

Black and White: A Tale of Cities and Men

It was the best of times,

It was the worst of times.

Charles Dickens

The local schoolteacher was over by Ulampawurru (Haasts Bluff mountain) taking a photograph of its rocky features. When she turned around to photograph the settlement of Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff) in the middle distance, the pangkalangu, the hairy giant who lives inside Ulampawurru, grabbed her from behind. Terrified, she screamed and ran for her life. But she had no reason to be afraid. The pangkalangu only wanted to comfort and console her as he feels sorry for white people because of their pale skin and their ignorance of the law. He would have killed her instantly if she had been black. This is a true story.

Michael Nelson Jagamara told us this story at the beginning of our meeting to discuss his collaborations with Imants Tillers.¹ It is, like their story, about the meeting of two orders, two laws, which for Jagamara are designated by the terms “white” and “black”. This outmoded terminology remains powerful for those who still feel the deep wound caused by the racial cleavage imposed by British imperialism over a century ago.

The pangkalangu lives in a cave in Ulampawurru. The rocks open up so that he can disappear.

Why did Jagamara begin with this typical Indigenous way of transmitting knowledge? Did it encapsulate his relationship with Tillers who, like the schoolteacher, had unwittingly violated the law.

At first Jagamara was reluctant to tell us how upset he had been when he first met Tillers, as Tillers is now a friend. But later he returned to their first meeting. With some emotion he said: *He can't paint over my painting like he did. It was a very clever painting, the way that snake bit that man, but he can't paint over my painting. He didn't have permission. It was wrong. One day those Sydney people will get him.* Jagamara was referring to his discovery, twenty six years ago, of Tillers' large painting *The Nine Shots* (1985), which had directly appropriated his painting *Five Stories* (1984).

Traditionally, Indigenous people are quick to forgive if the punishment is freely taken. It is not a matter of revenge or personal pride, but of keeping the cosmic order. It is something both parties want. Then peace returns. This traditional tendency of reciprocal forgiveness has been reinforced by the politics of colonialism. Because a white friend is a valuable mediator of cross-cultural exchange much often needs to be forgiven. However, despite Jagamara's friendship with Tillers, the old scar was still sensitive. It touched a raw nerve, no doubt the legacy of this country's racist history.

As long as I get enough money. But the painting comes first.

Jagamara's notion of painting descends from those first painters at Papunya. These are the artists that he admires and from whom he takes his cue. Jagamara, born sometime in the 1940s, grew up in Yuendumu, but regularly visited relatives in Papunya, a government township established in his early teenage years. When he was a young man, he saw the fledgling painting movement. He names Tim Leura, Billy Stockman, Johnny Warangula and Clifford Possum as painters who impressed him. He remembers them painting on boards and when they began painting on canvases. It greatly stirred his mind, and he wanted to know why they did it. The old men at Yuendumu didn't approve of these men at Papunya making secret stories public, but the young Jagamara, with the new world before him, sensed something new and great. He was easily convinced by what the Papunya men said: *It's for money and it's good to show the world our stories.* Jagamara repeated. *We have to show the world our stories, as long as we get some money.* He, like them, knew the value of their stories and the essential importance of reciprocation in the order of things. The painting movement was a strategy to deliver economic and political leverage with the white world, and thereby return order to the cosmos and heal old wounds.

Jagamara is a proud Warlpiri speaker. This is why he dislikes the lexical police spelling his name "Tjakamarra". "Tj" is a Pintupi not a Warlpiri sound. Warlpiri speakers, the largest language group in the Central and Western language block, have had a long history of engaging with white people. Jagamara was initiated in the bush the

old way, and today is a key ceremonial man, but also knows his way around the white world better than most of his people. Thoughtful, well-travelled and direct, he knows what it means and takes to be a professional contemporary artist. *Why*, he rhetorically asked us late in the conversation, *does Tillers contact me through Michael (Eather) and not ring me direct?*

There is an obvious answer to this question. Tillers is a reticent man with his own formal protocols of engagement. With little experience of the Indigenous world, he prefers to make contact through trusted intermediaries. Eather is the reason why Jagamara and Tillers are friends, and he is a key figure in their collaborations.

