

Decolonizing Research Methodologies

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# Decolonizing Research Methodologies: Insights from Research on Indigenous Sign Languages of Australia

## Abstract

This article incorporates themes from ethnolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, sign linguistics, and decolonization of research methods. We examine a Yolŋu-led collaboration to save their endangered Yolŋu Sign Language (YSL) in Australia's remote North East Arnhem Land. YSL is an alternate bimodal language for hearing Yolŋu and the primary language of Deaf Yolŋu. In light of dissimilar world-views between indigenous Yolŋu people and the Australian state, we describe opportunities for ethical research and equitable collaboration, with a practical guide to strategies of local action research. We deploy ethnographic insight to describe a globally rare and distinctive metaphysics of place and language. We find that long-term, embedded, place-based collaborative research, through local language,

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bestows a deeper understanding of Yolŋu spiritual connection to kin and country. Further, we found the affirmation of Yolŋu life space—as embodied in life on the homelands—provokes a different, empowered, non-subordinate cultural future. This embodied cultural future supports the critical intergenerational transmission of the Yolŋu ancestral inheritance, of kin and country, and its languages, signed and spoken, while resisting internal colonization.

### Vanishing Signs of the Times

This article discusses ethical and practical challenges for decolonizing linguistic research in Australia's Northern Territory.<sup>1</sup> We review broader socioeconomic and political influences with a view to discerning opportunities for ethical research relationships within co-existing and dissimilar worldviews brought into stark relief by the conditions of settler state colonialism. These opportunities, we argue, require distinctive rules of engagement. Long-term, place-based, collaborative coexistence valorizes shared language, trust, and respect. We give an ethnographic account of the metaphysical drivers behind the project to save endangered Yolŋu Sign Language (YSL). We focus on methods that enable local agency, power, and strategies resistant to enforced assimilation. Yolŋu are the Aboriginal inhabitants of North East Arnhem Land and speak the language known as Yolŋu-Matha (lit: people's tongue).<sup>2</sup> Both Deaf and hearing Yolŋu use the alternate sign language. We reveal the strategies and research methods we have employed to affirm the Yolŋu life-world in our collaboration to save YSL. And together, inasmuch as it is possible, we approach this distinctive Yolŋu spiritual relationship with their country, kin, and language to furnish useful lessons for equitable "action research" elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Progressively, the Yolŋu people of North East Arnhem Land are becoming increasingly heavily researched. These research agendas are often influenced by global and national agendas within evolving state projects that favor culturally particular kinds of development philosophy. More so, powerful neoliberal market logics, funding criteria, corporate, economic, and administrative principles constrain the structure and potentials of university departments and "think tanks." These aspects of a dominant Western worldview shape the processes and purposes of investigations into Yolŋu life. These are investigations of the kind that do not necessarily benefit Yolŋu, nor include Yolŋu research-

ers. In light of these circumstances, we describe a successful Yolŋu-led project to articulate, research, and reproduce unique local perspectives. Moreover, we describe ways to enhance place-based agency in a collaboration to save YSL and the metaphysical drivers behind the intergenerational transmission of this priceless ancestral heritage.

This article is a synthetic conversation drawn from more than two decades of shared praxis in linked emancipatory projects. This historic and current conversation captures many Yolŋu voices, arising from the homelands and offering their insights to the world (Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu).<sup>4</sup> In this case, cast as an academic article, we see this as a vehicle for reaching out to other interested people. We posit there is no ultimate or single reality, nor any privileged access to the Truth; we seek to show that in every culture there are people who see and strive for multiple mutually beneficial paths to the future. With this in mind, we pay close attention to cross-linguistic meaning in an attempt to translate a distinct Yolŋu worldview in terms of an academic discourse. A discourse that we employ to share something of our Truth, of Yolŋu values, beliefs and attitudes, social categories, and perspectives. This is our synthesis.

Our article is structured in five parts. In the second part, we situate the study in Yolŋu country in North East Arnhem Land and introduce a deeply spiritual connection to country and language. We briefly characterize some features of a Western worldview that impair potentials for deeper engagement. We deploy ethnographic insights into exchange value to argue that dominant institutional principles construct negative reciprocal exchanges. These negative reciprocal exchanges in turn reject kinship and spiritual values, silence local voices, and subordinate equitable engagement. In the third part, we describe in some detail the spiritual foundations of Yolŋu notions of kin, country, and language. To do this, we sketch out a universalized kin-based view of the world and a (ontologically prior) pre-existing ancestral geography (Morphy 2010), as two foundational dimensions of this little-known, very old, and globally rare Australian Indigenous heritage. We present the example of an extraordinary ninety-five-year-old Yolŋu woman, Laurie Baymarrwaŋa, and her struggle to save her homelands and language for a new generation. In part four, we present the theory and praxis of our emancipation research with description

of the development of the SAVE YSL project and details of the actual strategies used in our resistant action research. In part five, we conclude that long-term, place-based collaboration together with shared language, trust, and respect create the conditions for ethical research. Moreover, we describe affirmation of Yolŋu life space, embodied in life on the homelands, as engendering an empowered and different, not subordinate, future—a cultural future that yields opportunities for mutual benefit, grounded in place. This vision of a cultural future resists enforced assimilation and the internal colonization of “data harvesting” models implicit in many prevailing “outside” research agendas.

### Yolŋ of North East Arnhem Land in the Modern Settler State

We situate our study with the Yolŋu people and their languages in Australia’s North East Arnhem Land. The greater Arnhem Land covers an area of approximately fifty thousand square kilometres and is the home to some eighty different languages (Cole 1979, 26). It is also described as Australia’s most linguistically complex region (Evans and McConvell 1997). This area encapsulates over a hundred distinct homelands, areas of spiritual attachment. Predominantly non-Pama-Nyungan languages are punctuated by an enclave of Pama-Nyungan languages (the Yolŋu languages). *Yolŋu* is a term Yolŋu people and researchers have used since the 1960s to describe the indigenous people of North East Arnhem Land who speak Yolŋu languages. The word *yol* means person in most Yolŋu languages. Figure 1 illustrates the major ex-mission communities and smaller homelands within the area in which Yolŋu languages are spoken and to which people have traditional connections.

