

From Daylesford to Nhulunbuy and Back

The Northern Territory is a foreign country: they do things differently there, with apologies to L P Hartley and The Go Between. But it is like another world, another time.

From the moment you step off the plane things are different. The humidity hits you like a warm face washer, you remember the constant bead of sweat above the lip and the sweet fragrance of frangipani fills the air. Then the ground, you notice the red brown dirt of the airport and surrounds. In the twilight it's hot, still, the clouds build; the unusually late wet season hangs in there.

I'm back in the Territory and headed to Yirrkala, 'where the freshwater meets the saltwater', home of the Yolgnu people and Yothu Yindi, Australia's internationally renowned band, hailed "as the most beautiful blend of indigenous and modern music to emerge from the world's music scene"

It is also home to Nablco, known to the locals as 'Nabalcoiraz' a huge squat monster of a mine that dominates the landscape . The mine boasts the longest continuous conveyor belt in the world and its line cuts a swathe across the lightly treed scrub. It greedily feeds itself on mountains of red dirt spitting out aluminium and another by-product, electricity. Hot water pours into the bay after cooling these processes down. The abundant electricity feeds off to the different settlements around the district that are home to aboriginal communities and the township of Gove that services the mine.

Yirrkala is one of these aboriginal communities and where I'm staying with my mate, the Sport and Recreation Officer for the community.

That first night my friend is in Gove and we wander to the club for obligatory beers, it is hot and steamy. Tall slender black youth hover like moths around a flame next to Steve's car, they flutter in and out of the light, sometimes only their smiles visible. It's fifteen kilometres out to the community and the next bus is another hour. They all need a lift home after a football meeting.

'No, no I'm busy, my friends here.'

Here another culture shift; the Arnhem Club, membership only, no thongs and no T-shirts and air-conditioning that feels like walking into a fridge. Miners and other town workers mingle in one bar, aboriginal people sit around the edges, together but separate. We find secluded bar space in the gaming room, bright flashing lights, bells and whirring noises hum along beside us as we catch up on news.

Later I'm introduced to several local Yolgnu people; this one an artist, this one a female elder and that one owes my friend twenty dollars, their all mesmerised by their pokie machines and I only get a cursory once over. Later I naively ask what name they call the rainbow snake? I'm hoping to adapt one of my string tricks to the region.

The well-dressed aboriginal woman looks me in the eye as if I might be mad and considers me a moment. She whizzes her machine around again with the push of a button and blurts out a name almost a phrase that I have trouble catching. Later my friend laughs as he explains it's

not so simple as that. It's involves many different parts and relationships. It's hard to explain in one word.

Where the stories I have heard and told have a beginning a middle and a end, aboriginal stories segue in and out of events , locations, relationships, rituals, teaching and survival information. Their degrees of kinship and relationships to the land are extremely complex built up over thousands and thousands of years living harmoniously with their environment.

Over the next few days my friend alludes to these complex relationships as way of explanation but it's like nothing I've ever known before. We drive around so I can get a feel for the lay of the land. On our way out of Yirrkala you can't help but notice the mines presence, a long tendril weaves across the countryside. Mounds of red dirt are pushed up to the road's edge and the airport is moving, Steve tells me; its red dirt is needed for the bauxite mine.

We visit Skee Beach , further south along the Gulf and run into Mandawuy Yunupingu (of Yothu Yindi)and his wife and their grandson. We join them for lunch at the yacht club; he knows my brother Paul from the music world and he welcomes me in. Mundawuy's wife occupies her small grandson, it is evident from her games and rhymes that she too is a storyteller, a teacher.

The yacht club opens at midday and we wait outside in the gardens. From the far north corner of the garden the mine looms in the distance like a prehistoric predator, its size is awesome , its effect on the landscape immeasurable. But sitting in the southern corner we look out to safe harbour where yachts bob, dinghies runabout and the afternoon's storm collects over Gunyangara (Mundawuy's homeland) and Melville Bay

The different images are hard to reconcile in this remote corner of Arnhem Land.

