many of the younger people now do not speak in what some have called ‘classic Pintupi’, which involved more bound morphemes (as with pronouns) as well as a vocabulary and avoidance registers.

When I have spent time with Pintupi friends away from Central Australia, they prefer to watch the film and the film footage over almost anything else, slipping into the familiarity of their relatives and the language. Making something with the old film [footage] was exciting for the possibility of showing how people had actually interacted, told stories, narrated things. It was really important, perhaps the most important value of the film. It had an effect on the final edit; for example, I wanted to keep as much as possible of the meeting in which the Yayayi Community Council were speaking, in order to show how people showed ‘respect’ in speech, the diplomacy of daily life.

Lisa: One of the things that Melinda Hinkson [2016] explores in her substantial review of the film in the Australian Journal of Anthropology is the shifting temporality of the story. You’ve made a film of memory, of Marlene Spencer’s memories specifically. Significantly, the archival film material has evoked and provoked the memories the film collects. You also appear in that old footage as a young fieldworker. Yayayi was your first desert home, it was the place that made you an anthropologist. What was it like looking back and seeing yourself in the midst of that time gone?

Fred: Well, I think that an anthropologist seeing himself in the field is not so enjoyable. I’m very aware of all of my discomforts and anxieties that are maybe not so visible in the film. I’m smoking like a chimney in the film because there are many things happening that I follow imperfectly and I get very fatigued. But also, I wanted to have something to share with people; cigarettes were something [to share]. I can see myself in the film avoiding being drawn into intercultural relations about money and resources and trying to work out my situation. In making the film [in 1974], I always said to Ian, “My first relationships are with the people here. I know you after I know them and my obligation is to them. I’m never going to do anything for you that isn’t really suited to them.” I tried to maintain that in all my fieldwork there.

I see myself taking notes at various times and wandering around. There is one scene of me that we included in the film for reasons that have to do with the significance of some of the activity at Yayayi. Yayayi was one of the communities that was involved in Papunya Tula Artists, the beginning of the acrylic painting movement which became very significant in Australia. There’s a scene in which Ian filmed me very soon after he got there, documenting a painting. It was one of the things I did at Yayayi. Papunya Tula is an Aboriginal-owned co-operative [company]. The manager, Peter Fannin, couldn’t keep up with the documentation of the paintings, and so I was providing that information for their records. There is a scene, a kind of classic anthropological scene, of me with my notebook and a painting, and the painter John Tjakamarra [Wingantjirrinya]. I’m collecting the work’s ancestral story, the Dreaming
story, tjukurrpa, and Tjakamarra’s sitting there. Of course, as in most Aboriginal settings, he’s not alone. There are other Aboriginal men sitting there too. Tjakamarra was noteworthy for his lack of communication and was very, very soft-spoken. Another man who was a very close friend of mine was kind of interpolating for us there. Other people were offering their views about what the story is about, because they are related to that country. So, I think you kind of wonder there [about the story]. I remember very distinctly that event. I was listening to all of them, trying to figure out different people’s views and writing on the side, I was really trying to figure out whose version of the story was most appropriate for this case. It’s all being channelled into my notebook of the moment. That painting was purchased by the art co-operative [company], and with my documentation sent out, annotated in that way, as part of its provenance and its significance.

When we had an exhibition of early Papunya paintings in New York in 2009, we included footage from our project of me taking that documentation down and my notebook as a way of trying to show something about the ways in which Indigenous art makes its way into the world. So in the film you can see that. Even though it’s a very remote community and they are very ‘traditional’ – among the last people to be living a hunting and gathering life shortly before this time – agents of the Australian government and various institutions are part of their world: the art advisor, the people from the Aboriginal Art Board, who had given a grant to help support this enterprise, come out there and they interact with them. It was very important for us to be able to show – and that footage is very powerful – something about the way in which a contemporary life was lived in a remote community at that time.

Lisa: We see you as a quiet presence in the film. You’re listening. You’ve written about listening and also the imperative to help people, which was a local structure of meaning around your presence there. Could you say something now, reflecting on that time, and through your career, on the role and the aesthetics – the ethics – of listening as fieldwork practice? It’s very evident in how we see you in that film.

