NOURISHING TERRAINS

Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness

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DEBORAH BIRD ROSE

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Foreword

Indigenous Australians have helped to create the landscape. Through their continuing relationship with the land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have developed a comprehensive knowledge of its resources and needs. Their land management practices are complex techniques that rest on a vast body of knowledge which is now being incorporated into biological research, land management, language, art and many other facets of contemporary Australian life.

Indigenous people's wisdom and rights in relation to country are now widely appreciated. Australians of European descent increasingly appreciate that what they have called and cherished as 'wilderness' has a long history of human use, and these areas continue to be the 'nourishing terrains' of Indigenous Australians. This has resulted in a shift in the understanding of wilderness to reflect the human history of those landscapes. As Deborah Bird Rose says 'There is no place without a history; there is no place that has not been imaginatively grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation'.

The role of the Australian Heritage Commission is to identify heritage places which are part of Australia's National Estate. The Commission recognises that Indigenous values and knowledge are important in the management of heritage places, and encourages understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Within this context, the Commission asked Deborah Bird Rose to write this book to explore Indigenous views of landscape and their relationships with the land.

This book provides an overview of Indigenous perspectives, and captures the spiritual and emotional significance of the land to Aboriginal people. The poems, songs and words of Indigenous people included in this book testify the undeniable strength of their feeling and connection with their land.

I hope this book will foster a greater understanding amongst non-Indigenous Australians of the significance of Aboriginal connections with country. Such as understanding is essential if we are to develop better relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Wendy McCarthy AO
Chair
Australian Heritage Commission

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Introduction

THIS ESSAY was commissioned by the Australian Heritage Commission I was asked to take Aboriginal Australians' concepts of landscape and wilderness as my starting point, and to write about the whole of Australia, not just those regions in the Northern Territory, the Kimberley, and New South Wales where I have some personal experience. In addition, I was asked to include Aboriginal people's own words.

I have been particularly concerned to find a balance between the abstract quality of analysis which creeps in as soon as one starts to generalise about the continent, and the deeply embedded quality of Aboriginal people's own words. Initially I took this to be a contrast between my words and Aboriginal people's words. In looking through hundreds of documents, however, I discovered that when Aboriginal people start to generalise, their words also end up with an abstract quality. This unsettled me, because most of my experience with Aboriginal people has been that people speak straight from the heart, and speak straight to the issues that matter to them. Their immediate and direct words best communicate their relationships to country, and that is what I wanted to communicate to others.

I have come to realise that while explanations have to build a foundation from the ground up, they always run the risk of acquiring the pedantic quality of expository communication. Some discursive strategies, it is clear, inhibit the communication of certain kinds of deeply held knowledge and belief.

By way of analogy, consider the differences between an explanation of love, a love story, a love poem, and love song. Consider, too, the power and passion of a song-poem which is open to multiple interpretations and is rich in sensual imagery. Consider how evocative and mysteriously beautiful are some creative expressions. Each type of communication ~ exposition, story, poem, song, and song-poem ~ offers information. Together they may actually begin to speak to the fullness of the experience of love.

The analogy is intended to convey something of what I have been striving toward in quoting Aboriginal people's explanations, stories, poetry, songs, and

song-poems. Each type of communication carries important information; together they begin to communicate something of the fullness of people's relationships to the nourishing terrains of their lives.

I have drawn only on stories, songs and song-poems which already are in the public domain. Evocative, expressive, and frequently beautiful even in translation, songs and song-poems are often profoundly insightful for strangers in spite of the fact that they cannot bring the context of local knowledge to bear in understanding the meanings of the words.

While I have sought to find a balance between the songs, stories and poems of all the regions of Australia, I have had to keep in mind that this is not an essay about songs but rather an essay about land. My research indicates that in the most settled parts of Australia there is a flourishing of creativity in poetry and song, and that the main themes of this outpouring are identity and history. There are, to the best of my knowledge, very few songs and poems that are actually concerned with specific places.

