

*Swallowed Words: bringing up an Aboriginal past in the city.*

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**Abstract:** Many Aboriginal stories have not been allowed to be told historically due to the over-whelming dominance of non-Aboriginal stories. Many Aboriginal stories were once outlawed and so were forgotten, some only partially remembered, many now only told in the language of the invaders. There are other Aboriginal stories, however, especially those of particular urban Aboriginal peoples, which have lain 'dormant', protected by subversive family histories and embedded in objects claimed as the possessions of the Aboriginal people concerned. Some of these once 'swallowed' stories are now being regurgitated, re-emerging into a world that does not always recognise them as true. I am a non-Indigenous woman anthropologist and in this paper I recount some different versions of a story 'told' in different ways; through the signs and symbols of the Australian nation state, the movements of my Aboriginal research collaborators through what is claimed as their Country, through verbal storytelling, and through artefacts and paintings.

**Keywords:** urban Aboriginal art production; storytelling; Parramatta

I am a non-Indigenous woman anthropologist and I have been working with a group of urban Aboriginal people in what we now call Sydney for many years. Due to some complex politics which I briefly explain below, it is necessary to use a pseudonym when writing about this group of people so for the purposes of this article I call them 'Gwalan'. As well as being research participants many Gwalan people have become close personal friends. My relationships with people as both a researcher and a friend make the texts that we jointly produce rich, nuanced and sophisticated ethnography. These texts are also problematic in that I am as much a productive agent in generating the contexts for their telling as Gwalan are themselves. The subjectivity of the observer, as Devereaux (in Behar 1996:193) insists, always:

Influences the course of the observed event as radically as 'inspection' influences an electron. 'The observer' *never* observes the behavioural event which 'would have taken place' in his (sic) absence, nor hears an account identical with that which the same narrator would give to another person.

For better or worse, the stories I tell are not 'purely' Gwalan stories, but always, also my own.

Before I say anything else, it is important that I explain that Gwalan people have only recently (re)emerged as the traditional Aboriginal owners of what is now a large part of modern Sydney. It might be argued that Gwalan 'ethnogenesis' was initially in response to land rights, native title, and other seemingly benevolent state policies concerning Indigenous Australians. Yet there are also other forces at work. People who claim Gwalan heritage and identity today do so largely because of the genealogical research of biologist, Dr. James Kohen in the early 1980s. Prior to Kohen's work some of these people lived lives as either unspecified Aboriginal people living on the fringes of Sydney suburban life, or some may have considered themselves members of a post-contact group of 'Sydney Aboriginal people'. The vast majority of the approximately 6,000 people identified as Gwalan descendants by Kohen, however, did not identify as Aboriginal at all before and choose not to since his research.

Two or three hundred people have now identified as Gwalan and continue to develop various ideas, values and philosophies about and expressions of their identity. For these people recent disappointments regarding access to remediation for past injustices such as native title have not resulted in the demise of the various types of cultural renaissance that characterise Gwalan (re)emergence. It seems that the expressions of group identity they have developed over some decades have now become such values in themselves that they cannot and will not be relinquished. Art production is one such expression. Gwalan art production, like all Gwalan expressions of identity are, as this paper will detail below, intimately connected with Gwalan Country.

Like many Aboriginal peoples, however, Gwalan cultural identity is not expressed in the same way by all Gwalan descendants. There is more than one group of Gwalan and some Gwalan express themselves very differently from the Gwalan I represent here. Other Gwalan groups would be horrified to be identified with the practices of the Gwalan I work with because their ideas, philosophies and representations are very different. This is why it is necessary for me to use a pseudonym.

Gwalan Country, as well as being claimed as belonging to Gwalan is always also claimed as Australian state place and is represented as such in countless ways. Gwalan can never express their identity outside of the terms already put in place by the identities and histories of the dominant society. Yet, regardless of the overwhelmingly dominant discourses of modernity that the state makes of the city and discourses that place all Aboriginal peoples somewhere other than the city, Gwalan and the city go hand in hand. The city *is* Gwalan land. The development, experience and living of relationships with Gwalan Land and Gwalan people and the stories that represent, substantiate and reconstitute those relations are at the centre of Gwalan identity. Later in this paper I recount stories that are a product of the experience of interacting with Gwalan people in a particular part of Sydney with special significance for both Gwalan and settler Australians: Parramatta. I say more about Parramatta below. First I need to theorise how, specifically, people, like Gwalan, who have been written out of state stories can tell their own stories. How can their life histories be told in their proper context when that context has been over-written by an alien and dominant society? To begin to address these questions it is necessary to think about the urban space in which these competing, contradictory stories are told and the secrets of Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal interaction which are kept in this place.