Fred: I had a wonderful teacher [Jane Goodale] when I prepared to do fieldwork, who emphasised very much the need to listen to people and to try to understand them. It’s not an easy thing to learn. When I got to Central Australia and got to that community, I was so appreciative of their acceptance of me that modesty and humility seemed appropriate at every level. But also, I learnt very early on that only some people really have the right to speak about a variety of things, and that I should probably not be voicing my opinions too much about things that Aboriginal people should speak for. This is also the period of early self-determination. The very few times when I did try to tell them what I thought was going on – because I thought I knew what was going on with the government and other things – they would just basically say, “You just don’t understand,” and I realised that there wasn’t anything to be gained. So, I spoke to people a lot. I learnt the language, I hung out with people. The circumstances that were filmed [in 1974] were events in which I was peripheral, or I had a particular role. It doesn’t represent my everyday life of sitting down and talking with people about what

we were doing and what was going on, but I did learn that I needed to listen, and it was hard for me. I did learn Pintupi, informally, pretty well, but it was always a challenge to be sure I was following things. Fundamentally, I think, as an anthropologist you are there to learn and to listen, but it was doubly so for [working with] Aboriginal people. Especially at that time, because it was very common for people to assume they knew better than them [i.e. Yarnangu, ‘Aboriginal people’] about everything, and that people would constantly speak for them. On the occasions when I might have mis-stepped on that, I was reminded by people that I was a ‘whitefella’, and that these things were *their* business. Often, they would ask me what I thought. It didn’t mean that they accepted my views when they did, but they were very open. I realised that there were people there who had authority; there were people there who should be speaking. I also saw how they responded to people who talked over them. You can see in the film, people’s body posture when other people are not giving them the opportunity to speak. It’s one of the great things I learnt from them, really: how to be a respectful person. In Pintupi, there is a substantial discourse, a set of understandings, about what a respectful person is. The word in Pintupi is *kuṉṯ̲a*. It can mean ‘shame’ but it also means ‘respectful’, and people who speak out of place or inappropriately are said to be ‘lacking shame’, or that they should be ‘embarrassed’. That made a lot of sense to me as I learnt it, and it’s something very valuable. So, to some extent my practice, if you want to call it that, was really learning to be Pintupi. The proudest moment I ever had there, and it happened sometimes, was people would say, “This is Tjapanangka” – that was my subsection, my kinship classification – “He’s different. He listens. He shares. He’s from Yayayi.” That is really a part of my identity. I worked with Pintupi people in many other places later, but that early time – I lived there for two years – is really, in a way, who I am for them, and in a way who I am for myself in that situation.

**Lisa:** That aesthetic, that ethic of respectful listening, carries over into the film *Remembering Yayayi*, in that we have, as you’ve been describing, Marlene Spencer Nampitjinpa as the narrator. The film uses quite a tight close-up on her face throughout. It pulls out a bit at the end, and we see her more in conversation with you. The film steadily draws the viewer into a very intimate listening relationship. This is partly assisted by her visual presence in that close-up, but we can’t help but have absolute attention to her voice and to her narrative. It builds to a point towards the end of the film where Marlene becomes quite emotional about the changes she’s seen in the course of her life, the loss of people who are close to her, and it’s very, very moving [see Figure 4]. The film has played to audiences in Australia, in the United States – in New York at the Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival, in Paris and in some other places. Can you say a little bit about how that evocation, that drawing-in-to-listen, has worked in other places?

**Fred:** Well, there are two different experiences. There’s the experience when Marlene has been present at a screening, which was extraordinary because she talks to the image and to what she sees in the film, just as she does in the film itself. When the film is played, she’s engaging with it as a present context. That allowed people [viewers] to trust their own responses to her and to the humour in the film. I think when people see films about other people, other cultures, they don’t necessarily know how to respond. We try to give them cues. It takes longer in the film, but when she was there, present at the screening, that was great.
The film progresses from a lot of humorous things, and then towards the end of the interview with Marlene, she starts to reflect more about her time there at Yayayi and the people that she sees in the footage and she says, “I remember…” She starts talking about the fact that people died. She remembers one person, and she says, “He’s gone,” and then you can see her emotion is building up. I intervened at this moment in our filming. It had actually been provoked by my asking her – I wanted to get her to go back to Yayayi and the closure of Yayayi – so I asked her. Usually you don’t ask people about the deaths of their close family members, but I wanted to get her to think about this. I said, “Your father died at Yayayi, right?” and then she just sort of steps back for a moment, and I thought, “Oh, that wasn’t so good.” She starts to think about the deaths, and then I said, “But you know, those people, they lived a good, long life,” because the people she mentions actually didn’t die young. Many people are dying young now, with a huge epidemic of kidney failure and obesity and so on, but in the film, everybody’s really healthy. She’s remembering the loss of them, and I said – to try to make her feel better – “But those old people, they lived a good, long life.” It just had no effect on her, she just rolled right past that. I felt it was a kind of tin-eared response from me, and it’s embarrassing, actually, to see it in the film, but it is real, and then she continues. At the end of the film, she’s really taking up a position that I recognise as a very Pintupi location of ‘grief’ [yalurrpa], and she starts rubbing her eyes with her sleeve. When people are grieving, this is exactly what they do. Pip looked over at me and signalled, “Should I turn it off? Should I leave it on?” But Ian [Dunlop] always said this one thing, “Don’t turn the camera off.” So, we kept the camera on, and Marlene continues to talk. Then, she pulls herself up, and she says [in English], “That really touched me, this video. I know [knew] all the men, all the women, and people, when I was a young girl in Yayayi.” We were nearly crying ourselves, at that point. But that’s the moment that I had always hoped for in this. That there would be some kind of connection [with the old footage]. There’s something about the moment of my being in front

