Prologue

In 2008, there seemed to be a shift in people's consciousness of race and colour, not only in Australia, but worldwide. Australia's Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, set the stage with his apology to the Stolen Generations. He said 'sorry' for the impacts of generations of flawed policy, for every kind of violation of human dignity and cultural integrity and for the suffering of those Indigenous families who had someone taken away. Tens of thousands of ordinary Australians gathered in public spaces in just about every capital city, regional centre and country town, or met with friends, or watched 'The Apology' on television. A groundswell of joy, relief and hope swept the nation.

On the international stage, the unthinkable happened. In an overwhelming victory, African-American Senator Barack Obama was elected President of the United States of America. It seemed that a willingness to listen to all voices and the stories they bring to gatherings of families, communities and cultures was emerging in the world.

For Australians, the Apology represents an ending and a beginning; settler Australians now have an opportunity to acknowledge and constructively move beyond the lie of *terra nullius* that shrouded us in ignorance, even shame, for most of our history. The story of Australia's Indigenous peoples, their foundation in identity and rootedness in the land can now be freely embraced. The Prime Minister has symbolically lifted the shroud, enabling White and Black at last to walk 'side by side' into the future, two cultures sharing the same space.

Our stories are different and will be different for generations to come. After 18 months as head of the former Howard government's Northern Territory Intervention, Major-General Dave Chalmers told journalist Paul Toohey that:

> *Personally, I've come on a journey. My understanding was superficial – I have to say it – my lack of respect for them [Indigenous people] was [the same as that of] many Australians …*
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> *Over time we as a society have undervalued indigenous culture and in many places it's been lost. And where it's been lost, people have lost their compass, they've lost their framework of life. And it's not being replaced by a mainstream Australian framework, and people are in limbo. We need to be paying a lot more attention to traditional healers and traditional lawmakers, the role they played, and play, in peoples' lives.*
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> *Most of all … governments need to offer hope.*
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> (Toohey, 2008)

I have had the great privilege of enjoying an enduring, thirty-seven-year long friendship with a remarkable group of people. It's only with hindsight that I realise the extent of that privilege. To have known and learned from so many of the tribal lawmen and lawwomen, the last traditional language speakers and knowledge holders of the now irrevocably transformed Ngarinyin, Wororra and Wunambul peoples and their culture, is a truly rare experience.

Bungal (David) Mowaljarlai OAM (c. 1926–97) was a visionary, charismatic Ngarinyin lawman of high degree whose record in the public arena includes Aboriginal of the Year (1992) and the Order of Australia Merit (1995). In his distinguished life, Mowaljarlai was passionate in his effort to bridge the gap between 'whitefellas' and 'blackfellas'. For 40 years he blitzed forums, seminars, workshops, lecture theatres, the airwaves and the small screen. He told his story at 1980s land-claim and 1990s Native Title hearings. Eventually, with an unrelenting sense of urgency to offer what he called 'The Gift' to non-Indigenous Australians, he turned to canvas.