The city, following de Certeau (1984), Simmel (1971), Debord (1994) and Morris (1998) can be understood as the quintessential site of the capitalist project and where state surveillance operates to its fullest potential. The city, however, is not only thought to be a site of high surveillance. The city also provides opportunities for various peoples to use spaces in their own ways. Because it is always developing, always changing, always moving towards greater and

more efficient forms of consumption, the city may be understood as the ultimate sign of civilisation. Considering that many discourses represent Aboriginal peoples as the binary opposite of civilised, it might be said that the city could be thought to be the antithesis of Aboriginal place. The city might be considered, by some, to be the last place to find 'authentic' Aboriginal peoples reproducing 'genuine' Aboriginal culture. Yet, no matter how the city is theorised and represented by various strategies of state power, it is the way that people *use* spaces which make some places habitable in the ways that the state plans and represents, and allows other places to be used in secret ways which may be subversive or otherwise different to state plans and representations (de Certeau 1984). The city may in fact be a *most* likely place for Aboriginal peoples to practice 'authentic' forms of culture without constant surveillance.

A walk through the streets of Parramatta with Gwalan can be a walking tour of Gwalan history and an encounter with the secrets of Gwalan identity. Gwalan artists are enthusiastic participants in capitalism, both as consumers and producers. The ways in which they participate in capitalism as producers, however, is revealing of how they make Parramatta their own place in ways quite different to non-Indigenous Australians. Obtaining the necessary materials for the manufacture of Gwalan artwork as consumer goods requires a walk into what is, for me, unfamiliar territory. That is, a walk with Gwalan to collect materials for artwork requires the transformation of Parramatta from a place which is variously represented as 'colonial seat of power', 'modern shopping centre' and 'place of *past* significance to Aboriginal people' (among other things) to a place which is used to tell Gwalan stories. A walk with Gwalan, especially in what is claimed as Gwalan Country, very often includes foraging for materials for the manufacture of paintings, jewellery and other artefacts which are later sold as commodities. Pieces of wood, gum nuts and ochre as well as broken pieces of coloured glass, chips from ceramic tiles and 'convict bricks' are collected along with a commentary on why these things are important for various tasks and how they will be used. These objects are used by Gwalan to tell stories. Not all of these objects are successfully connected to memory, however, and some things remain illegible – a trace or mark of forgotten or illegible histories. A walk with Gwalan through Parramatta produces countless examples of these 'story objects' which represent the unending struggle over meaning that characterises the (multi/inter) cultural space that all Gwalan must always inhabit. Old dirt tracks going nowhere, old tin cans, the remains of a fire, abandoned buildings, all these are silent objects which appear on our walks. They are simply there – traces of a secret history of contact between Gwalan descendants and non-Gwalan descendants – which has been forgotten by 'us' and may be appropriated by Gwalan for their own purposes. These purposes may include constructing stories concerning the past and on-going inter-relationships between Gwalan descendants and non-Gwalan descendants. As Walter Benjamin (1986) insists, it is the small, the frivolous, the wasted objects – the rubbish of western culture – that witness a history that is silent in dominant discourses.

These pieces of 'our' rubbish have been theorised by Gilles Deleuze (1989), in a film context, as what he describes as 'radioactive fossils'. These objects were 'unearthed' and explained to me by Gwalan. Our 'rubbish' is attributed Gwalan meaning and is revealed to contain Gwalan stories. I would argue that Deleuze's conceptualisation of these objects as 'radioactive fossils' is as fitting for these actual material things as it is for cinematic images. For Deleuze, the fossil – an object from another time, another place, often another culture – embodies a history, but one that can never be completely revealed. The fossil is silent, dead, inert – yet radiates with meaning and history. It is dangerous and threatens to escape. It also threatens to tell stories that we may not want to hear, may not be ready to hear, or which may still be happening and are therefore evermore threatening. In short, radioactive fossils are dangerous and unpredictable. Radioactive fossils embody a past which is incommensurable with the present that the object inhabits. According to Deleuze, the important thing about these objects, these 'radioactive fossils', is that they contain history within themselves. They are excavated from another place and another culture disrupting the plane of the present time, place and culture. During our walks in Parramatta the present culture is constituted by both the dominant Australian and Gwalan cultures.