15 Indeed, she remarks that she can see them in the footage as if they are still alive, a presencing that clearly affects her.
of the camera with her. I do share her feelings. Not to the same extent, but those were people who really made my life what it is. So, to the extent that that happened and is there, I felt we had accomplished something that I wanted viewers to have, and some engagement with an Aboriginal world through them. She [Marlene] has the great capacity to provide it to us.

Lisa: It’s a beautifully edited film, and of course it builds to that emotional climax at the end. Pip Deveson, as you’ve mentioned, is a brilliant and very experienced editor. How much input did you or did Marlene have into the editing of the film and the shape it takes?

Fred: The film is structured fundamentally around the themes I mentioned before that had been set up by the four other consultants. These are themes that Marlene hit as if she were hitting her mark in some kind of performance. The others all responded in very similar ways. So, we knew that we had something that resonated with the community of Pintupi viewers. One of the disappointments is that none of the Pintupi people we talked to had any interest in being involved in the editing. They really saw that as our business and that they would see it afterwards. So, Pip edited it, sending it back and forth to me, and I fine-tuned the translations throughout. Then, when Marlene was in Canberra on other business, Pip was able to show her the rough cut. She loved it and then we did take it out and show it to people.

My friend Bobby West, who had been the chairperson of Kiwirrkura – he was my oldest friend from the beginning of my time at Yayayi – was another advisor on this. We had him look at all of the film, and ‘okay [approve] it’, or not. We had a few concerns that he had raised, that we adjusted in the film: a few things that he thought Marlene had said that might be confusing to people. In terms of the editing, we did not have the kind of dialogical editing\(^\text{16}\) that we might have hoped for.

I think it’s an interesting issue that people in that community don’t have that much experience with [audio]visual material. The truth of the matter is, I believe they would always prefer to see the raw footage where nobody is edited out, even if they’re in the corner of the image. The film is, in that way, a kind of a compromise between the necessities of its circulation and the uses of its circulation, in a shorter form. But also, as the film project evolved and because of Marlene’s identification with the dialysis project that’s helping so many people in Central Australia, the original response of the people who saw the film was “How healthy we were then!”\(^\text{17}\) They’re living in the midst of an epidemic now.

At the time of the original filming, they were all thin; they were healthy. They looked good; they were lively. Because of Marlene’s presence and also because two of the other consultants were also heavily involved with the dialysis project, I felt that I didn’t want to just make a film that was an ethnographic film, something that was simply for an [outside] audience. I thought, “That’s not enough.” But I also felt that they [the community] already have the footage itself; maybe they don’t need any more. Papunya Tula Artists, which is involved in this [film footage] project, also has helped develop the project of remote dialysis, so I thought that given the communities’ response to the film and what it means, that this film

\(^{16}\) I drew this concept from my friend and former colleague Steve Feld (1987).