The Yolŋu comprise some sixty or so clan, or *bäpurru*, varieties of language that form a discrete linguistic community.<sup>5</sup> Historically shared cultural and social exchange practices have enhanced linguistic diffusion in those Yolŋu languages around the edges of the Yolŋu language boundaries. People regularly intermarry across these language boundaries. Linguistically broad and complex inter-clan marriage (connubial) exchanges continue to be an important arena for shared sign languages, such as YSL and a broader Arnhem Land Signed Lingua Franca (Adone, Maypilama, and Brück 2018). Sign is part and parcel of the reproduction of Yolŋu society. Concepts of exchange



and religious value placed on language. Language is considered sacred, and its exchange in an economy of religious knowledge is significant. The Yolŋu people are happy to share their gifts with those who respect them and treat these gifts with the reverence that Yolŋu do. All too often, outsiders are seen to “pick up these precious gifts and take them away” (Barraṯawuy 2007 PC). The drivers and motivations of external research agendas do not resonate harmoniously with this spiritual value.

The Indigenous peoples of North East Arnhem Land are experiencing a rash of outside research and investigation.<sup>7</sup> Old people complain, “First we had the dreamtime, now we have meetings.”<sup>8</sup> Growing external intrusions of global, national, and institutional research are typically for purposes other than those of Yolŋu people. In broad strokes, among the post-enlightenment features of a Western world view are an expanding neoliberal and market rationality, growing corporatization, and the ongoing economic exploitation of subordinate cultures and the environment, leaving aside the many other aspects of modernity. In Australia, the settler-colonial state sets the policy agendas for the Indigenous population. State provision of inadequate legal, health, education, and basic services constrain Indigenous lives.<sup>9</sup> The historical and present conditions of poverty construct a subordinate class. Dominant state and comparatively wealthy research institutions exploit these unequal power relations. Disadvantaged Yolŋu people are expected to “exchange” their ancestral inheritance, land, and knowledge for cash. This kind of exchange is incompatible with Yolŋu values and constitutes what anthropologists have christened negative reciprocity.

The famous French professor of anthropology Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949/1969) and later Marcel Mauss (1966) elaborated the theory that intersecting domains of economics, kin, and language are regulated by notions of reciprocity. Marshall Sahlins’s *Stone Age Economics* (1972) reformulates this reciprocity into three kinds: *Generalized*, *Balanced*, and *Negative*. Sahlins’s crucial insight into types of reciprocity, all of which are present to different levels in both Western and Yolŋu worldviews, is that *negative* reciprocity is destructive of relationships. His schema starts with *general* reciprocity present in kinship and intimate relationships. One example is the way you might give to your children

without expecting any return. A *balanced* reciprocity is concerned with transactions that seek equivalences and social harmony between those in more distant relationships. One such example is where material concerns are present and may subordinate personal or group closeness, as in ritual gift giving and the market. From the perspective of Yolŋu people, reciprocity that moves towards symmetry and balance is understood to be conducive to spiritual harmony and underwrites more instrumental collaborations. *Negative* reciprocity is about the maximization of benefit at the expense of another. Sahlins characterized *negative* reciprocity as the attempt to get “something for nothing with impunity” (1972, 3). Key examples of this kind of reciprocity are exemplified in warfare (including tribal/inter-clan), imperialism, and the corporate business model. (See also Lebra 1975.) It will be of no surprise that the kind of exploitation engaged in neoliberal market logics and settler-state relations to indigenous people are viewed with some suspicion by Yolŋu. Apart from the obvious inequality of such negative relationships, a closer look at what is truly at stake for Yolŋu people in such asymmetrical intercultural exchange reveals a greater and more insidious injustice.

### What Is at Stake: Words in an Economy of Religious Knowledge

What is most important are the stories of the country. All of the different countries have stories and languages and colours and dances and ceremonies. These dances and ceremonies and colours are the linkages that tie all the people of this place together, and to the land. It is a network of links to our ancestors and their stories and their creations that make us all one people. It is these understandings about the importance of our myths, about our languages, that are so critical at this time when the Balanda (Non-Yolŋu/Europeans) are taking over our country. This is the work that I do, that I love, because I understand how important it is to be related to country, and to know the stories and language of my country.

Doris Yethun Burarrwaŋa, hearing member of the Yolŋu Sign Language Team, 2016

For Yolŋu people, jeopardy lies in the endangered circumstances of their links to country and its associated sacred ancestral inheritances. The Yolŋu people share a deep and indissoluble elemental

(consubstantial) bond with their ancestrally inherited land, laws, and languages. Notions of universal kinship and an ancestrally charged network of geographical sites are paramount. These ideas make it clear why research—and linguistic research—is not just a straightforward “scientific” or “philological” enterprise. The metaphysical dimensions of the Yolŋu worldview are crucial. It is precisely these metaphysical values that drive Yolŋu research projects like SAVING YSL.

*What Is Yolŋu Sign Language?*

Dhiyaŋu bala dhuwandja dhäwu ŋarrakuŋu nhäwiku guŋgyun marŋithinyaraw djamarakuŋiw' lakaram goŋdhu mala ga dharra dhiyak djäkaw limurrukalaŋaw wäŋaw. Dhuwandja dhäwu ŋunhi nhä ga ŋorra marŋithirr ŋunhi nhe dhu waja ŋäma ga nhäma ga nhina.

I am helping to teach children why it's important they know about their sign language on their country. This is a story about teaching children to see what is there, and about learning to see what cannot be seen.