The aboriginal people have lived here for over forty thousand years, treating the land with great respect and reverence, their stories of the dreaming incorporate a sophisticated understanding of ecology and shared commonality of all species of living creatures.

David Suzuki in his book Wisdom of the Elders details this complex understanding by referring to Arande's (Central Australia) Red Kangaroo Dreaming stories. He refers to respected biologist, and renowned authority on the natural history and ecology of the red kangaroo A. E. Newsome when he writes in a research paper about 'eco-mythology.' Newsome claims that stories about Red Kangaroo Dreaming and the sacred spring at Krantji, 'may have an underlying ecological rationale.'

'A map of the ancestors overland trek near Krantji ---- breathing life and form into the landscape as they went corresponded with uncanny precision to maps of preferred habitats of red kangaroo.'

'The ancient Aborigines who created these legends must have been well acquainted with the ecology of the red kangaroo, and appear to have passed that knowledge into the mythology to be hidden by allegory.'

But these stories were created when a proud people roamed the land, when survival depended on your knowledge of the stories and your adherence to their lessons.

Nowadays aboriginal people live on communities and other lessons are needed for survival. Western bureaucracy is not something that comes easily to the communities in the territory. Mundawuy and his brother Gularrwuy are rightfully worried about the future of the Yolngu and that is why the Yothu Yindi Foundation has been established.

Pronounced "yo-thoo-yin-dee", the name translates from Yolngu matha , (Yolgnu lanuage) to English as "child and mother" and is essentially a kinship term referring to the connection that the Yolngu clans of north-east Arnhem Land have between themselves.'

At Gunyangara I visit Yirringa Music Development Centre, incorporating the Ian Potter Foundation Studio. A recording studio set amongst a small patch of rainforest overlooking Melville Bay, it must be one of the most ideallic locations in the world.

Once again the duality of the associations strikes me; technology comes to Arnhem Land.

Later that afternoon Steve takes me to one of his favourite spots. Gulkula, a stringybark forest facing the Gulf of Carpentaria, it is also the site of the Garma Festival of Traditional Culture. We sit on a fallen log and look out across bush and sandunes to the sea. Now I can feel the hum of nature, smell the forest after light rain and I feel incredibly contented, I find myself chuckling out loud. It is so peaceful and there is something very comforting about being out of telecommunications range.

We stroll back to the site of the Garma Festival site not far from where we've been sitting.

Imagine if you will then , several lean to's in clearing in the bush. Wood poles with corrugated tin roofs, floors laid with coarse river sand and 'five hundred traditional dancers, artists and musicians of the Yolgnu clan groups along with two hundred invited guests' sitting, watching, learning in a circle around a central grassed area, this was the scene last July at the Garma Festival of traditional culture. A huge totem pole stands centrally, tall and definitely masculine, it acknowledges this spiritually significant site, 'Garma is the abstract idea of a place from which cultural meanings flow....and the place for our Garma is Gulkula.' They hope to bring this festival to an international stage so that '(we) can learn from each other and live together"

Back to Yirrkala to pick up my gear before heading to the air-conditioned town library for my first storytelling engagement. The scattered beer cans at the town's edge indicate the drinking spot for the youth of the settlement. It is a dry community (no alcohol) and they wander out here to sit by the side of the road to drink; it is known as "The Limit". There is no water, no lights, no amenties and as they swagger home they are a definite traffic hazard, their dark, lithsome bodies, hidden and swaying in the night.

Their dreaming stories never incorporated beer, or cans that do not decompose, or takeaway fried food and soft drinks that have become their staple diet.

A day's work and back on the plane and off to Darwin, this time for a storytelling inservice for librarians and teachers. My passionate pleas urging them to tell stories, to inspire children with heroic deeds of great heroes, to impart understanding through the stories they choose to tell.

Late Sunday I head down to Adelaide River, 110 kilometres south of Darwin on the Stuart Highway, or down the track as they say up here. I will be based at the pub, travelling out to schools and communities in the vicinity. The Adelaide River Pub is renowned for its great food, meals are enormous, and the rooms might crack it for one point of a star. The saying 'don't let the bed bugs bite' probably originated here. It is also home to Charlie the Buffalo, star of Crocodile Dundee 1 & 2, the poor animal is on it's last legs, so to speak, with a crook hip, they don't expect him to live much longer.