It does not follow that Aboriginal people in the more settled regions do not have significant relationships to their own country. My experience has been that many people have sustained those relationships against the most overwhelming efforts to eradicate them. It does seem to be the case, however, that at this time these relationships are not a key subject of song and poetry. I do not want to generalise unduly, but I would note that the themes of history and identity emphasise the common experiences that Aboriginal people face, and I conclude that the use of creative arts to forge links among people has a higher priority at this time than does the use of creative arts to express the differences among people. To this I must add that during the course of my work in New South Wales, Aboriginal people have told me time and again that because they have lost so much, they are not prepared to speak publicly about their knowledge in any detail. They fear that they will lose control of that which remains. One can only respect the intense determination which drives people toward exercising extreme control over information. If a day comes when Aboriginal people feel less threatened, it may be possible that they will then want to share more with settler Australians.

Some urban poets and songwriters speak of the cityscapes which form the significant places of their lives, and for those whose home country has been overtaken by a metropolis, their creative expression forms powerful links in the continuity of Aboriginal life in Australia. Because my brief is to concentrate on landscapes rather than cityscapes, I have not sought to incorporate an analysis of city dwellers' complex relationships to their place, and of the significant ways in which relationships to place are mediated by kinship. A beautiful poem by Tony Birch of Melbourne gives a glimpse of some of the riches that are available.

Ladies' Lounge

straddled across
laminex chairs
dragged from kitchens
into the warm streets
these women
would drink shandies
and smoke cork-tips
while the Hit Parade
drifted from the verandah

---

we would sit along
the bluestone gutter
listening to our mothers
singing Cilla Black
they would do nails
brush hair and
touch each other
in a late afternoon
summer sun [1]

A question which keeps arising among non-Aboriginal people is: were Aboriginal people conservationists? This question has aroused a great deal of debate, and much passion has been invested in it. Those who argue that the answer is 'no' point to wasteful practices, to the extinction of giant mammals (an event that may be linked to Aboriginal hunting), and to obvious instances in which Aboriginal people's land management practices have not been fully successful. Those who argue that the answer is 'yes' point to successful management practices, to the loss of species with the cessation of Aboriginal land management practices, and to a world view which is neither human-centred nor geared to the endless satisfaction of human wants.

At stake are issues which go beyond the particular question. I believe that this debate emerges from conflicting world views and visions of humanity. The first position ('no') is built upon the view that wherever you go in the world people are pretty much the same: they all want to consume and compete, to achieve greater power and comfort. The fact that Aboriginal people had so little destructive impact

1 Reproduced courtesy of the author

upon the continent is said to be due to the level of their technology rather than to any fundamental difference in their world view. The second position ('yes') is built upon the view that there are genuine social and cultural differences among the different families of humanity, and that Aboriginal people have developed a system of knowledge and a way of managing the continent that is quite different from the ways that European-derived cultures manage knowledge and land.

I know of no way to resolve this debate, since people remain attached to their world views in spite of conflicting evidence, and there is evidence which conflicts with both views.

My own view, which informs this essay throughout, is this: the terms 'conservation' and 'conservationist' are contemporary terms brought into being by the urgency of the ecological issues which surround us. Aboriginal people were not conservationists in this contemporary sense of the term because they did not have to be. They had managed the continent in such a way that they did not have to face the massive loss of life-support systems.

I believe that Aboriginal people's methods for managing the continent are not the outcome of an impoverished technology (as the most extreme materialists would insist), but rather are the outcome of ways of knowing and understanding the world which settlers have only just begun to appreciate. The real issues, I believe, concern practice and philosophy: what are Aboriginal people's land management practices, and what is the philosophy within which they are embedded.

There is so much to be learned from Aboriginal people ~ about land management with fire, about the species of the continent, about relationships among living things, and between living things and the seasonal forces, about how to understand human society as a part of living systems, taking humanity seriously without making of it the centre of creation. At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge that many Aboriginal people take quite different views about conservation from those developed by scientists and other concerned citizens.[2] In studying these differences I have come to the view that there is so much to be learned, and the continent is so needy, that every moment spent in a fruitless debate about whether or not Aboriginal people had the kind of conservation ethic that is familiar to non-Aboriginal people is a moment wasted.