Doris Yethun Burarrwaŋa, Hearing member of the Yolŋu Sign Language Team, 2018

YSL is an alternate sign language and as such is a sign system that coexists with spoken languages. It is not a signed version of the spoken language. It is a complex linguistic system that emerges in a context of bimodal bilingualism (Adone 2014b). YSL is a sign language that augments everyday communication and is at once the primary mode for the Deaf and hearing-impaired/partially hearing Yolŋu community.<sup>10</sup> Alternate sign languages are different from primary sign languages expressly because they are used by hearing people as an alternate mode of communication. Bilingualism/multilingualism is common in Indigenous spoken languages in Australia, but even more so, bimodal bilingualism (speech-sign) is the norm in Arnhem Land. YSL plays a significant and distinctive role in Yolŋu communication. YSL is a complete and comprehensive sign language<sup>11</sup> that evolved in the complex cultural and ecological contexts of this ancient continent, in the necessities of silent hunting and gathering and in the common arenas of culturally required alternatives to speech. As such, alternate sign languages are used every day, in ritual contexts, in reference to sacred sites; whenever speech is problematic, inappropriate, or prohibited; or where silence is required or conventional. Signs can

be used, for example, in secretive communications or on the homelands, where the ever-present ancestral spirits are poised to listen into people's conversations.

Like other languages, alternate sign languages possess their own grammar. There are several varieties of YSL associated with the people living on the land or homelands where such forms have evolved. One such example is the Yan-nhanju sign language of the Crocodile Islands (YNSL—International Language Code ISO 639–3 yhs). These distinctive varieties are linked to their place within the network of sacred sites around the homelands where they are signed.<sup>12</sup> Under the pressing conditions of settler-state colonialism, these astonishing, delicate, and perishable signs linked to the land and life on the homelands are disappearing. For a younger generation, sign language is reminiscent of a way of life on country, a way of life that is being denied them. Alternate sign languages are extremely vulnerable to destruction because of the tiny scale of family-supported homelands. These homelands furnish the contexts for the use and transmission of these rare forms of sign and are being effectively destroyed by extensive and determined anti-homelands policies at the state and federal levels.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Yolŋu and Non-Yolŋu: Working Together*

The Yolŋu Sign Language team, comprised of Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu people, is committed to recording, retaining, and passing on this ancestral inheritance of our languages and the bequest of links to country. The YSL team's joint manifesto runs thusly: "Yolŋu and Non-Yolŋu struggle for a positive continuity with ancestral practices that sustain the cultural, linguistic, and biological diversity of our land" (James, Adone, and Maypilama N.D, xi). We are more powerful together, as brothers and sisters, striving for a better future for kin and country.

Michelle Barraṯawuy, carer of three Deaf Yolŋu and a YSL champion, says:

We have continued to tell the story of how we were given these precious gifts by the ancestors and how we continue (under enormous pressure against us) to care for and replenish our rare and beautiful history. We are working hard to keep the precious knowledge about our world fresh and pass it on to a new generation following in the

footsteps of our ancestors. Many great people have come in front to show us how to live and pass on this important knowledge. We must continue to show the way for those who come behind. We are the people who are the guardians of the land and the knowledge for the new generations.

Michelle Barraṭawuy, Hearing member of the Yolḷu Sign Language Team, 2007

The accelerating loss of YSL motivated the YSL team to conduct this vital research for the children and for the future of Yolḷu society. Michelle Barraṭawuy reminds us of the courage and insight of Laurie Baymarrwaṇa's vision and Baymarrwaṇa's struggle to save the priceless ancestral inheritance of Indigenous languages and give it back to the children. Here, in her vision, is implied the law of the ancestors. The intergenerational transmission of the gifts of the ancestors goes ahead, despite official indifference.

*Spiritual Power and Kinship: Invisible Links of People, Places, and Language.*

The metaphysical drivers for the SAVEYSL project arise directly from commitment to the sacred trust of the laws of ancestral inheritance—that is, the intergenerational transmission of connection to kin, country, and the law. Yolḷu people believe in an ontologically prior kin-based social universe bestowed by the ancestors and governed by the “law” (*rom*) (Morphy 2010, 363). *Rom*, the law given by the ancestors, comprises “the precepts and practices that shape human social life on the humans that follow them” (Keen 2004, 211). To understand these “precepts and practices” is to understand the expression *That tree is my mother*. To untangle the meaning of this phrase, we must tackle the meaning of kinship, or *gurrutu*.<sup>14</sup>

*Gurrutu* is the name Yolḷu people use for the complex networks of kinship central to the Yolḷu worldview. As Yolḷu children grow, they are immersed in the world explained by their mothers and close relatives. In this world, the children begin to acquire a mental map of who is around them, their close kin, mothers, mother's mothers, and expanding into ever more distant relationships. Burbank (2006) describes a “self with others” cognitive scheme immersing the “cultural child” in “early learning” about relationships between “self” and “others” (Burbank 2006, 4). The child internalizes an “enduring and motivationally charged” model of “self with others schema.” This schema is

at the core of the child’s experience of family. This schema of family relations is then “*transferred* onto the world of things” (emphasis mine) (Burbank 2006, 4). The child’s mental model of the world then is a schema of relatedness projecting outwards, to all things, as an extension of family. Thus, all parts of the known and unknown universe are brought into the network of gurrutu relations. In this idea lies the foundation of kinship, but we are not yet ready to unravel the full meaning of the expression *That tree is my mother*.

It is from one’s position in the gurrutu network that one draws one’s relationship with those around, and the terms for naming these relationships with things in the social universe. Gurrutu provides the social coordinates for orienting oneself and others in a social space that extends to sites, places, and objects in the world (e.g., trees). Moreover, these gurrutu roles entail culturally significant reciprocal relations. The social roles in gurrutu *include* responsibilities and obligations including adherence to the sacred trust in the law and care for land, kin, and language.