Monday morning I walk around the corner to the school, the swollen Adelaide River courses swiftly by my side, I'm later to hear stories from the kids that crocodiles have been spotted just on the lawn at the front of their school. It is a beautiful building with lush tropical garden surrounding it. Classrooms sit on stilts to take advantage of the breeze and louvered windows allow the breeze to flow through, The space underneath is utilised for play when it rains and huge dot paintings adorn the shelter shed.

The audience's upturned faces are like salt and pepper, black, brown, white and like children everywhere they love the stories. The aboriginal children that attend this school belong to the camp mob that live down near the river, they are always tired and often truant from school. Where once this would have seemed like a prized camping spot now it is for the fringe dwellers, stuck between two worlds they don't seem to fit anywhere.

Tuesday, a visiting school rings in, they don't think they can make it, the rivers are up and rain is threatening. They have an open-air caged truck that isn't suitable for all weather conditions. Jenny the Librarian organises a four-wheel drive, 'If they can't come in, we'll go out to them.'

After lunch we set off, unsure of what to expect only knowing that I'm headed to the Daly River mission. We drive for an hour and a half before we ford our first stream, there are four more to cross and the last is highest at .4 metres. Jenny, forges on she is worried that afternoon rain might make it difficult to return.

Finally we are on the outskirts of the settlement, jabiru, like large white cranes, wade in the reed-rimmed patches of water that surround the settlement. We drive in to the Saint Francis Xavier mission, community school. It seems so strange to find this flashback to my Catholic upbringing in this isolated area of the Northern Territory. But it's straight to it, we want to get in and out again before the rain starts again.

I'm a little apprehensive, here I am, as if taking coals to Newcastle, telling stories to man's oldest known living culture. Born in the year of the rooster all of a sudden I'm not so cocky. English is a limited second language for many who live on Aboriginal communities and I don't know what they will make of a balanda (white) women telling them stories.

I sit them down, draw them in and get ready to tell. But suddenly the back door of the library building is flung open and a young boy announces, 'A fight! In the river, two crocs.'

And voom their gone, the entire audience, children, adults and me, outside to watch two big male crocodiles fighting in the river. But to tell the truth I couldn't see them they were camouflaged by the branches of the mangrove trees.

I can laugh now, but then it made me even more trepidacious. Finally, I begin telling stories to a mixed age group of 40 children and their teachers. My string tricks have always been invaluable, five tricks, taught to me by Ann Pellowski and Kel Watkins and I feel like I owe them royalties. These tricks always lull them into the stories, even the most fearsome audience, so now they're all listening. I know one origami fold, a crane that flaps its wings. So Junko Morimoto's *The White Crane* becomes the Jabiru, I cut stories to bare detail, I throw in a little creole (pidgeon-english) and they listen.

Back across the five creeks before the rain starts but the dense grey clouds muscle and jostle around us all the way back to Adelaide River. When I'm having my afternoon siesta I hear the heavens open up as the rain pelts down on the tin roof like a gattling gun.

Next morning I'm up early with first bird-call, today we're flying out to different communities on a small six seater plane. As somebody commented it was like sitting in an old sixties style combi van with torn upholstery. I am a nervous flyer and it had been a long time since I had been in such a small plane.

But it was so exciting I tried to focus on the scenery.

We headed due west from Adelaide River to a mission settlement called Ngnamariyanga (phonetically none-murray-ung-ga but the children sing it when they say it), from the air we could see the north-west coastline of the Territory and below us the paths of the mighty rainbow snake crisscrossed the land.

When I worked in the territory years ago I learnt that aboriginal people have an incredible aptitude for aerial vision. That is, white children would draw a house with windows, chimneys, flowers and the sun, aboriginal children would draw aerial views of mountains and landscapes, it was amazing. Looking at the rivers from the sky I too had a chance to connect to creation time when the rainbow snake became part of the dreaming stories of this old, old landscape.