This became most pronounced when we (my Gwalan friends and I) came to Parramatta Park. Parramatta was selected in 1788 by the first Governor of New South Wales, Arthur Phillip, as the site for the new seat of British government of the new colony when it was apparent that Sydney Cove was not suitably fertile to sustain European farming practices after the first year of colonisation in 1789. Governor Phillip built a small house on the site which was improved by his successor, Governor Hunter and extended by Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1815 to much the same proportions as those seen today. Parramatta Park contains, and is itself, a monument to the first Government House at Parramatta and celebrates a colonial moment when the seat of colonial power was in Parramatta. It is the oldest public building in Australia and is saturated with different and competing significance for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia. But this historical significance is secondary to Parramatta Park's present significance as a state place which is represented as 'place of past and on-going colonial government'. These representations take the form of signs and plaques commemorating various colonial figures and their deeds at particular times. They also take the form of formal roads; a weir on the river; highly decorative Victorian cast iron gates; band rotundas; and of course, the Georgian mansion known as Old Government House. However, it was a secret site in Parramatta Park that is not marked, does not have European signs or plaques, which Gwalan pointed out to me as a Gwalan ceremonial site. The grounds of Old Government House contain a site that before she died, a very senior Gwalan descendant told me she remembered attending as a small child in the 1920s while Gwalan men, including her father, engaged in ceremony. Whilst walking around this place, with Old Government House looming nearby, Gwalan kicked the earth turning up shards of glass, pieces of rock, fragments of tin using these pieces of 'rubbish' to tell stories of their life, their families and their ancestors. These were stories I had never heard before, stories I promised not to tell, and stories which might not be believed if I were to tell them now. The objects that Gwalan unearthed on our walks around the ceremonial site were disconnected from their pasts yet radiated their power to affect the present. Some of these fossils tell stories. One old Gwalan lady pointed to what appeared to be a pile of stones, bricks and other 'builders' rubbish' explaining:

That there's a cairn. That's the spot where Aunty saw them ancestors. Them old fellas (ancestors) made them to show us the way to ceremony. (Fieldnotes)

As a member of the dominant 'white' Australian society the kinds of stories I might have attributed to the pile of 'rubbish' would have been quite different. To me, these 'fossils' were telling stories of past industrialisation that has been superseded by new technologies. The 'radioactive fossils', recollection objects from a past that included interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Sydney peoples, disrupt the Australian state narrative of Parramatta Park as site of uncontested and on-going colonialism because Gwalan ascribe counter narratives concerning on-going Gwalan presence and Gwalan custodianship of country to them. Whatever forgotten or partially remembered stories these objects contain, because of their presence at the site of what is claimed as a Gwalan ceremonial ground, Gwalan claim them as testament to the existence of a Gwalan past in that place. A Gwalan present was created on our walks in Parramatta Park by recognising Parramatta Park not only as 'past seat of colonial government', but as 'site of Gwalan ceremonial ground'. This Gwalan present is disrupted by the appearance of 'our stuff'. These objects appear, not just as possible witnesses to past Gwalan ceremonies, but as 'fossils' of a history of contact which has been forgotten or suppressed by 'us'. This history of contact is appropriated and given significance as current, dynamic and ongoing by Gwalan. Although these objects are the artefacts, the ruins, the rubbish left by 'our' wasted projects, Gwalan gather them up and use them in different ways to tell their own stories. As a young Gwalan woman turned a shard of old opalescent bottle over in her hands and looked through the swirling colours of the glass she asserted that White denial of Gwalan survival and a history of contact between Sydney Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal peoples is disputed by the presence of the bottle in this place because:

Whitefellas say Gwalan are all gone. They reckon that they was the first Aboriginal people to go. This's a old one this bottle. This bit o' bottle was here at ceremony. Maybe a whitefella brought it. Maybe a Gwalan man brought it from a whitefella. I dunno. But it had to come from a whitefella an' it had ta have bin at ceremony. (Fieldnotes)

The shard of glass in question turned up unexpectedly a few weeks later when I happened to be at a Gwalan art stall in Parramatta. Over the trestle tables that served as counters to sell Gwalan art and crafts a colourful display of various works had been arranged. These works included small, framed 'dot' paintings mostly featuring the images of animals native to Gwalan lands; fridge magnets in the shape of animals detailed in colourful dots and carved wooden artefacts including boomerangs and didgeridoos.

Some of the paint used in the manufacture of these objects contains white ochre from Gwalan land. By extending (and somewhat adapting) Deleuze's theory I argue that the use of this paint transforms these objects into a kind of 'radioactive fossil'. Gwalan ochre is made from crushed pieces of white clay from river and creek beds on Gwalan land. White ochre is quite literally Gwalan Land: it is material stuff of country. It is not a 'radioactive fossil' in the sense I have already described – it is not made from 'our' rubbish or waste, rather it is simply itself a fossil. It is a remnant, a material trace of Gwalan ancestral land, literally.

The significance of fossil traces of Gwalan country in 'storytelling objects', that is, in artefacts and art works, is not, however, generally explained to the consumers of these items. That is, these stories about prior ownership of country are not articulated. They are rather almost 'smuggled' into the lives of consumers who then live with them as silent fossils of Gwalan presence.