Figure 2 is a standard illustration of kin relations in the gurrutu system. This representation is just for heuristic purposes, as the complex lived system of relatedness is infinitely more thorough. For Yolŋu

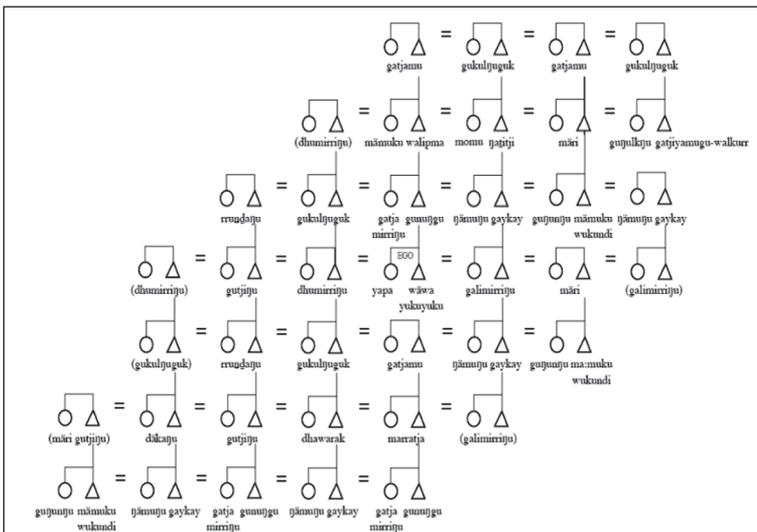


FIGURE 2. Yolŋu Gurrutu (kinship) taken from James (2009).

immersed in lived experience, it is “natural” obvious, to the point of being almost invisible, yet all-present in its fungibility. For us, then, the schema shows the network of connection from the point of view of the child, or ego, in the center of the diagram. It is from the ego’s position that the map projects outwards to the surrounding relations of other kin in the system. Each vertical line represents kin belonging to the father’s clan, or *bäpurru*, line.<sup>15</sup> The diagonal connections are links between mother and child. The equals sign (=) indicates ideal marriages, and marriages mean a new generation.

Each person inherits the same clan or *bäpurru* language, homelands, songs, stories, designs, and ancestral essences as their father. All of these things, of the same ancestral essences, belong to the *bäpurru* or group. It is from the position of a person’s *bäpurru* group that they are linked, and describe those links, to all the other phenomena in the universe using kinship terminology. So to reckon the truth of *that tree is my mother* comes from the shared ancestral essences of one’s *bäpurru*, and the relationship with the essences of one’s mother’s *bäpurru*.

The *gurrutu* system provides the terms and metaphors to conceive of and give kin names to the relationships between *bäpurru* groups, people, and things—e.g., mother’s group, sister’s group, uncle’s group. In this way, we recognize *that tree is my mother* because our mother’s *bäpurru* group is responsible for the songs, dances, designs, names, and fertility for *that* kind of tree. Any tree of this kind can be called your mother because that kind of tree shares the same ancestral essence as your mother and your mother’s *bäpurru*. Everything is related to everything else by kinship, and everybody is related to everything else through kinship. In this way, you can say this language is my mother, or father, or sister. The words and names of your language are considered kin and are not to be confused with commodities.

This intricate and beautiful network of intimate kinship relations with the world is the outcome of thousands of generations of close and elemental connection to country. Old people say that residence on the homelands, close to sacred sites, infuses life with ancestral power.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, Yolŋu people have something much more profound in mind when they use the English expression “my country.” Little surprise then, that these localized population patterns linked to discrete areas of country have been demonstrated by genes and thermoluminescence

to have persisted for at least 50,000 years (Tobler et al. 2017, 180). These are no longer controversial dates. This unique human marvel is achieved, in essence, by handing down the unique metaphysics of ancestrally inherited laws, myths, and knowledge of place. Put another way, for more than two thousand human generations, the intergenerational transmission of these ancestral gifts has persisted on the homelands, although this is now gravely endangered. These elemental links to place are of a profound import to the Yolŋu worldview. Frances Morphy (2010) has used the elegant phrase “a preexisting ancestral geography” to depict the ontologically prior network of ancestral sites that link discrete Yolŋu bāpurru to their homelands.

*Preexisting Ancestral Geography: Djalkiri (Foundation of the Law)*

Dhuwandja ŋunhi maŋgikunharaw dhiyak wāŋaw wāŋarr dhuwal dhuwandja dhukarr maŋgikunharaw nhaltjan limurr dhu maŋgikum limurrŋŋ djamarrkuŋin’y walal dhu nhāma nhā ga ŋorra ŋunhi nhe ga bāyŋu nhāma nhokal mel-yu ga ŋāma dhiyaŋ dhukarryu nhe marrtji dhu ŋuthanmaram nuŋuwuy walja ga dhiyak wāŋaw nhinanharaw ga djāmaw. Dhuwandja ŋunhi dhukarrnydja nhe dhu ŋuthanmaramany dhuwandja maŋgikuharaw dhiyak wāŋaw ŋunhi walal gurrupar limurrŋŋal. Dhuwanadja ŋunhi dhukarrnydja limurr dhu nhina ŋunhiliyi māgayaŋur dhiyal wāŋaŋur ŋunhi walal gurrupar limurrŋŋal ŋalāpalmirriy mala, dhiyak wāŋaw djākaw limurrŋŋalaŋaw.

This is the knowledge of the spirits of place, this is the way that we teach our children to see what is there, and importantly to understand what you cannot see with your eyes. This is the way we make a place for our kin to live in harmony with the environment our ancestors made for us.

Michelle Barraŋawuy, Yolŋu Sign Language Team, 2015

Underlying Notion of Ancestral Essence, Kin, Land, and Language

As we have seen, the kin-based schema of the gurruŋu system forms a mental map of important social relations, in social space, so to speak. So too, the preexisting ancestral geography creates a mental map of spiritually imbued physical space. These places are the arena for life’s adventures, and they are the very places the language of the people exists. These are the homelands, focal religious sites understood to be consubstantially connected to the ancestors who created them.

Homelands are at the heart of country. Knowing country depends upon complex cultural relationships linked to living on homelands. The link between the language of the ancestors and the people is strongest on the homelands.