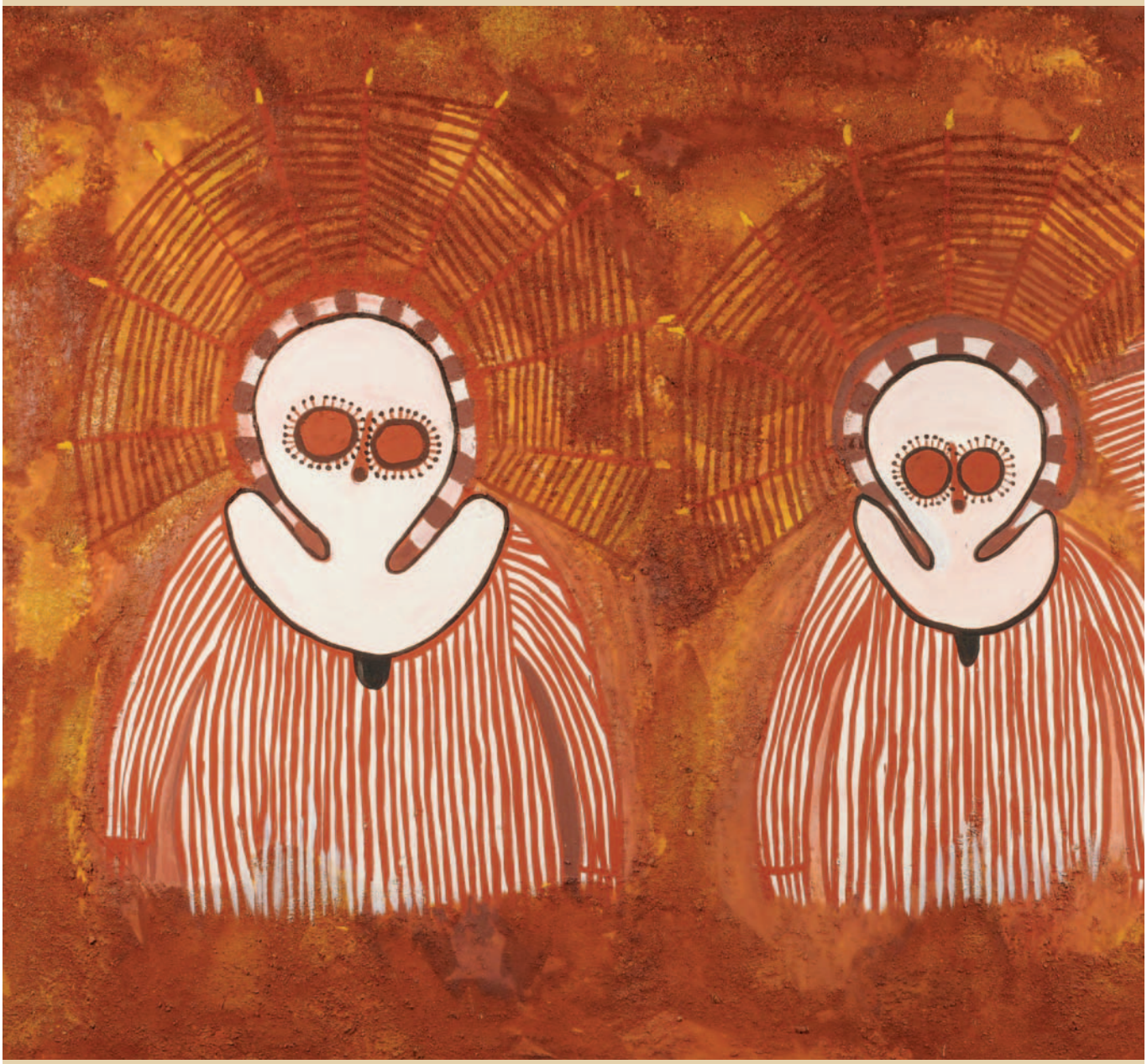
The Gift is that of knowledge, that particular Indigenous knowledge of belonging and identity sourced and sustained in relationship with place and country. He believed it was what whitefella culture, the newcomers to Australia, needed in order to awaken in them a deeper sense of respect for and stewardship of the original, the native environment and peoples, so they too could properly belong. This was his lifelong mission. To this end, Mowaljarlai left his creative works: a book, co-authored with Sydney photographer Jutta Malnic – titled *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing Up Alive* (1993); an extraordinary film and book, *Secret and Sacred Pathways of Knowledge of the Ngarinyin People of Australia* (2000), created in collaboration with Ngarinyin Elders by documentary filmmaker Jeff Doring; my book, *Men's Business, Women's Business* (1998), which he and his countrymen commissioned; and numerous transcripts of interviews, workshops and public appearances. During the last four years of his life, Mowaljarlai created a body of paintings and sketches – the story of Ngarinyin cosmology. This canon shapes and informs my story.