My first and most enduring obligations are to the Aboriginal people who have taught me so much. I would mention in particular the women and men of the Northern Territory and the Kimberley who welcomed me to their countries, camps and hearths, shared food, knowledge and good will, and who continue to keep me in line. I must also mention the women of Wallaga Lake (New South Wales) who

2 See B. Rose 1995 *Land management issues: Attitudes and perceptions amongst Aboriginal people of central Australia,* Central Land Council, Alice Springs, for an excellent discussion of some of these differences.

also welcomed and taught me. Along with much else, they enabled me to understand the extent to which Aboriginal culture is sustained in people's kitchens and other domestic spaces. Teaching their children, supporting their kin, taking care of their country, and holding together a culture that is fragile by any standards, these women, and the thousands of others like them, are heroes.

Betty Meehan provided the intellectual stimulus to this essay, and was tolerant during the long period of its gestation. Participants in the ICOMOS-sponsored workshop on Indigenous Landscapes (February 1995) gave me helpful feedback at a crucial moment. Annie Clarke, Cathy Robinson and Steve Chapman very kindly read a rough draft and encouraged me greatly. Darrell Lewis, as ever, gave me invaluable assistance both with editing and with his wide-ranging knowledge.

I thank them all.

Deborah Bird Rose

1 Country

FROM my studies with Aboriginal people I have developed a definition of country which starts with the idea that country, to use the philosopher's term, is a nourishing terrain.[3] Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with.

Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place, such as one might indicate with terms like 'spending a day in the country' or 'going up the country'. Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart's ease.

A lovely song-poem that speaks to the peace of country is *The Bulbul Bird,* composed in the Ngarluma language of the Pilbara (Western Australia) by a man identified as Waljbira:

Bulbul is here
Follow the stony creek, your track to northern shores!
Bulbul is here
This pool is 'water throughout the year'
Stir my heart and also give rest.[4]

'Water throughout the year' is both a description and the name of a place. The poem is a map of a locale and a map of the states of being which the poet associates

3 Levinas in S. Hand (ed) 1989 *The Levinas Reader,* Basil Blackwell, Ltd, Oxford.

4 C. von Brandenstein & A. Thomas 1974 *Taruru; Aboriginal Song Poetry from the Pilbara,* Rigby Limited, Adelaide, p. 45. In his notes, von Brandenstein states that the poet used a term which is glossed as 'mind' rather than 'heart'. I can only guess that von Brandenstein used the term 'heart' in the poem because he felt that it more accurately conveyed the poet's intention (ibid, p. 86).

with the place. Locating the bulbul bird/coucal pheasant at the place speaks of permanent water, and probably also to the sacred origins of the place, for the coucal pheasant is a Dreaming figure in the Pilbara, celebrated for stopping flood waters.[5] The poet does not tell us further meanings of the place; that knowledge, we are meant to understand, is not to be sung for an unknown audience.

Country is multi-dimensional ~ it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air. There is sea country and land country; in some areas people talk about sky country. Country has origins and a future; it exists both in and through time. As I use the term here I refer to areas of land and/or sea including the subsurface and sky above, in so far as Aboriginal people identify all these components as being part of their particular country.

Sea and Sky

Around much of the coast of Australia, Aboriginal people own (according to their own law) both the land and the surrounding waters. The creative beings traverse the whole area ~ land, sea, beach, reef, sea grass bed, sky, and fresh water sources. The law of the land is also the law of the sea, and sea, like land, is country that is known, named, sung, danced, painted, loved, harvested and cared for.