\(^{17}\) The film became more and more devoted to this project through its reception by Pintupi as a sign of their prior health.
could have two uses, really. One, in publicising in some way what self-determination really meant to people then (and now). That question is up there in the footage. It’s not there as my opinion, but present in all of its complexity, its presence in events. And two, the health issue. When we screened the film at the National Museum of Australia, the people from the Purple House came [see Figure 5]. It was a venue in which donors could be sought out to support the dialysis project. Marlene and another one of our consultants, a middle-aged woman [Monica Robinson Nangala], came to talk about the importance of this and the health crisis. The Purple House will also screen it later in Alice Springs.18

I felt that this is a project that has some value for the community. When I wrote my book, the first book,19 I felt it had some value in the context of land rights, but nobody working with Aboriginal people since the 1970s as an anthropologist can feel that making simply an academic project out of the work is enough. It’s not always possible for us to do more, but Aboriginal people do expect that you’re not just there to get information from them: that if you’re there and taken in as a member of the community, as someone ‘from Yayayi’, for example, you have obligations towards them, to help them and to do things. What form that can take is always a question and not always obvious, but I have felt, through my whole academic career, an obligation, something that I can never repay them, for the many things that they have given to me. I think many people working with Aboriginal people feel this incredible debt for being included so much in people’s lives. That debt is not just a kind of abstraction. With this film, I wanted it to do something for them. One thing it can do is to mobilise people around the issues of health. Another would be that the National Museum of Australia now holds their cultural property, so it won’t be lost. That was important to me.

Lisa: Cultural property, another big topic that threads itself through this work and through a lot of your thinking over the last couple of decades. Some of the [audiovisual] material in this

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18 The film screened in Alice Springs on 4 and 5 July 2017 as part of local NAIDOC week celebrations.
19 See Myers (1986).
film we wouldn’t be able to share as an audio clip in a podcast. Some of it might be easier to share. Can you say something about the early footage and the cultural properties in it? And what you had to do to make this film, because it’s actually a feat in the management of very complex relations around cultural property in film.

Fred: When we started the project, we went through two sets of university Human Subjects Research ethics approvals. Internal review boards, agreements about what rights people would have in the material, what ethical obligations we had, and so on. The original footage, we understood, Ian Dunlop had shot for Film Australia, which eventually has become Screen Australia, a government organisation, but he continued to have rights to his own projects. That’s how we understood it. The National Archive was very happy for us to use the material as a research tool, so that’s what we were doing. We weren’t planning to make a film.

When we decided to make a film, we edited it [the original footage] and we did all of this work. We had all the agreements. Papunya Tula Artists, the Aboriginal communities Kintore and Kiwirrkura were all involved, they were very happy with all this. Very late in the process, Ian Dunlop and Pip Deveson went to the National Film and Sound Archives [NFSA] – the agency that controls the copyright of the footage and manages its usages – with the proposal to make a film to be added to Ian’s other film work, that would be free for them [NFSA] and that could be included [with Ian’s corpus of other work]. They said, “You don’t have the right to make the film.” Ian was completely taken aback, because his understanding was that it was his material [and therefore he held authorial rights] even though it was lodged in the archive. That commenced quite a long process in which we had to negotiate with them.

Part of my current research interest, of course, is the issue of rights in cultural materials, and what had happened in Australia. Archival material like that was actually being freely
shared with people who had permissions of the communities. That is, the National Archives recognised that communities had rights to their material, and if you had permission from them you could use it. But now, because the Australian Federal Government had removed most of the funding from the archives, the NFSA had to make money from their collections. We would call that a return to neo-liberalism, in which institutions had to earn their keep. They were obliged to charge us money, and it was quite a lot per second, commercial rates. They said, “Well, we’ll allow you to do it at academic rates,” which is still very costly.

Initially Ian was quite upset because [as already indicated] he believed that he had authorial rights, as he was the creator of the film material, which in most copyright circumstances would give him control over it, even if he shared it [the film and the rights in it] with the community. But now, the government had a claim to it. So, we had some money in the grant, and we paid for the right to screen it in festivals. However, the film is marred, in some sense, by the necessity of including a stamp on it that says ‘Property of National Film and Sound Archives’, on all of the archival footage. It’s not terrible, but it does hinder its visual ability. Eventually, Ian rediscovered the Memorandum of Understanding that he had with Film Australia when he retired, which made it pretty clear, I thought, that he had rights to the material to use in his own projects, and he was a co-producer of this project. In the end, we needed a lawyer. The Australian National University legal team wrote to the National Film and Sound Archives about the rights. So, you have two government bodies basically hashing it out about the rights to this. Actually, ideally and theoretically, it belongs to the Pintupi communities themselves, and to Ian as a creator. In the end, the significance of the creator’s copyright privileges was allowed to stand. With the community’s agreement and the agreement of Ian, we were allowed to go forward without having to pay these horrendous fees. It’s quite an interesting story about the bureaucratisation of these protocols for establishing who has ownership rights in cultural material.20

Lisa: One of the ideas that you’ve developed over at least the last 25 years of your work is what you call ‘culture-making’ (Myers 1994) for desert people, and also as an idea that’s helpful in anthropological theorising. You’ve also emphasised the value of thinking about anthropology as a social practice that is, at times, itself involved in, or enabling of, culture-making. You’ve gone so far in a paper in 2006 (Myers & Ginsburg 2006) to say that there are emancipatory potentials in culture-making for people. Does this film fit into that trajectory of Pintupi culture-making as you’ve understood it? And if it does, in what ways might we think about it as emancipatory?