Tillers and Jagamara first met in 1986 in Sydney.² Jagamara was staying with his friends Tim and Vivien Johnson, whom he had befriended on the road to Papunya in 1980 before he was a painter. They were his main conduit to the contemporary artworld. The occasion was the Sydney Biennale, in which Jagamara's painting *Five Stories* had been included. Reproduced on the adjacent page in the catalogue was Tillers' *The Nine Shots*, which had appropriated *Five Stories*. *The Nine Shots* was not actually in the Biennale, but an accident of the alphabet – Tjakamarra followed Tillers – had thrown them together in a shared destiny. It seemed like an invisible hand was at work, but the dice had spoken.

I told him it was wrong and to never do it again. That lawyer got onto him. For Jagamara it was a matter of law, but Warlpiri not white man's law. Jagamara referred the matter to Anthony Wallis, who ran

the Aboriginal Artists Agency that was established by the Aboriginal Arts Board to administer copyright. While it would have been very difficult to prove that Tillers had broken any white law, the issue that in the end mattered was the ethics of appropriation.

While appropriation is universal to all cultural production, it became an ethical issue in the European artworld when notions of individualism and originality became hallmarks of fine art. This, in part, is why Appropriation Art, as it was called, was the characteristic genre of the post-modern critique that gathered pace in the early 1980s.

There are also ethical issues associated with appropriation in traditional Warlpiri law. Appropriation is a key feature of Warlpiri art. The designs that Jagamara uses in his paintings are appropriations of Tjuringa and rock art designs made by Ancestral Beings. Such appropriation is a type of signature that confirms the authority of the Dreaming, in much the same way that Michelangelo's *David* carries the authority of that ancestral creation, The Apollo Belvedere. In both cases the quality of the appropriation determines the truth of the work. Because it is the way that ancestral knowledge is transmitted, improper appropriation can have grave consequences, even when it is unintended. By these standards, post-modern Appropriation Art – as practised by Tillers – is improper appropriation because its copying is intentionally poor or inaccurate and designed to recontextualise rather than reiterate the original. Jagamara's complaint was not that his image had been appropriated, but that it

had been appropriated improperly.

In the 1980s Tillers was a leading practitioner of Appropriation Art. *The Nine Shots* was his latest move in a decade of making Appropriation Art, and intended as a critique of the primitivist tropes in MoMA's 1984 exhibition '*Primitivism*' in 20th Century Art. He first saw a reproduction of Jagamara's painting *Five Stories*, then named *Possum Dreaming*, in a dealer's advertisement in *Art & Australia*. Greatly taken by its contemporary look, to him it seemed uncanny that *Five Stories* looked more post-modernist than the neo-primitivism of the New Expressionists then getting such a good run in the New York artworld. Thus re-contextualizing *Five Stories* in this way seemed a perfect means to take his attack up to the centre. *The Nine Shots* was painted for the New York art scene, and first exhibited there.³

Revolutions are the best and worst of times. Rather than being delighted by Tillers casting his work in a revolutionary light, Jagamara was taken aback. He had no concern for current artworld critique, but was very sensitive to the power of appropriation and its proper use. As much as Indigenous artists claim a place in the contemporary art scene, they have equally maintained their own local discourses and protocols. Current interpretations of traditional law regarding secrecy prohibit some Indigenous paintings originally made for public sale. However, *Five Stories* is not such a painting. Getting permission to reproduce it in an art book is a straightforward bureaucratic process involving the exchange of forms and money.

While Jagamara was upset that Tillers didn't consult him, his complaint went beyond bureaucratic procedure or matters of courtesy. In our discussion with him, Jagamara seemed most concerned that Tillers *painted over* his painting – by which Jagamara meant his story. He believed that the Baselitz section was Tillers' hand and distinguished it from his Ancestral painting underneath. In painting over Jagamara's painting Tillers had changed the story. This is akin to the affront felt by Christians and Muslims when their texts and images are interfered with. It was an act of iconoclasm.