Early in my fieldwork Gwalan more often attempted to explain the significance of the presence of some physical 'storytelling object' from Gwalan land to potential consumers of their products. These were typically met with refusal to purchase the item. Many potential purchasers appeared to be either unimpressed, or else just did not 'get it'. Purchasers who were attracted to the beauty of the objects were less enthusiastic it seems with a more complicated and political meaning attributed to the 'thing'.

On one occasion, for example, I witnessed an old Gwalan lady proudly explain to a non-Aboriginal potential buyer that a particular art work and its design came from Gwalan Country and is important to Gwalan people. This 'explanation' was the story. It was an opportunity and an invitation for the woman to establish a relationship with a Gwalan senior woman. It was most disappointing when the woman replaced the object and walked away. She apparently did not want to hear a story about prior Aboriginal presence in Sydney, and was not interested in establishing a relationship with an Aboriginal woman. When I asked a senior man why Gwalan have abandoned telling white consumers about such things he said:

Them fellas don't believe us anyway. Save ya breath I say. (Fieldnotes)

In my experience the general response from potential consumers to explanations *offered* by Gwalan is largely dismissive. There have always, however, been customers who *demand* another kind of narrative.

While I was casually chatting with Gwalan people at the stall, a number of customers browsed through the items on display. After a while a middle-aged woman approached a senior Gwalan woman and myself holding a fridge magnet she had chosen with a ten dollar note, the price marked on the item. The magnet was made with the off-cuts of magnetised plastic used industrially by 'us'. The scrap plastic was salvaged by Gwalan and cut into the shape of a turtle which was 'picked out' in green and white dots.

These magnets are 'radioactive fossils' proper in that they are made from 'our' industrial waste and transformed with white ochre to become significant Gwalan objects. They embody a history of contact which continues into the present. To my surprise, rather than handing the money and the magnet to my friend to complete the transaction, the woman held onto both objects and asked:

What is the story that goes with this? (Fieldnotes)

The senior Gwalan woman patiently and politely told the customer that the object was significant as something important to Gwalan people. The customer, however, was clearly not satisfied with that story. She asked:

But what about the Dreamtime story? Doesn't it have a Dreamtime story? (Fieldnotes)

The Gwalan woman tried to explain that the animals and other images on the Gwalan consumer objects were just that, animals and other images. She showed the customer that the Gwalan language name was printed on the object and told her that the objects were significant to Gwalan people but were not Dreaming stories. The Gwalan woman knew from experience that she could not explain that as 'radioactive fossils' or recollection objects, these articles *contained* stories indexically, but not stories that are always capable of being told – especially in contexts like this.

Clearly, Gwalan ideas about the meaning of the consumer objects they sell is somewhat different to consumer's ideas about these things. The hugely successful Aboriginal art market has quite ingeniously used assumptions about Aboriginal spirituality to sell Aboriginal art. Many accounts of Aboriginal art make reference to this history. It is well documented that prior to the early 1970s Aboriginal art was almost completely ignored or undervalued. This was largely because, as peoples who were considered to be 'primitive', Aboriginal artists were not considered capable of producing work with 'meaning'. One of the primary marketing techniques of white art advisors was to promote Aboriginal art as asserting a mystical significance documenting associated Dreaming stories. In some ways these stories, as my example of the customer at Cumberland state forest shows, have become almost more important to collectors than the paintings themselves.

This has been a major contribution to the popularity of Aboriginal art globally. It also, however, is misleading to consumers of Aboriginal art and artefacts who seem now to think that *all* Aboriginal cultural products should come with a Dreaming story attached – even a fridge magnet. That consumers have been educated to expect all Aboriginal art

to possess mystical qualities and be somehow connected to Dreaming stories means that Aboriginal artists who do not necessarily or always paint 'story paintings' are often put in positions, like that described above, where they need to defend the 'authenticity' of their work due to misinformed consumers. 'Radioactive fossils' are not the same as Dreaming stories. Consumers appear to resist any explanations of the object's significance offered by Gwalan themselves, so the stories become again 'swallowed'.

## **Conclusion**

The objects that Gwalan sell are significant as vessels which embody unspoken histories of contact between Gwalan and non-Aboriginal peoples. These objects are material embodiments of Gwalan place as it has been transformed from 'state place' through the acts involved in making the object and in being 'radioactive fossils'. The acts involved in manufacturing these 'recollection objects' transform state place (as Parramatta Park) into space for the articulation of Gwalan identity. These expressions are then represented in Gwalan art objects as 'radioactive fossils', silent but certain witnesses to another version of history and identity. One that 'we' do not seem to be ready to hear.

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