Fred: I drew on this concept as I was struggling also with issues of ‘Primitivism’, which are always used to judge Aboriginal people’s work [art, performance] as whether it’s ‘traditional’ or whether it’s ‘contaminated’ [see Myers 1991, 2006]. I think the emancipatory part is that it allows people to understand others as reaching towards you, as offering you a way into their worlds, to the extent that they are willing to do so. It allows them to make their cultural understandings through time. Because of the technology of the film, I think the question you asked about the editing is really to the point. It is not as much a product of their [consultants’]

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20 See Myers (2017b).
activity as I would have hoped. That is to say, if we had had more time, if I could live in Kintore for six months – which I can’t because of family circumstances – it might have been more played out through time, where they could have had more input. Input, as deep consultation, takes a long time for Aboriginal people. You can’t do it in two weeks. The process of consultation is longer. We did have an extended time. I think many scholars and activists have concluded that the idea of ‘collaboration’ is not simple. I have come to prefer ‘accountability’. Anyway, [this project] is collaborative in many respects, but collaboration is limited by people’s skills, and an understanding of a medium. The medium of film is something that most of the people in the two communities don’t have sufficient experience of to make judgments of the kind that they might make. Perhaps if you showed it and you could reshow it and play it back and cut it and so on. There is some of that: the Pintupi communities had been watching the film for several years, so we did have the advantage of their understandings of the material, but our ability to train people to participate and to collaborate in the ways that we would have hoped, and the limitations of our own resources and our own family situations, made that, I think, less than it might have been. I don’t want to say it was a perfect project. It is a project. I would have liked nothing more than to spend more time out there and let it play out in that way, which is what I did in my two years of fieldwork and later long periods. [But] people’s lives become more complicated. Some of the constraints are the realities of our lives. It is a big issue in anthropology – no matter who you are at a point in your life.

I have 40 years of history. It’s right now 44 years almost to the day [19 July 1973] when I went to Yayayi for the first time, and I can remember it as if it were yesterday. Bobby West was my first friend. I met him on the first day I was there [in Yayayi]. Now, he’s coming to open up this exhibition [Tjunguṉutja – ‘From Having Come Together’]\(^{21}\) that’s about to happen here in Darwin. I think that history and time has earned me some trust from people, and also some knowledge of the signs of people’s hesitations. I am always worried about pushing into things that I should not be. That’s why that moment of asking Marlene about her father rings to me as a bit insensitive, although I actually was meaning to provoke her to reflect. And I do know that, despite the fact that there is a well-known taboo on the names of the dead, that taboo is often suspended for the practicalities of the moment and among people who know each other very well, with some indication that you respect their relationship to it. From that point of view, I think maybe if there’s an emancipatory potential in this film, it is [to give a value in the present] to the sweep of anthropology which was engaged with questions of land rights and the documentation of a way of life that will never [again] be what it was. And that our friendships can be helpful.

Lisa: I think that’s a really great place to end this discussion. Thanks Fred, it’s been a pleasure listening.

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\(^{21}\) We are referring here to the opening of the exhibition at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), 1 July 2017, in Darwin. *Tjunguṉutja* was a retrospective of the collection of early Papunya Tula paintings held by MAGNT, curated by Luke Scholes (curator of Aboriginal Art, MAGNT) in collaboration with five senior artists of Papunya Tula Artists – Bobby West Tjupurrula, Michael Nelson Jagamara, Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra, Sid Anderson, and Joseph Jurrah Tjapaltjarri.
Conclusion

This discussion has two key frames of reference in the contemporary field of visual anthropology and it is through these that we figured the movement of our discussion when we caught up to record an interview/conversation in Darwin in 2017.