When asked if he had ever considered telling new stories, Jagamara was perplexed. *That might be for a new generation*, he wondered, but his body language suggested that the very idea was ridiculous. The story might be told in new ways to reflect changing circumstances – as, for example, Shakespeare's plays sometimes are in modern theatre – but the story itself cannot change. For Jagamara, the Dreaming stories explained everything. The paradigm worked. Would a biologist abandon the explanatory power of Darwinian evolution for another story, say that of Intelligent Design?

Further, as owner, Jagamara does not have permission to sell the actual story. These are not things that can be sold. Only the telling of them – as in a painting (which is like a recording) – can be sold. And as guardian of these particular stories, Jagamara is held responsible for their correct telling. He can give certain permissions regarding their telling but as guardian he must ensure that all the protocols of kin, what can and cannot be told, and the context of the

telling, are followed. Getting this wrong can have disastrous consequences. Tillers was all wrong. He did not consult, he was not an incarnation of the appropriate Ancestors, he was uninitiated (i.e. too young even to apply for a licence to tell the story) and had no kin relationship with the appropriate people. If word got back to his countrymen about *The Nine Shots*, Jagamara would be held accountable.

Jagamara was very aware of the importance of this issue because of the commotion caused by the Papunya painters. Elders in other communities (Balgo, Yuendumu, Pitjantjatjara lands) did not believe that the Papunya painters had authority to make the paintings for public exhibit, and complained that they, who also had rights and obligations in these stories, had not been consulted. For Jagamara this issue, essentially theological in nature, was a defining moment of modern times. Many Indigenous people who have since become well-established artists were, in the 1980s, fearful to paint. It was a very contentious issue amongst the Warlpiri, who only began to paint in the early to mid-1980s, Jagamara included. So when he saw *The Nine Shots* in Sydney in 1986, he had good reason to be upset, fearful and anxious to set things right.

Critics in the artworld tended to see the incident in terms of the unequal relations of power that is the legacy of colonialism. Thus they were not concerned about Baselitz's appropriated image in *The Nine Shots*, except a few critics who pined for the existential authenticity of modernism.⁴ Nor was there any analysis of the actual painting or

Tillers' intentions or the above subtleties. What mattered was that Tillers had made a move on Indigenous territory, and in ways that were compared to colonisation.⁵ Indeed Tillers' overpainting could be interpreted as repeating the offences of colonisation – a European schema that obliterates and fragments the original Indigenous painting underneath. However, if *The Nine Shots* was an allegory of colonisation, Jagamara read it quite differently, as he saw the Ancestral snake biting the white man, who clearly is in pain. *The Nine Shots* is a modern Laocöon in which the white soldier gets payback. Jagamara liked it, he thought it very clever, but this didn't redeem the painting. Nor did he seem too concerned about the unequal relations of power that is the legacy of colonialism. Foremost on his mind was that *The Nine Shots* had put him in a very difficult position with not just his community but also the Ancestors.

Complicating matters was that Tillers was an important white artist. Jagamara knew this from attending the Biennale, but also from Tim and Vivien Johnson. There was a further complication. Jagamara's friends, Tim and Vivien Johnson, were also Tillers' friends. The importance of personal contacts and the obligations that ensue in encounters with Indigenous people cannot be underestimated. This gave Tillers a certain advantage, but it also meant that he was obliged to show himself and, as it were, face the music.

The only way forward was for the two artists to meet. The meeting was brief, at the Biennale's Bond Store opening night.

Jagamara gave Tillers a dressing down and made it clear that he could not do it again, but also shook his hand. In facing the music, Tillers followed Indigenous protocol. Thinking about it later, Jagamara, ever inventive and seizing the opportunity, suggested to the Johnsons that collaboration was a way in which a white artist could work with Ancestral designs, and invited Tim to collaborate with him. He also allowed him to paint certain Ancestral designs. Thus Jagamara, a worldly man who knew that unorthodox things (such as the Papunya Tula movement) were needed to re-balance the world, began to think his way through the mess that *The Nine Shots* had created. However, he did not invite Tillers to collaborate. The Johnsons were long-standing and important white friends who had been to Papunya, who knew and respected the protocols.