Matthew Dhulumburrk of Milingimbi spoke of sea 'country' in connection with gaining legal control over portions of the sea (known, not entirely accurately, as 'sea closure'):

The reason we want to close the seas is: the earth is not empty. The reason why we are closing the seas and the land, offshore two kilometres, even though it is not good enough, is that the earth and the sea, the water is not empty ... We got something in it, we always have it and we'll be having it all the time ... The land and the sea not empty sheds that man has built. There's something in it.[6]

If sea country is an unexpected concept, 'sky country' may be even more so. For many people this is where the lightning men and women live, where their dead relations may be living, and where creative beings have travelled and stopped. In the south-eastern parts of Australia, sky country is where the great creative being Biame stays. Fred Biggs, a Ngeamba man from the Menindee (New South Wales) area described one aspect of sky country. His words not only discuss the sky country but also link it to the earth through seasons and weather:

5 H. Hall 1971 *A Partial vocabulary of the Ngalooma Aboriginal Tribe,* Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, p4.

6 Submission to the Aboriginal Land Commissioner regarding control of entry onto seas adjoining Aboriginal Land in the Milingimbi, Crocodile Islands and Glyde River Area. 30 May 1980, Written by Mark Dreyfus (NLC) assisted by Matthew Dhulumburrk.

The Star Tribes

Look, among the boughs. Those stars are men.
There's Ngintu, with his dogs, who guards the skins
of Everlasting Water in the sky.
And there's the Crow-man, carrying on his back
the wounded Hawk-man. There's the serpent, Thurroo,
glistening in the leaves. There's Kapeetah,
the Moon-man, sitting in his mia-mia.

And there's those Seven Sisters, travelling
across the sky. They make the real cold frost.
You hear them when you're camped out on the plains.
They look down from the sky and see your fire
and 'Mai, mai, mai,' they'd sing out as they run
across the sky. And, when you wake, you find
your swag, the camp, the plains, all white with frost.[7]

'Promised Lands'

Each country has its sacred origins, its sacred and dangerous places, its sources of life and its sites of death. Each has its own people, its own Law, its own way of life. In many parts of Australia, the ultimate origin of the life of country is the earth itself, as Hobbles Danaiyarri, a Mudbura man of Yarralin (Northern Territory), explained:

Everything come up out of ground ~ language, people, emu, kangaroo, grass. That's Law.[8]

In Aboriginal Australia each country is surrounded by other countries. The boundaries are rarely absolute; differences are known, respected and culturally elaborated in many ways. As David Turner says, Aboriginal Australia is made up of a series of 'promised lands', each with its own 'chosen people'.[9]

Each nourishing terrain, each promised land, was cared for. Aboriginal land management was long thought by Europeans to have been non-existent; Aboriginal people were thought to have been 'parasites on nature' ~ people for whom the labour of working the land was unknown. It is now possible to say with certainty

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7 F. Biggs in R. Robinson, 1970 *Altjeringa and other Aboriginal poems,* A H and A W Reed, Sydney, p. 25.

8 Personal communication, see also D. Rose 1992 *Dingo Makes Us Human, Life and land in an Aboriginal Australian culture,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 57.

9 D. Turner 1988 'The Incarnation of Nambirrirrma' in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions. Ethnographic and Historical Studies,* T. Swain & D. Rose (eds), pp. 470-484. The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Bedford Park, SA. p. 479

that Aboriginal people's land management practices, especially their skilled and detailed use of fire, were responsible for the long-term productivity and biodiversity of this continent.[10] In addition to fire, other practices include selective harvesting, the extensive organisation of sanctuaries, and the promotion of regeneration of plants and animals. Organised on a country by country basis, but with mutual responsibilities being shared along Dreaming tracks, and through trade, marriage, and other social/ritual relationships, management of the life of the country constitutes one of Aboriginal people's strongest and deepest purposes in life, as well as making up much of their daily lives in so far as it is still possible for people to take care of their country.