Firstly we are attuned to (and bothered by) the glorified banality of the term ‘collaboration’. As a gloss for ‘working together’ it can too easily elide entangled histories of engagement and shifting distributions of power and agency. It oversimplifies the real conditions of possibility and multiple practices involved in co-creative projects (Haviland 2017), and it risks sidestepping a serious working through of complex participatory identities.22 A banal conception of collaboration threatens to become, in many invocations, little more than another box to tick in the policing of imagined boundaries. The second frame, discussed more explicitly here, is that of the ‘memory’-making capacity and tendency of archival ‘returns’ in the present lives of people whose generational successions have been threatened or disrupted dramatically within living memory. As Indigenous filmmakers like Rachel Perkins and Frances Peters-Little emphasised in telling the stories of the political struggles of an earlier generation, the Pintupi consultants want this film to illustrate or illuminate Indigenous strength, commitment and cultural practices, which they see as having guided their history from the settlement at Papunya back to their own country.

These two frames are linked. Archival ‘return’ – as a collaborative practice involving multiple ‘stakeholders’ working together on both sides of the equation – begins and ends with respecting the community protocols for designing, planning and carrying out the work of retrieval, consultation, sharing, receiving back and caretaking. Simultaneous with this social-ethical imperative, the cultural/material ends of repatriation cannot be predicted because enacting the primary respect for cultural privacy, authority, safety and aspiration is performative across multiple locations and times, via a variety of people and rule-bound processes. The case of the Dunlop footage is iconic in this respect: the relational negotiations around ‘return’ proved to be as fraught at the highest levels of our national cultural institutions as they are at the local levels of desert communities around the question of who can and will speak about the past and its value in the present, and to whom and to what ends. The exercise of taking, or shaping, power at any one point only opens up the necessity of renegotiating at another point.23

Anxieties surrounding the circulation and control of archival images are by no means solely the emotive terrain of people who might re-meet their ancestors and past family on screen. Archives can themselves be active agents in the displacement, projection and amplification of this anxiety, converting culturally significant recorded ‘national’ history into a price-per-second value. The Remembering Yayayi project reminds us that if, as Marilyn Strathern (1999) pointed out many years ago, property – and therefore culture as property – is

22 See Apmere Angkentye-kenhe: Language as a music playing us (Sometimes 2018), a recent innovative arts practice-led Aboriginal language-based research project in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) that thoughtfully enacted this kind of working through. Also, the report ‘Ngapartji Ngapartji – the consequences of kindness’ (Palmer 2010), on the Big hART project of the same name.

23 We thank Steve Feld for helping to formulate this insight.
foundational to sociality and relationality, we should attend closely to its movement, its play of meanings and uses. The social life of cultural property (Appadurai 1986) mitigates against the reduction of co-creative relationships to the cold interface of a business contract, no matter how legally binding the latter may be. Shared pleasures in the recognition of historically emerging connections can be intense, and happily so. They spring up irrepressibly and unpredictably. They foreground and spill beyond the transactional discipline of ‘partnerships’ and ‘collaboration’. Most importantly, they do a lot to ensure the survival of the deal, to keep the spirit of a project going. Such shared pleasures inspire inventiveness in the management of memory-based co-creative projects, eliciting a strong sense of purpose when red tape feels all too constricting and constraining.

Individuals experience social memory as a shared place of relatedness. Archival ‘returns’ have powerful intergenerationally affective dimensions. As the social life of the Remembering Yayayi project has shown, archival ‘returns’ that involve creative collaboration also inherently carry the potential to galvanise new relationships within and beyond communities. In Central Australia at the present moment these kinds of projects have a particular potency as people whose childhoods were in part shaped by the dramatic social transitions and cultural transformations of the 1970s move into roles as elders within their communities.

A range of what we might term ‘memory machines’ – processes, practices and productions that gather, curate and remake memory stories in visual and other media – are key here. They are mimetic in the sense that they create likenesses of what was. They are revelatory, remaking the past from the perspective of a precarious present, and casting it into an uncertain future. They suggest in equal measure personal nostalgia, community and research salvage, and enduring historical values.

As with the landmark MAGNT exhibition and accompanying film of the earliest Papunya paintings, ‘Tjunguṉuṭja – from having come together’ (Scholes 2017), and similar retrospectives, films such as Remembering Yayayi provoke pleasure, sorrow and pride. It was no coincidence that we recorded the interview for this chapter at the time of the opening of this remarkable revelatory and revisionist Western Desert art show. Out of footage at risk of fading into obscurity, Marlene and the project’s other key Pintupi consultants, together with Fred, Pip, Ian, Peter and others, made new memory narratives for desert people and for all who have been involved in their histories up close or at a distance. As they themselves grow older, what becomes of these memories in the imaginations of near and far away audiences remains to be seen.

References


We never had any photos of my family**: Archival return, film, and a personal history


Films