Further, Tillers suffered payback. The fiasco was a boon to Jagamara's artworld career, but for Tillers it was a huge shock. Numerous cudgels were taken up against him in Jagamara's name. The reverberations were particularly intense immediately after the 1986 Sydney Biennale, but were still being felt many years later. Indeed, it is still felt today. Interactions between non-Indigenous and Indigenous artists remain fraught.

For Tillers, then one of Australia's most successful contemporary artists, suddenly to be a pariah was an enormous jolt. His immediate reaction was to pull his head in. He knew that *The Nine Shots* could not easily be undone and that the only way forward was sideways. That is, while not turning his back on the fiasco, he

also did not turn away from his past practice. In Australia, Tillers' deep commitment to a particular system of painting is only matched by those Indigenous artists wedded to a neo-traditional style. However, he began to rethink his earlier approach to place and focus more on issues of locality and geography in which Indigenous histories have an important role.

Like Indigenous neo-traditionalists (such as Jagamara) Tillers' aesthetic is predicated on reworking existing discourses. This approach allowed him to diminish the role of his own subject position and embed himself in and between the voices of others. He imagines this space to be like an ecosystem in which chance meetings and mutations can shift the dynamic and balance of the place. Thus he is a great believer in serendipity and the throw of the dice. Despite his hopes for *The Nine Shots*, it was a bad throw. Fatalistic by nature, Tillers knew he had to wait to see where this gamble would lead. What might normally be considered accidents or dismissed as coincidences are for Tillers opportunities, not to be seized but followed through and played out. He listens attentively for unexpected convergences and is alert for changing currents.

Likewise, Aboriginal worldviews acknowledge "right timing" and are alert to the natural tempo of things. Waiting can be productive. Fifteen years later, in 2001 at an artists' lunch in Sydney, Tillers and Brisbane-based gallerist and artist Michael Eather shared a casual conversation in which Tillers confessed his enduring discomfort since *The Nine Shots* debacle. Eather, who admired the work of Tillers and

Jagamara and through personal experience had a nuanced appreciation of the complexities of cross-cultural dialogue, was adamant that Tillers step across the divide and visit Brisbane to meet with Jagamara and explain himself in person. Eather suggested that the best way forward was to deepen the engagement through collaboration.

Eather's facility as a mediator cannot be underestimated. It is his calling. In 1984, the year *Five Stories* was painted, Eather had travelled from his home in Tasmania cross-country to Maningrida, where he lived for several years and started a family. His experiences there formed a basis for his passion to explore the sometimes difficult and often polemic attitudes towards cross-cultural dialogue, including collaboration. His idea that Jagamara and Tillers collaborate presented an opportunity to further his own calling since he first tested it in a serious way as the instigator and principal curator of *Balance: Views, Visions, Influences* (1990) at the Queensland Art Gallery. It was a sharp personal learning curve. Building on what he had learnt, in 1990 Eather worked closely with Brisbane's Indigenous community to develop The Campfire Group, an informal but dynamic affiliation of artists engaged in collaboration, activism and artistic experimentation. This environment supported Jagamara in his critical re-emergence in the late 1990s, when he developed his distinctive expressionist urban style – which he only does at Eather's FireWorks Gallery and studios in Brisbane.

By inviting Jagamara and then Tillers to participate in the Campfire Group, both artists were drawn into a circle of collaboration that included not just themselves but also Eather, Richard and Marshall Bell, Joanne Currie, Laurie Nilsen and others. As the Jagamara/Tillers collaboration was particularly fraught, Eather's role was central. It is best compared to that of "manager" or "boss", which in desert parlance is a close relation who not only orchestrates and organises but also takes on responsibilities and the authoritative work of dispute resolution within ceremonial performances.