Country, ideally, is synonymous with life. And life, for Aboriginal people, needs no justification. Just as no justification is required to hunt and kill in order to support one's own life, so there is no justification required in asserting that other living things also want to live, and have the right to live their own lives. It follows that other species, as well as humans, have the right to the conditions which enable their lives to continue through time: minimally to the waters and foods on which they depend, and to the sanctuaries in which they cannot be hunted or gathered or harmed in any way. It further follows, as I will discuss in greater detail below, that all living things have the right to their own Law and custom, to their own sacred places and rituals.

A 'healthy' or 'good' country, is one in which all the elements do their work. They all nourish each other because there is no site, no position, from which the interest of one can be disengaged from the interests of others *in the long term*. Self-interest and the interest of all of the other living components of country (the self-interest of kangaroos, barramundi, eels and so on), cannot exist independently of each other *in the long term*.

The interdependence of all life within country constitutes a hard but essential lesson ~ those who destroy their country ultimately destroy themselves.

Country must also be contrasted with landscape as that term has developed in some arenas, for the term 'landscape' signals a distance between the place, feature, or monument and the person or society which considers its existence. One can ask questions about what people will choose to conserve in a given landscape. One can ask questions about the multiplicity of values that a landscape has for people. But these questions cannot readily be asked within an Aboriginal concept of country because country has its own life, its own imperatives, of which humans are only one aspect. It is not up to humans to take supreme control, or to define the ultimate values of country. Aboriginal relationships to land link people to ecosystems 'rather

10 D. Bowman 1995 'Why the skillful use of fire is critical for the management of biodiversity in Northern Australia', *Country in Flames; Proceedings of the 1994 symposium on biodiversity and fire in North Australia,* D Rose (ed), pp 105-12. Biodiversity Unit, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, and the North Australia Research Unit, Canberra & Darwin.

than giving them dominion over' them.[11] In this mode of thought, the values of life are pre-given in the sacred origins of the world.

There seems to me to be a fundamental philosophical gap between European cultures of conquest and Aboriginal cultures of balance. Dominant European cultures of colonisation, and at this time the dominant political and economic cultures of Australia, assert that some living things are to be eradicated, or, more negligently, simply stranded on a path toward death. This has been called, without irony, the survival of the fittest. I say 'without irony' because from a life-centred perspective it is difficult to discern the long-term fitness of practices which destroy the practitioners' own life-support systems.

In contrast, many indigenous peoples do not articulate a justification for life precisely because they hold life inherently to be significant. The contrast emerges most provocatively in consultations with Aboriginal people about the eradication of feral animals. Bruce Rose reports that:

> killing some animals to look after others involves value judgements which are not necessarily part of the Aboriginal world view ... Ethics and value judgements which support playing favourites with some species over others do not fit easily into the Aboriginal world view.[12]

Life is meaningful, and much human activity ~ art, music, dance, philosophy, religion, ritual and daily activity ~ is about celebrating and promoting life. Country is the key, the matrix, the essential heart of life. It follows that much Aboriginal art, music, dance, philosophy, religion, ritual and daily activity has country as its focusor basis.

Not only is life valued, but the systemic quality of life is valued too. Within this holistic system of knowledge, each living thing is a participant in living systems. Celebration of life is a celebration of the interconnections of life in a particular place which also includes the humans who celebrate.

One of the powerful Groote Eylandt clan songs, the song for the West Wind, brings together the life of the beings within the country and the changes which resonate through the country, along with human ownership of the country:

West Wind

I've tossed it now, wind and song,
To the flat land,
Bare, treeless flat land.
I've tossed it now, wind and song.

11 B. Rose, op. cit., p. xviii.

12 B. Rose, ibid., p. 91.

To the flat land,
Bare, treeless flat land,
To the sandy flats.
The wind is testing its strength,
Blowing down to the ants' path
With its tiny pebbles,
Down to the tiny heaps of gravel,
Down to all the heaps of gravel.
I followed the flat land
In my country. Where is Ekilyangba?
It's in my country.
Where is Ekilyangba?
I've set my foot there.