The settlement was surrounded by water and luminous green lichen, or grass floated and swayed on the surface. Why there were more shades of green than even the biggest box of Derwent pencils. The airstrip, if you could call it that, in contrast was red ochre.

At Ngnamariyanga I was shown around the different classrooms and introduced as 'the storyteller.' You could see they too were curious and a little apprehensive. I'd decided to start with my rainbow snake trick. Now in this story I employ a fair bit of poetic license, it was actually taught to me by Ann Pellowski. I explain it's a trick and a story taught to me by an old aboriginal man from Darwin named Wyendji. Then I call the snake Goriolla which is actually its name from Gulf Country. No-one seemed to notice and when I looked for approval to the elder man at the back he impatiently nodded for me to get on with the story.

I told them my Anase tale *A Story A Story* by Gail E Haley. For this I have Kel's spider in a web string trick that becomes Osebo the Leopard of the terrible teeth as you manipulate the strings and the creature moves up and down. I'd seen an Anase 'big story book' sitting in one classroom so I knew they'd heard of him. I called Nyame, the sky God, the big spirit fella, in the sky and everything else seemed self explanatory.

It rained ever day I was in the Territory and the sky was continually dominated by masses and towers of grey cotton clouds. On the little plane we seemed to fly through corridors of them, steering a clear path to avoid the turbulence. Isolated patches of light and rain showered down around us. The Dragon's Pearl a story from the far-away days of cloud breathing dragons was the show stopper. Chao Sheng the boy swallows a pearl and turns into a dragon, each time I told the story I ceremoniously unwrapped a ten inch painted dragon that belongs to my son, I told them it was very precious.

The young teacher's fresh from college in Darwin told me they had never known them to be so quiet. I knew they had understood and enjoyed the stories. I was impressed by the respect the elders had instilled for stories.

The infant teacher didn't bring her children into the session their english was so limited but Jenny dragged me in there anyway. I cut my teeth on pre-school storytime and I've honed my props down to a couple of simple things. It was exciting and made me realise how universal stories are.

Back on the plane for the longest leg of the trip to Jabiru, in the heart of Arnhem Land and site of a huge open cut mine. From the sky disused holes of previous sites are like opals. The colours are brilliant blues and aquamarines, it must be the leeching effect of the minerals. Surrounding Jabiru are spectacular ancient escarpments that follow the rivers across the countryside but the mine seems to dominate the landscape even more because of the intrusive nature of the beast.

It is a large school and I only have time to visit two groups, back on the plane, still feeling a little queasy so I decide to ditch my packed lunch from the pub, egg and lettuce sandwiches.

At Batchelor area school the next day I tell stories to the primary children, the groups are small and the children are attentive. It's been a long week and I'm happy to attend happy hour with the staff before I catch the bus back to Darwin.

A few weekend dinner parties round of my stay and I find myself in question mode. One friend is manager at Dombosco , the detention centre where the latest Territory suicide was reported. I hear the young lad had only one day left of his sentence. I hear cynical old friends talk of aboriginal people, the mob that live around the parks and reserves of Darwin, "And these are the custodians of the Land"

Mandatory sentencing is raised, some argue it's like legitimised discrimination, others say it's necessary to stop white territorians feeling like they live in a 'combat zone.'

I learn that the law was actually introduced as a way of curbing urban crime but that it's devastating effects have been felt more in the remote communities.

I see it as the kind of anti-social behaviour that is often associated with poverty, as a confused response to massive cultural domination.

For all the exciting developments, like recording studios, and cultural festivals our society has knocked these quiet sensitive people for six. Our ways must seem so harsh and brash to the original inhabitants of Australia.

I feeling an overwhelming sadness that our society has ignored their great wealth of knowledge, I feel sad that stories were given no value. Travelling to the territory I feel like I dipped my toes into a huge sea of interwoven knowledge and wisdom that resonates with the landscape. I feel greedy for more.

I have travelled to remote corners of the territory and been the 'teller of tales' and I acknowledge June Barnes when she say's 'the storyteller gives and with that giving the storyteller receives.' I'm sure that I have received much with this storytelling experience.