*Who Are the Ancestors?*

Yolŋu cosmology posits the existence of ancestral Waŋarr (creator/spirits). These moiety-specific Waŋarr created the known universe in two halves, either Dhuwa or Yirriŋja.<sup>17</sup> This is the origin or genesis of the law (*rom*)—the laws of cosmic order. These laws are contained in myths recounting the actions of the ancestor Waŋarr as they roamed forming the world. On their journeys, they left traces, imprints, and procreative powers in the land and seas. The phenomena and named sites they created are imbued with their essence. In short, the laws, myths, and acts of the Waŋarr make up the distinctive consubstantial “substance” of one’s ancestral inheritance and thus spiritual identity of each discrete and named bāpurru. Importantly, each distinct bāpurru has its own language, linked by ancestral essence.

It is no exaggeration to say Yolŋu people attach enormous significance to the ancestral inheritance of sites and the bestowal of songs, paintings, stories, names, and language. They believe that the languages of their respective clans or bāpurru and countries were endowed to them by ancestral Waŋarr (creator/spirits). Nancy Williams describes the mechanism of this linguistic endowment:

The spirit beings/ancestral beings/creator [*Waŋarr*] beings vested land in particular groups of people in a time long past. Both the beings and the time are locally distinctive, as are the acts of vesting. They all, however, include descriptions of flora and fauna as well as topographical features of the particular land and sea, and most importantly they gave names to them. Usually the language in which these acts are done is also distinctive and pertains to the specific locality. (Williams 1999, 57)

Williams neatly rehearses the significance Yolŋu accord to a specific locality, the endowment of ancestral names, and, importantly, language. As mentioned, each Yolŋu individual and bāpurru has links to a specific language joined by consubstantial connections. In sum—

mary, notions of *gurrutu*, preexisting ancestral geography, and shared ancestral essences are fundamental to the Yolŋu worldview. This is why ancestrally endowed languages cannot be traded as commodities. The law and its sacred trust drive people to fight to save their kin, country, and language, against enormous odds.<sup>18</sup> The valiant Laurie Baymarrwaŋa (1917–2014) was a leader and founding member of the YSL team who inspired us all. Following is a small part of her story.

*Baymarrwaŋa's Struggle to Save Her Language and Homelands*

Australia is a signatory to Article 14.1 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People*, which reads, “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.” This enlightened-sounding approach is at odds with the material reality of settler-state policies. Australia’s history comprises five phases of government regulation over indigenous people. These are the eras of subjugation, segregation and protection, assimilation, slightly more benign notional self-determination, and now neo-assimilation (Truscott and Malcolm 2010). Aboriginal people are not covered in the Australian constitution. In the Northern Territory, the state-controlled education department makes enthusiastic public representations about its support for Indigenous languages, but no funding is committed. Despite the education department’s stated policies, the assumptions behind its educational practices promote Standard Australian English monolingualism to the exclusion of Indigenous languages. (Devlin 2011; Piva 2017; Truscott and Malcolm 2010).<sup>19</sup> The policies of the Northern Territory education department have consistently demonstrated the assumptions of social Darwinism, cultural imperialism, and cultural relativism and the influence of global economic imperatives (Truscott and Malcolm 2010). Nationally, Australia continues to lead the world in language decline, singled out as the continent where languages are disappearing most quickly. The terrible prognosis is that all Australian Indigenous languages may disappear within the next few decades (AIATSIS et al. 2005; Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014; Nettle and Romaine 2000, 4–5; Zuckermann and Walshe 2016).

Ninety-five-year-old Laurie Baymarrwaṅa says:

Nhaṅu dhähuny yuwalkthana Yolḷu mittji marṅgiyini mana dhana mayili mana dhähuny mana limalamagu ganatjirri maramba barrathalayuma gurrku mana waṅgalanga.

We will pass on the stories (wisdom) of our sea country for the new generation to make it strong. (Baymarrwaṅa and James 2014)

The imposition of the Milingimbi mission on Baymarrwaṅa's land decimated an older generation of knowledge holders, causing a ruinous diminution in the usage of her language. The conditions of the mission settlement destroyed, by accident and design, the patterns of intergenerational transmission of the Yan-nhaṅu language. With the disappearance of this language went the invisible links of knowledge linked to the tides and times of the Crocodile Islands (James 1999, 2009; James et al 2003).

Laurie Baymarrwaṅa,<sup>20</sup> born circa 1917 on Murrunga, the largest of the outer Crocodile Islands, did not speak any English. Nevertheless, she was determined to teach her kin the ancestrally inherited language of her sea and island country and its associated site-based local knowledge of the homelands—lessons clearly only she could give. In 1993, Bentley James arrived on the island. At this time, Baymarrwaṅa's people were thought to be extinct and only 300 Yan-nhaṅu words were recorded. Despite these circumstances, Baymarrwaṅa and James worked from the tiny island, where Baymarrwaṅa lived in a tin shed with no running water. From her homeland on Murrunga Island, Big Boss, as she was affectionately known, fostered local resources and deployed modern technologies to build livelihood activities in a cultural-based economy for her kin on the Islands. With help from her non-Yolḷu companions, Baymarrwaṅa created language nests; bilingual resources; and sea rangers, junior rangers, and heritage programs on homelands (Russell-Smith et al. 2018). Baymarrwaṅa provided these livelihood activities at her own cost as a pensioner. With volunteers, she funded this vision to pass on her endangered language through trilingual school resources. Her projects to care for her sites, family, and country were successful, despite unwanted intrusion from external state apparatus and a host of uninvited researchers.

Baymarrwaṅa's vision and family of projects are still driving continuities and innovations in local knowledge and custodianship of the

biological and linguistic diversity of her homelands. Her vision and indefatigable strength continue to give momentum to the YSL project.

*One Theory of Emancipation Research in Yolŋu Sign Language*

Dhuwal dhäwu yan marŋgikunharaw yolŋu-yulŋuny, nhä ga ŋorra ŋunhiliyi. Dhuwandja dhu ga marŋgikum nhänharaw, ŋunhi bäyŋun nhe ga nhäma nhokal melyu.

This is a story about teaching people to see what is there, about learning to see what cannot be seen with the eyes.