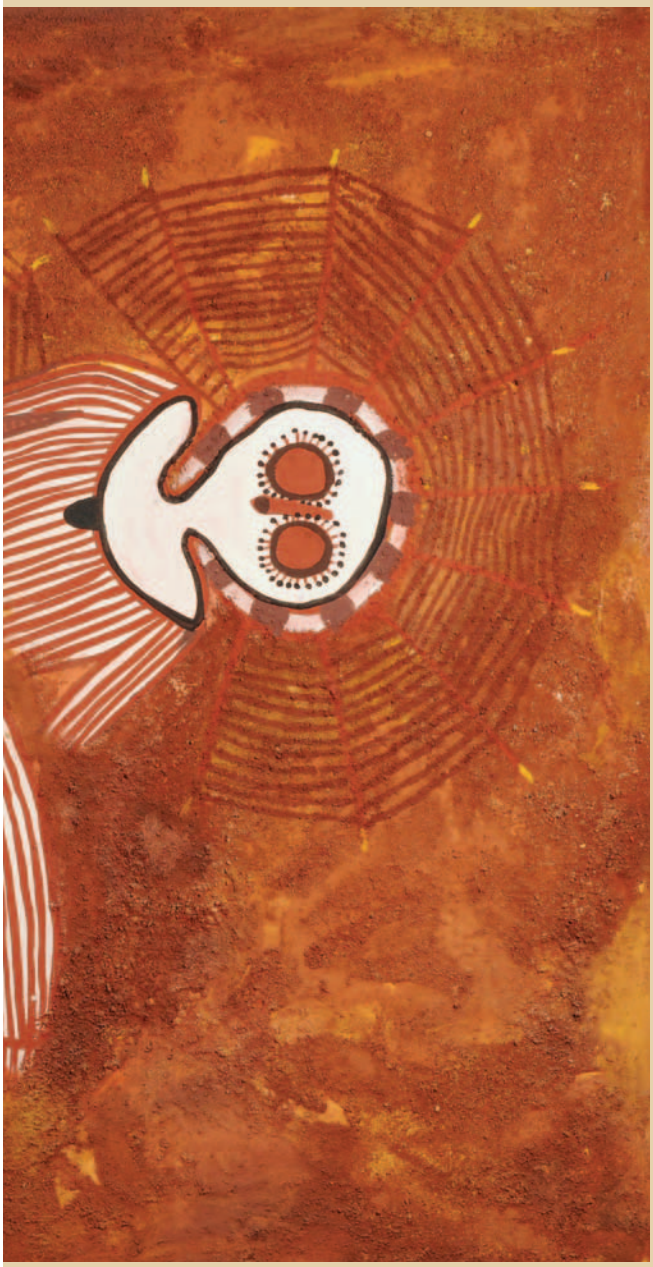
I first met Mowaljarlai in the mid-1970s on the speaking circuit where each of us was representing interests dear to our hearts and lives: Aboriginal land rights and women's liberation. We formed an unlikely friendship, initially based on our mutual recognition of the marginalisation our constituencies experienced in mainstream political and economic life. Our association deepened to include our immediate and extended families, friends and colleagues who now comprise an extensive, active co-cultural network throughout Australia. I worked with Mowaljarlai on many of his projects, some of which, like Bush University and the Ngarinyin Education Initiative, we started together. In the last three decades

of his life we shared cultural knowledge, addressed political, social and economic issues, co-parented his youngest sons and navigated many more Ngarinyin and Wororra young people through their adolescent years, both in Perth and 'out bush' in traditional Ngarinyin country. When he passed away, Mowaljarlai left me as guardian of his sons and a grandson and trustee of his estate, including the collection of paintings. Through this association I have met many eminent and ordinary whitefellas who have ventured north to the remote Kimberley homelands of the three tribes who are united by their creator spirit, the *Wanjina*. While some were involved in government business, many visitors, including authors, academics, professionals, bureaucrats, judges, religious and journalists were Bush University participants, curious about Indigenous culture, or seekers of a more elusive meaning.

Western Australian writer Tim Winton admired Mowaljarlai enormously, considering him one of Australia's greatest visionaries. In 1992, Tim made himself available to the Eminent Person's Group, a small company of outstanding Australians committed to assisting the *Wanjina* tribes – the Ngarinyin, Wororra and Wunambul peoples – in their 1992 High Court Utemorrah Land Claim. He had travelled extensively through the Kimberley region in the 1990s, but had never met Mowaljarlai, not even when he wrote *Dirt Music* (2001), whose setting and atmosphere feature the *Wanjina* tribes' remote country.

In 2001, I returned to teaching English Literature after three decades of working in remote Australia with Indigenous people, and had to teach Tim Winton's novels, only one of which I had read. The English Literature curriculum had changed dramatically, as had the requirements of study outcomes. An entirely new focus on critical analysis and postmodernist deconstruction had replaced the search for themes and meanings in the text. I found this new focus dry; intellectually interesting and challenging, but devoid of appreciation of story as a sublime, emotional journey that could be enjoyed as an experience in itself. My poor students had to search for and write about the tricks used by poets, novelists and playwrights to 'con' them into believing or seeing the world in particular ways. They had to become distrustful of text, context and text producer in order to demonstrate their analytical skills. It was in this environment that I read and taught Tim Winton's novels. It was not long before something eerily familiar in Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1991) and *An Open Swimmer* (1982) became evident. I thought he must have studied Indigenous law or philosophy, or known blackfellas as well as I did, because it was this world view that I recognised in his work. I called this literary reading of Winton's work the 'neotribal'. I contacted him to ask about his sources, and found instead a remarkable story of converging cosmologies and colliding universes.





MOWALJARLAI
Coastal Wanjinas

This Wanjina family come from Montague Sound, sunset side. In big whirlywind, he was thrown on land. All of them. This mob they hiding in caves all around here. Little ones, too. Really powerful Wanjina. If anybody humbug, he get really upset, makes big storm. Those lines like halo around his head, they represent clouds and lightning. This is Wororra Wanjina. He didn't come to Wanilirri for big battle. He just stop here. My mother is Wororra from this side.