Eather arranged for the first meeting to occur at his FireWorks Gallery in Brisbane in June 2001. As a way of introducing himself, Tillers brought with him the sixteen canvas boards that make up *Nature Speaks 1* (1998). Why this painting? Was the word in the large type in the middle of the painting, EMPATHY, meant to signal his goodwill? Did the other large word HORIZON signal something else, perhaps a new horizon, the promise of a new world? And NATURE SPEAKS, what does this mean: that he was ready to listen to the force of Warlpiri painting as the incarnation of country? However, we should not place too much emphasis on these words. They are scattered across the canvas like a throw of the dice – a considered throw maybe, but a gamble nevertheless. That other word, upside down on the top right, is perhaps the most significant: CHANCE.

Photographs show Tillers arranging his boards on the studio floor in Brisbane while Jagamara, Laurie Nilsen, Richard Bell and

Eather stand by as witnesses. Simon Wright, who took the photograph, remembers that the meeting began with Jagamara and Tillers shaking hands, but this failed to put either of them at ease. It took nearly an hour for Tillers to feel ready to lay his boards down. Further to this meeting, collaboration was discussed and the formal and financial terms settled between the three parties: Tillers, Jagamara and Eather. They agreed on a series of seven works. *Then we joined our stories together.*

“Joined” is how Jagamara remembered it in 2012, some seven collaborations after their initial dance a decade earlier, but little adheres in their first collaboration. Tillers’ *Nature Speaks 1* was an icebreaker, and it provided a template for the collaborative process. This suited Jagamara, as he seemed determined not to allow a repeat of *The Nine Shots*. This time Tillers would provide the initial design that Jagamara would paint over. However, Tillers did not allow his primary text to be over-painted, as if for him it was the essential element of his story. By not removing the masking tape that is the stencil for the text until Jagamara had returned the boards, the text could not be interfered with.

The title of their first step – *Nature Speaks (With Confused Possum)* – is apt, as the painting is awkward and stumbling. Each painter seems intent on seeking a ground zero from which collaboration with the other might be possible. While Tillers’ stenciled text reverts to type, his central presumption throughout the *Nature Speaks* series – HORIZON – is negated: THERE IS NO HORIZON.

This first-grade lesson in the conceptual fault-line between Aboriginal and Western ways of perceiving country does not signal a new horizonless aesthetic departure on Tillers' part. The horizon and its system of signification had never been part of Tillers' art. Nearly twenty years earlier, Tillers had made it clear that the convergence between the horizonless spatialities of Papunya Tula painting and neo-conceptual art had created a ground for conversations with Indigenous art.⁶ However, this shared lack of a horizon did not make each the same. It was a starting point only. Tillers offered *Nature Speaks 1* not so much as an icebreaker but as a foil, a sacrificial lamb. In symbolically sacrificing the ordering principle of the horizon, Tillers returns to a ground zero or pre-symbolic space that is open to the other – in this case, an Indigenous conceptualisation of space.

Jagamara also performs his own negation of *Nature Speaks 1*. Playing on certain formal similarities between the letter E – there are three large Es in *Nature Speaks 1* – and the conventional Warlpiri sign for possum tracks, Jagamara seemingly throws a bomb into Tillers' text. The resulting debris of disconnected floating black and white Es dominates the painting. It also mocks Tillers' elegant letters, disassembling the poetic weight of his text. Here could be read a subversion of both Tillers' investment in the power of text and European power more generally, which in the Indigenous mind has traditionally been associated with writing and the book.⁷ However, Jagamara's subversion also reduces the rich tradition of Warlpiri iconography and songlines to a ruin, thus the confused possum with no story. This surely is a deliberate semantic echo of the original

stolen story, *Five Stories* – aka *Possum Dreaming* – and its derailment in *The Nine Shots*. With no story to follow, no Dreaming track or songline, where is the ground for collaboration?

Jagamara also added a painting to this first step, *Possum Dreaming* (2001), making the collaboration a triptych. *Nature Speaks (With Confused Possum)* is the central panel, flanked by *Nature Speaks 1* on the left and *Possum Dreaming* on the right. Thus *Nature Speaks (With Confused Possum)* is a bridge – albeit an unsteady one – between the two artists. In *Possum Dreaming*, Jagamara brings the confused possum track into a new order by arranging it on the grid of the sixteen canvas boards. Instead of black and white tracks, there are only black ones, superimposed on the faint shadow of Pollock's anarchic drips on white ground. As if the final dialectic movement after the negations of *Nature Speaks (With Confused Possum)*, *Possum Dreaming* seems a synthesis of neo-conceptualism and neo-traditional Warlpiri painting.