Elaine Maypilama Lawurrpa, Yolŋu Sign Language Team, 2012

There are many ways to approach the theoretical analysis of the YSL project. For the moment, let us stay with the theme of exchange reciprocity and ancestral laws. Economic concerns shape everyday happenings on homelands, and kinship arrangements shape the relations of production and the manner in which things are done. Ancestral laws guide the circulation of goods and services. The manner and mode of production include the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. The product of people's work critically includes provision of education for a younger generation. Education for the young is a gift based on a notion of generalized reciprocity. The intergenerational transmission of the law is the gift of the ancestors. This is the overarching theory, logic, and drive of the SAVE YSL project.

History and Evolution of the YSL Project

A very deep history has led to the handing down of this priceless ancestral inheritance. In the distant past the development of bimodal bilingualism appears to arise in harmony with the countless generations of lives in place and the vicissitudes of changing environments over eons. This intimate connection to country on unimaginable time scales has seen cycles of glaciation and aridification and the constant threat of uncertain ecological carrying capacity. As previously revealed, survival on this driest of continents necessitates long-distance links and networks of ritual, connubial, and economic exchanges across geographically distant groups. Exchanges between distant groups speaking different languages have stimulated extraordinary multilingualism and bimodal bilingualism. Herein lies the need for a system of widely understood signs to assist in communications across language barriers

compelled by survival. From these ancient roots spring forth the signs of YSL.

### *Recent History*

Near the beginning of the last century, anthropologist Lloyd W. Warner collected the first seventy signs of YSL (referred to at that time as Murngin Sign Language) while visiting the Crocodile Islands from 1926 through 1929 (Warner 1978). Those signs are still in use today. The hearing Yolŋu population often uses several spoken languages, and most are fluent in at least one Indigenous sign language (Adone 2014a; Adone and Maypilama 2013; Adone et al. 2018). Common bimodal bilingualism, with the exception of Native American communities, is rare elsewhere in the world (Farnell 1995, 2003; de Vos and Nyst 2018). Today, there exists a profound threat to the homelands from which Yolŋu languages spring. They are the heartlands of language, the foundations of kin-based links to the ancestral geography. Adone and Maypilama (2014) documented the acquisition of YSL by both hearing and Deaf children from birth. As compared to many Western cultures, Deaf people are not stigmatized or marginalized. They are part of the society. Acquiring YSL from birth is a normal state of affairs. While YSL is still learned from birth along with spoken language, its intergenerational transmission has been diminished by changes imposed (both deliberately and coincidentally) by the settler state.

We have set up the YSL project to augment the intergenerational transmission of Yolŋu Sign Language. Yolŋu people have urged and encouraged this project to SAVE YSL. Yolŋu elders from the sunrise in the east of Blue Mud Bay to the sunset west of Milingimbi in the Crocodile Islands have shared their signs to educate, inform, and entertain.<sup>21</sup>

“‘Yolŋu’-Yulŋuy ŋuli ga lakaram dhäwu goŋdhu.”—“People always talk with hands”

### What Is the SAVE YSL Project?

SAVE YSL is a Yolŋu-led initiative working to create a very special text called *The Illustrated Handbook of Yolŋu Sign Language of North East Arnhem Land*. This book will be distributed for free to the children of North East Arnhem Land. This is the return of the ancestral gift.

This comprehensive and inclusive bilingual text will promote continued “bimodal bilingualism.” This will benefit children with hearing impairment, so prevalent among Yolŋu students. Ninety percent of Yolŋu students in North East Arnhem Land have suffered from the inner ear disease otitis media (Menzies School of Health).

Following on from Baymarrwaŋa’s project to hand out the *Yan-nhaŋu Atlas and Illustrated Dictionary of the Crocodile Islands*, this beautiful new language guide, *The Illustrated Handbook of Yolŋu Sign Language of North East Arnhem Land*, will be distributed to schools and children for free. Distribution will include eight North East Arnhem Land schools; thirty-six or more homelands and homelands schools; and nine ranger, junior ranger, and learning-on-country programs, for free. It will be distributed to some three hundred libraries, universities, museums, and colleges; one hundred national Indigenous organizations; and Deaf schools around Australia, at no cost. The SAVE YSL project will honour Baymarrwaŋa’s vision to save Yolŋu Sign Language in line with ancestral law.

In its present state, the SAVE YSL project is led by Dr. Elaine Maypilama and Doris Yethun Burarrwaŋa. In the early 1990s, two non-Yolŋu colleagues, Adone and James, were approached to help on this project, which they have continued to do. This project comprises various publications on Yolŋu languages, both spoken and signed, including a series of articles, the grammar sketch of YSL, and the *Yan-nhaŋu Atlas and Illustrated Dictionary* (Baymarrwaŋa and James 2014). More recently, the YSL dictionary and learners guide (SAVE YSL) are joint efforts of the Yolŋu Sign Language team to enhance the intergenerational transmission of YSL language and culture. The EuroBabel project on endangered languages funded the study done by Adone and others, including the grammar sketch and published articles, while James concentrated on the production of a YSL dictionary, a YNSL dictionary, and trilingual resources for schools.

### Strategies of Decolonizing Research in Yolŋu Sign Language

The following strategies are guides to ethical and engaged research in the Yolŋu homelands and communities of North East Arnhem Land. We have employed these practical and ethical behaviors during our projects to achieve positive indigenous language outcomes

for homelands and in our SAVE YSL project.<sup>22</sup> Below, we describe in broad brushstrokes the underlying philosophical directives of the SAVE YSL project, affirming Yolŋu law, kinship practices, and the maintenance of traditional authority over decision-making in the project. The guiding principle is the recognition that ancestral laws hold the key to sustaining the cultural linguistic and biological diversity of the Yolŋu land and the Yolŋu people's continued relations with it. However, these principles are constrained inasmuch as material relations with the settler state allow. The link to language on the homelands is the strongest. The traditional mode of production on the homelands enhances the spiritual links of people, their country, and their languages. We will continue to struggle to hand down this rare ancestral gift of language. The strategies the YSL team used are as follows:

