

**The Mutability of Time and Space as a Means of Healing History in an  
Australian Aboriginal Community**

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For many Australian Aboriginal communities linear time is perceived to have a depth of only a generation or two. This linear time exists along with what I call “temporal wave time”. In temporal wave time all events exist alongside each other on a flat temporal plain, like the face of a wave that moves forward, capturing all history as it progresses - hence you can have things like "Toyota Dreaming" and "Cigarette Dreaming". People certainly also see time as working in other ways – linear, and in categories like “cattle time” or “rain time”. But the main way of perceiving time is as this flat, wave like structure.

It is for this reason that very hurtful and tragic events like multiple deaths can attain a constancy in these communities, and a gravity that disrupts other events on the temporal wave. One way of conceptualising this is to imagine the day-to-day historic stories on the temporal wave to be like bright stars casting their light onto the landscape illuminating its features. Then imagine a body of immense gravity (such as multiple deaths), like a black hole, suddenly appearing near the stars, capturing their light, and in the process warping both time and space and distorting reality. Such a destructive event, if left unresolved, would clearly play havoc with the cosmos, far beyond its own borders. And this is what was happening in my Northern Territory case study working with a *Mudburra* speaking community. The severity of the hurt caused by an instance of multiple deaths was too overwhelming to be dealt with by ordinary actions like the abandonment of houses and the destruction of dead peoples’ property. No temporal distance was being created between the deaths and the immediate lives of people. The magnitude of the events surrounding the deaths was eclipsing everything else on the flat temporal plain. And this was unlikely to resolve itself as the wave of time moved forward, meaning the event remained unresolved and ever-present.

When it became clear after several months that the hurt caused by the deaths would not resolve, people began to discuss how they might heal the community by breaking the link between these very sad historic events and their own immediate lives. A decision was made about six months or so after the deaths, to engage an elegant mechanism called *winnun* to help heal the temporal wave. *Winnun* in its most basic manifestation involves trade of material objects over long distances. However, it is much more than this. *Winnun* is best understood as it was described to me; as being like blood circulating in a body. Carried within the blood are all of the things necessary to keep an organism alive and healthy. In this sense, the objects traded in *winnun* are not in themselves as important as what they carry. These objects (in this case boomerangs and spears) are embedded with special meanings that are exchanged with other objects as a way of rewriting community memories and healing the past. Through a detailed example, I will show how the gravity of several deaths, was perceived by the Aboriginal community and how they came to resolve it by engaging the inherent mutability of secular time and space in order to rewrite the past.