There is another layer to Jagamara's distinctive and assertive use of the letter E as a possum track emblem. It recalls Tillers' use of the letter T – derived from Colin McCahon's incorporation of the Greek letter Tau. It thus doubles as a signature mark, obviously of Jagamara (the possum dreaming is an important story in Jagamara's identity), but also a chance homage to his manager or "boss", Michael Eather. *Possum Dreaming* is in Jagamara's urban style, thus echoing his abstract expressionist turn made several years earlier while working at FireWorks Gallery.

Nature Speaks (With Confused Possum) was begun in Brisbane but finished apart, by postal correspondence, setting the pattern for the rest of the collaborations and underscoring notions of locality and place that frame – even provided the ground for – the collaborations. Tillers worked in Cooma, while Jagamara travelled from Papunya to Brisbane to make his entries on the canvas. Jagamara also made use of his city visits to collaborate with Eather, Richard Bell and others, and continued to make the expressionist style works that he initiated between Papunya and Brisbane in 1998.

The first collaboration did successfully kick start the collaborative process, as 2002 proved a busy year with both artists now fully committed to the enterprise. Four collaborations were produced in the following order: *From Afar*, *Nature Speaks AX*, *Nature Speaks AD* and *Who Speaks?* *From Afar* had its origins as a conceptual postcard – its title echoing both the geographical and conceptual distance between the artists. Tillers masked out his text, posting the sixteen rust-coloured boards from Cooma to Brisbane, where Jagamara, indifferent to the hidden narrative, mapped out a schematic songline of their new relationship. Jagamara's concentric circle locates the Brisbane studio as a meeting site, red and white in the colours of a traditional Warlpiri sand painting. Three meandering lines intimate Tillers' European origins in white, Jagamara's Warlpiri origins in black, both meeting on the western edge of the circle, and Eather, the manager, his red trail coming from the other side. Each trail is a nominal possum dreaming, its tracks like octopus tentacles wrapped around Tillers' monolithic T. Jagamara's multiple dreaming

tracks or songlines, which were a feature of the original *Five Stories*, becomes a leitmotif of the next three collaborations – all of which comprise doubled trails. Tillers' text imposes, amongst other fragments, THROW OF THE DICE, CONFUSED POSSUM, AIRPORT, CITY, REAL, EMPATHY, I TAKE BUT I SURRENDER – an oblique narrative of his journey towards a new meeting with Jagamara that is also repeated in the subsequent collaborations of that year.

Nature Speaks AX is centred by a large red T. HORIZON reappears, but ambiguously, as it is accompanied by ABOLISH and WILL NEVER, as well as the usual references to chance. There are also obscure references to German Romantic painter Philipp Otto Runge's doe-eyed cherubim and New York conceptualist Lawrence Weiner's (This & That) put (Here & There).⁸ Jagamara overpaints with his familiar black possum tracks: doubled rows of Es marching across the canvas. The effect is not incongruous, but it only adds to the mystery.

Nature Speaks AD contemplates the chance of birth, of luck, of desecration, of the personal. A volley of arrowheads or spears peppers the centre of the painting, a metaphor for massacres so often invoked by the ghostly texts of older languages, but also a reference to Tillers' working process. Much of his working is cut-and-paste. The scalpel blade and masking tape are primary tools of production in his selective vivisections of images and texts.