- In our practice of recording Yolŋu ancestral knowledge, we framed strong recognition of the unbroken sovereignty of the Yolŋu people over their traditional country and affairs. This means all our project proposals, from indigenous and nonindigenous volunteers, were legitimated by senior Yolŋu authority.
- The SAVE YSL project gave Yolŋu control over any and all representations and recognizes the right of Yolŋu people to describe and determine how their language is interpreted. In part, this may require the learning of the homeland language as well as the Yolŋu Matha lingua franca. For example, on the homelands of Murrunga Island, it was expected that the Yan-nhaŋu language was spoken. This “it is said” allows one to hear ancestral voices on the wind speaking in the Yan-nhaŋu language.
- Non-Yolŋu colleagues were responsible for assessing goods and services provision for the project for potential intrusions by state bureaucracy or any other kind of outside interest that would hinder the project. It was incumbent on the non-Yolŋu colleagues—Adone, James, and Maypilama—to give comprehensive explanations of the potential imperial entanglements of such engagements in the local language. For example, it was important to note the level to which such commodities or services would inhibit Yolŋu authorities in Yolŋu Matha.

- Our meetings, consultations, and actions were, as often as possible, held at the homelands of the indigenous authorities, in the local language. Meetings at the larger communities associated with such homelands tended to maximize the authority and opportunities of uninvited social actors from unrelated domains.
- It was the responsibility, as much as is practicable, of the non-Yolŋu to provide open and accurate information about the program's potential, in the local language, through both formal and informal means so as to give traditional owners the best opportunity to empower their decision-making on such issues.
- It was the responsibility of the non-Yolŋu collaborators to factor in extra time for proper and authentic translation so as to materialize full and informed consent in regard to an increasing number of proposals for research—external research agenda were often dressed in the verbiage of equitability, joint collaborative practice, and inclusivity, but at bottom were yet another data-harvesting adventure with no local benefits.
- Decisions, programs, and projects by settler-state government apparatus, associated service providers, or research institutions were seen as detrimental to the interests of, or out of line with, the control arrangements of traditional Yolŋu authority. Those decisions, actions, and products, especially in our case, were brought to the attention of the local authority in the local language so as to materialize full and informed consent prior to moving forward.
- In the case of our project, sister projects, or contractors needing to access land and sea areas, Yolŋu authorities properly maintained their right as land owners to control such activities on their lands and seas in line with the NT Land Rights Act of 1976. Before any movement towards such areas, permission was therefore respectfully sought and generously given.
- Material support for movement of people and resources to and from the homelands was furthered by appropriate liaison with education department flights, outstations resources, Progress Association resources, and rangers as available in our region for the provision of assistance for the homelands.
- The project supported and affirmed the high intrinsic value of indigenous ecological knowledge, as ancestral inheritance, and its

linked linguistic aspects as ancestral essences, as a significant dimension of sustaining the lifestyle and identity of the indigenous knowledge holders, and it asserted resistance to colonization through cultural knowledge. (Toyne 2000)

- Non-Yolŋu colleagues ensured that the knowledge in the program that might have been sacred was checked and validated against senior traditional authority in regard to its use in both local and more extended distributions such as TV, video, radio, photographs, and any other recordings. For example, in the creation of the YSL handbook, all signs that relate to sacred sites and ceremonial practices are checked against local authority.
- The utilization of new knowledge from non-Yolŋu sources, historical sources, and more recent inventions also had to be checked against senior authority. The Yolŋu authorities themselves were the final arbiter of utility. For example, intrusion by external researchers was judged as necessary for some projects to further local aims.
- Our SAVE YSL project functioned to affirm the importance of kinship relationships. Affirmation of that kinship system together with local arrangements expressed values distinct from those of the settler-colonial system and therefore constituted, and are supported, as a key form of resistance to internal colonization.
- As our long-term nonindigenous collaborators, James and Adone continue to evaluate and reevaluate how their practices in the community, behaviors, and personal attitudes continue to support the idea of Yolŋu resistance through cultural empowerment. Their reflexive self-knowledge and effective participation in the life-world of the community as a kinship member, recognized by other kin and producing correct behavior, continues to build resistance to external systemic colonization and the strengthening of Yolŋu law.
- Attitudes and affirmations of personal practice aimed at strengthening and maintaining bonds of kinship and relations to country must be shared through involvement in extensive informal contact with traditional owners from a wide geographical area. In our case, this manifested in continual visits to homelands across the North East Arnhem Land region. In addition, this allowed our team to keep abreast of various developments and possible opportunities for geographically distant linkages with kin speaking different languages.

This travel has afforded a large number of new and different YSL signs.

- James and Maypilama's long-term commitment to living in place was essential to building the trust of both outer and inner project members. Adone's regular visits to the Northern Territory and contact with the team has continued over thirty years.

As can be seen, this is not a comprehensive list, but it is an indication of the philosophical trajectory and strategies of our collaboration. We have attempted to frame the strategies in such a way that emphasizes potential ethical place-based relations while simultaneously safeguarding against the multiple sites of exploitation implicit in proximity to the wider system. These are opportunities to celebrate the mutually beneficial aspects of two distinct knowledge systems (James 2015). Yolŋu projects for Yolŋu ends are keys to sustaining our traditions, but collaboration with trusted colleagues is required to navigate the changing circumstances of the intercultural colonial space. We are more powerful together.

Other studies worth mentioning here are ones by de Vos (2012), Kusters (2015), Kusters et al. (2016), and Le Guen (2014a, 2014b). These studies are also based on community-driven research in indigenous communities and discuss some of the issues we have mentioned here.

### Conclusion: Signs of Life

We have drawn together these perspectives in synthesis to trace the course of our collaborative efforts, in support of the intergenerational transmission of YSL. Under pressures from globalization and the policies of the settler-colonial state, we have sought to stay true to our project and to make space for the voices of those who see and strive for multiple, inclusive, and mutually beneficial futures.