Tillers' technique of hand stenciling also lends a reproductive quality to Jagamara's motifs, fixing a hard edge on otherwise painterly gestures. However, the last painting before a hiatus in the collaborative series, *Unfurled Lightning* (2003), proves an exception, and illustrates the pictorial risk that Tillers takes in handing over control: Jagamara breaks out in a cobalt revolt, dripping paint in calligraphic graffiti. Familiar with Pollock's *Blue Poles* in Canberra – *that's art*, he joked, maybe tongue in cheek but not about to pass up a chance. Here the conceptual switchbacks become more loaded as Pollock's method was taken from Native American sand painting, now transposed by the authoritative, authentic sand painter as the signature of his urban style. However, Jagamara's energetic roll of the dice eludes easy reconciliation with its ground, as if to make a point about the collaboration and the game of contemporary art that he plays. Jagamara puts his markers front and centre.

After a period of illness for Jagamara, in 2005 he began a three-year-waltz on *Fatherland*, twenty one years after the original *Possum Dreaming* (later *Five Stories*) was painted at Papunya with the aid of Marjorie Napaltjarri, Jagamara's wife and ongoing studio assistant – to borrow a term across worlds. *Five Stories* had been a pictorial and conceptual breakthrough for the artist in stitching together five distinct Dreamings, although paradoxically there is no one definitive rendering of these.⁹ Both Jagamara and Tillers had an invested interest in returning to this image. *Five Stories* became the central ground for *Fatherland*, although made new in an inversion of its well-known reproduction.

Tillers too returned to the past, his appropriation of Baselitz's limp figure drawn from *A Green One (Remix)* (2006), already a facsimile of Baselitz's 1965 painting. In Baselitz's original, an abandoned swastika lies in the rubble, now obscured, even censored, by Jagamara's vertical sequence of graphic boards (on the right edge of the painting), gleaned from an earlier studio session. These nine boards have the simplicity of mnemonic aides, stacked up like one of Tillers' canvas-board stacks, and also recalling exterior murals on art centres and schools across the Centre. This magisterial painting and the largest of the collaborations so far – some ninety boards – is a breakthrough work. It remakes *The Nine Shots* in a fashion that Jagamara sees fit. Not only does Jagamara get to paint his story but Tillers also does not paint over it. In terms of the parallel and increasingly convergent histories of Australian art¹⁰ and what Tillers later dubbed post-Aboriginality,¹¹ this must count as the most significant Australian artwork of the post-colonial period.

However, *Fatherland* is not their final collaboration. With it, a platform was established for collaborations that were not about righting personal wrongs, but about testing new ground. Perhaps this is why, in contrast to the colonial habit of setting Indigenous narratives in fading twilight, *Hymn to the Night* (2012) emits the radiance of a new dawn. Tillers' Baselitz figure – from *The Herder* (1965) – appears awake in wonderment, the flak jacket implying a post-apocalyptic landscape, the stockwhip impotent but still in his grasp. The double perspectives suggest a dual world, a state of eclipse. Jagamara's icons traverse his pictorial repertoire – yam,

snake, kangaroo, possum, site, ceremony, lightning, bush turkey – like so many constellations suspended over desert sand or stellar space. Tillers' map of language and place names locates Papunya at the centre of this universe, an acknowledgement of a lesson learned. More existential quotations whisper like private prayers on the wind, underscoring the contrite and grateful artist and the depth of his investment.

Hymn to the Night broke the familiar pattern of their collaboration. Tillers still painted the boards in his Cooma studio. However this time he travelled with them to Brisbane to meet and talk with Jagamara. Further, Tillers did not mask out his text, allowing Jagamara to paint over it and trusting him to finish the job. In *Fatherland* Jagamara's contribution respectfully keeps a distance, a separation from that of Tillers. Not so in *Hymn to the Night*. For the first time Jagamara paints over Tillers' story in a free and emphatic way. Jagamara's emotional investment in the painting, evident in the energy of his mark making and the thoughtfulness of his design, makes *Fatherland* seem somewhat tame. It promises a new history of Australian art. At one hundred and sixty five boards, it is to date the largest and most monumental of the collaborations.

By sealing the preliminary works with Mallarmé's epigram "A throw of the dice can never abolish chance", Tillers locates the work firmly within his oeuvre, an act reinforced by the sequential canvas-board numbers from his epic *Book of Power*. Yet Jagamara also emphatically makes his mark, to the point that in his terms of painting

over, in *Hymn to the Night*, Jagamara has appropriated Tillers' story text and all and incorporated it into his own.

However, if our recent interviews with various artists are any guide, the jury is still out. Richard Bell (who has collaborated with Jagamara) does credit Jagamara with his own agency, but others cast aspersions over the whole exchange. The inequality of power between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians remains a central theme. There was considerable skepticism towards Tillers' motives as well as general wariness of parables about friends across worlds and suspicion of a currency based on aesthetics and ideas. Some believed that Jagamara was merely being used by Tillers – after all, the collaborations are on Tillers' territory, with the canvasboard, each of which is numbered and in his Book of Power. Why hasn't Jagamara begun a painting on a roll of canvas and asked Tillers to add a few marks? We put this question to Jagamara, but he said he preferred to be the one painting over Tillers' design and not the other way around. Besides, he had previously worked on canvas boards and saw nothing significant in the format.

If these collaborations offer a bridge, it is not an easy one to cross. Each artist alludes to deeper mysteries in their respective traditions that are only glimpsed in riddles and elusive symbols. If these deeper mysteries are a shared feature of each artist's work, they have separate histories and geographies. Thus the paintings become doubly arcane, collaborative sagas that could justify a fully annotated diagram – the kind of simplistic coda conventionally

supplied with a desert painting purchase, but which would be equally unrevealing.

The burning question now is what do we expect of these collaborative paintings? What fears and hopes do they stimulate or satisfy? Clearly these are more than pre-meditated and constructed career moves by a trio of senior men – Jagamara, Tillers and Eather – although they are in part that as well. Perhaps the enduring value of each collaboration – still an unknown quantity – will be measured by the extent to which it reaches towards freedom while reminding us of the conditions of freedom. *Who speaks?* And more cautiously, *who listens?*

Ian McLean and Una Rey

¹ We spoke with the artist at FireWorks, Michael Eather's gallery and studio in Brisbane, on 20th March 2012. Jagamara was there finishing off his current collaboration with Tillers, *Hymn to the Night*, as well as making a dozen or more of the "expressionist" paintings that are his Brisbane style.

² For a good account of the meeting, see Vivien Johnson, *Michael Jagamara Nelson*, Craftsman House, Roseville, 1997, pp. 70-73.

³ I have analyzed *The Nine Shots* in some detail in Ian Mclean, '9 Shots 5 Stories: Imants Tillers and Indigenous Difference Part 1', *Australian Art Monthly*, 228, April 2010, pp. 13-16; and Ian Mclean, '9 Shots 5 Stories: Imants Tillers and Indigenous Difference Part 2', *Australian Art Monthly*, 229, May 2010, pp. 12-16.

⁴ For example, see Donald B. Kuspit, 'Imants Tillers at Bess Cutler', *Art in America*, vol. 73, no. 3, March 1985, p. 158.

⁵ For example, see Juan Davila, 'Aboriginality: A Lugubrious Game?', *Art & Text* 23, March-May 1987, pp. 53-56.

⁶ Imants Tillers, 'Locality Fails', *Art & Text* 6, 1982, pp. 51-60; and Imants Tillers, 'Fear of Texture', *Art & Text* 10, 1983, pp. 8-18.

⁷ See Penny Van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2006.

⁸ *Die Cherubsglorie [Cherubim]* (1809).

⁹ Central to the painting's narrative is the Flying Ant Dreaming at Yuwinju, two different Possum Dreamings [at Jangankurlangu and Mawurji], the Rainbow Serpent at Yilkirdi and a Rain Dreaming site, as well as either the Two Kangaroo Ancestors at Yintarramurru or a rock wallaby dreaming trail. See Vivien Johnson's account of the contradictions in documentation and in the artist's recollection of specific versions of Dreamings, while accuracy or "straightness" of the stories is paramount, in *Michael Nelson Jagamara*, pp. 133-143.

¹⁰ Bernard Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini, 1980 Boyer Lectures*, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 1980.

¹¹ See Imants Tillers, 'A Conversation with Ian North', *Artlink*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2001, pp. 36-41.