We have intended to illuminate something of the remarkable, persistent, and complex Yolŋu relationship of kin, country, and language. More so, we intended to describe and share the story of this rare and endangered gift of Yolŋu ancestral heritage and the ongoing struggle to reproduce its laws and its languages. The vulnerability of Yolŋu Sign Language resonates with the threat to Yolŋu life on the homelands. Yet, there is still hope. We have seen the vision of ninety-five-year-old

Baymarrwaṅa and the power of collaboration for resistant action. Her lifelong mission to maintain her homelands, laws, and local initiatives to pass on her language to a new generation continue to inspire.

The deeply spiritual nature of Yolḷu connection to country and language empowers local agency and the place-based metaphysical drivers for intergenerational transmission. However, we must work together if we are to save it. The shared strategies for collaborative ethical research in our two distinct knowledge systems, Yolḷu and non-Yolḷu, can create multiple spaces for the insertion of Yolḷu values and cultural futures.

The SAVE YSL project is about protecting, recording, and documenting a rare endangered language for Deaf and hearing Yolḷu, arising from the country. Moreover, SAVE YSL is about reproducing and sharing YSL with a wider audience. The roots of this project are embedded in the links of kin and country from which Yolḷu languages spring. The SAVE YSL project continues to affirm Yolḷu life space, embodied in life on the homelands in a cultural future that supports the critical intergenerational transmission of the ancestral inheritance. This cultural future is one that resists enforced assimilation and that resists internal colonization and the “data harvesting” models implicit in many prevailing “outside” research agendas.

## Notes

1. Due to limited space, we are not able to include our work on other sign languages in Arnhem Land and in the Kimberley area (Western Australia) (Adone 2015). Thus, we focus on Yolḷu Sign Language.

2. *Yolḷu* is a term used since the 1970s to describe the Indigenous population of northern Australia’s remote North East Arnhem Land. Arnhem Land was named after the ship Arnhem by captain William van Colster in 1623. The current population of some 7,000 people has been referred to in earlier anthropological literature as the Murngin (Warner 1937), the Wulamba (Berndt 1951, 1952, 1955) and the Miwuyt (Shapiro 1983). According to Schebeck the term *Yolḷu* was introduced into the linguistics literature by O’Grady et al. (1966) in Schebeck (1968).

3. Similar research methods and strategies are deployed in the Miriwoong Sign Language project in the Kimberley, Western Australia.

4. Homelands populations are usually made up of one or two related family groups and their kin living together on their country. Homelands are very different from communities where many clans coexist on the land of another group as an artefact of colonialism. Life on homelands is more

closely ordered around landownership and care for family and ancestral connections.

5. Yolŋu languages are described, including Dhuwala (Lowe 1957), Dhaŋu (Schebeck 1986), Gälpu (Wood 1978), Golpa (Zorc 1986) Ritharrŋu (Heath 1980), Djapu (Morphy 1983), Djinaŋ and Djinba (Waters 1989), Djambarrpuyŋu (Wilkinson 1991), Wangurri (McLellan 1992), Gupapuyŋu (Christie 1993, 2001) and Yan-nhaŋu (James 1999, 2009, 2015; James et al. 2003; Baymarrwaja and James 2014).

6. To be consubstantial with something is to be identified with it at the elemental level, to be of identical substance. Consubstantial identification constitutes the principal ontological basis of ownership of the elements of the bāpurru, sacred sites, maḏayin (ritual paraphernalia), and the ancestral essences of their living descendants (Bagshaw 1998, 162; Keen 1994).

7. Australia's national development program and the expansion of the trade global markets research sector is producing a rash of PhDs. In 1990, there were just under a thousand graduates; in 2009, six thousand. In 2016, more than 65,000 research higher degree students enrolled at Australian universities, with most being full- or part-time PhD students (Croucher 2016; Dobson 2012; Harman 2005).

8. A contemporary stereotype, it is often heard in Indigenous communities bemoaning the onerous number of meetings people are coerced into.

9. N.T. has the highest Indigenous incarceration rate among first-world countries, at 87 percent Indigenous. N.T. Indigenous populations also have high child mortality, early preventable adult death, appalling education figures, and the world's highest rate of Indigenous language decline (AIATSIS et al. 2005).

10. No statistical numbers are available. Adone and Maypilama (2016) estimated around thirty to fifty Deaf Yolngu adults throughout Arnhem Land. According to Menzies, there are many more hearing impaired. Otitis media is very common (see also Butcher 2015).

11. (International Language Code can be found at; [ethnologue.com/language\\_code ISO 639-3 ygs](http://ethnologue.com/language_code_ISO_639-3_ygs))

12. See James, Adone and Bruek (2018).

13. Settler-state destruction of homelands. See Amnesty International (2012).

14. Retroflex t

15. The term clan is now usually replaced by the term bāpurru, as it denotes a more complex meaning closer to Yolŋu conceptions. Bāpurru have been described as complex, multilayered, focal social categories with a common identity, existing in shared ancestral essences (see Keen 1978, 1994, 1995; Toner 2001).

16. See James (2015).

17. Dhuwa and Yirritja are two halves, or moieties, of the Yolŋu system of thought that divide the world into two categories, classifying every aspect of

the physical and spiritual world. These moieties are characterized by complementary reciprocal relations understood to create the fundamental conditions for life.

18. Ancestral connections imbue life projects on country with a spiritual authority, commitment, and resilience. The homelands movement and the fight for land rights and bilingual education are spirited and adaptive Indigenous projects still structurally undermined by the settler state.

19. Truscott and Malcolm (2010) show how an externally weakly funded, but internally vibrant, NT bilingual education program, which ran during the 1970s and 1980s, was closed down without consultation by the NT government in 1998. Increasingly punitive welfare reform and N.T. government-legislated 'English only' teaching are part of a schizophrenic and invisible assimilationist political agenda contradicting Australia's international posture on indigenous and human rights covenants (Truscott and Malcolm 2010, 15)

20. Baymarrwaḡa was named Senior Australian of the Year in 2012. <https://www.australianoftheyear.org.au/honour-roll/?view=fullView&recipientID=780>

21. Verified by senior Yolḡu.

22. In part informed by the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas (1984), these strategies are a synthesis of the combined life experience of D. Adone, B. James, G. James, and P. Toyne.

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