I've trodden
On the path,
The narrow path,
Ant path.
Red ants,
Meat ants,
Tiny ants.
Parrots screeched,
Flying low over their ant friends.
Ant paths,
Ant tracks.
Wind striking grass,
Parting grass,
Rustling.
My grandfather's wind,
Tiny ants' wind,
Thin ants' wind,
The west wind has veered away.[13]

Each country is understood by its people to be a unique and inviolable whole. People assert that other species also understand the country this way, and indeed that the country understands itself this way. Each whole country is surrounded by other unique and inviolable whole countries, and the relationships between the countries ensure that no country is isolated, that together they make up some larger

13 J. Stokes & Aboriginal Advisers, 1981, *Groote Eylandt Song Words*, Angurugu, Groote Eylandt, p. 10.

wholes ~ clusters of alliance networks, Dreaming tracks and ceremonies, trade networks, tracks of winds and movements of animals. In this way a working system can be known to exist way beyond one's own countries, but no one ever knows the full extent of it all because knowledge is of necessity local. The fact of localised knowledge is itself Law. This system does not invite people to assume that they can or should know everything. Nor does it commend itself to people who believe that they can and should (or already do) know everything.

The holistic quality of country has a further implication: when questions arise of intervention in order to protect something, Aboriginal people are likely to respond with requests to do nothing or with requests to preserve the whole system in which the particular is embedded. Thus, for example, members of the Ginytjirrang mala (clan) of Arnhem Land call for a management strategy for the seas which depends on local knowledge, local responsibilities, and local action, and which emphasises that land and sea are all part of the same Law:

When talking about land and sea in Yolngu way, the sea is the same as the land. On our lands in the Northern Territory land rights legislation allows us to make the decisions concerning exploration and mining proposals in our country. But land rights stop, under your law, where the sea meets up with the land. We want the right to say yes or no to exploration and mining in our land and sea country and we want this right fixed in the constitution so it cannot be changed ... Our management arrangements for the sea are at least as complex as yours; but at least most adult Yolngu understand how their own system works. And our system has worked for us for thousands of years. We think this is due to our relationship to the sea. In our law Manbuynga and Rulyapa, we are all related as kin to the sea. We thus use the sea and have access in accordance with our law which derives from these kinship ties.[14]

Knowledge ~ local, detailed, tested through time ~ is the basis for being in country. Aboriginal people take notice of their country, and through the attention they give to country, their communication becomes two-way. Communication is based on the ability to understand what is happening and where it is happening. The song-poem by Sam Mitchell of the Pilbara makes this point indirectly as he sits in his house and sings of what is happening way off in his country:

14 Ginytjirrang Mala with the assistance of A•D•V•Y•Z for the Northern Land Council and Ocean Rescue 2000 ≈ November 1994. 'An Indigenous Marine Protection Strategy for Manbuynga ga Rulyapa', unpublished mss, pp. 6, 9. Manbuynga and Rulyapa are two main currents in the sea.

Thunderstorm

After sundown the clouds start to burn,
A big one is bending low, stays and breaks up,
Then it rounds again and raises its forehead high.
On both ends sheet lightning shines.
In the middle where the first layer is gone,
You can see the flash, even inside your home.
Everything dissolves.
In the desert, wide-spread falls the cloudburst,
Drenching all the trees between the two sandhills.[15]

Paddy Fordham Wainburranga, a Rembarrnga man of Arnhem Land, spoke of these matters in a story he told about his country:

I'm here telling you this story in this place called Bulara ~ that's the big country name for this area. ...

We used to make our camp sometimes without water. Then early in the morning we'd get up and sing out and look at the country carefully, so we could find water and go hunting.

That's what this part of Arnhem Land is like. Other places are all right but here in the middle you've got to talk to the country. You can't just travel quiet, no! Otherwise you might get lost, or have to travel much further. That's law for the centre of Arnhem Land. For Rembarrnga people.

My father used to do it. We used to get up early in the morning and he'd sing out and talk. Sometimes he didn't talk early in the morning, only when travelling and we used to stop and he'd talk then in language.

It would make you look carefully at the country, so you could see the signs, so you could see which way to go. ...

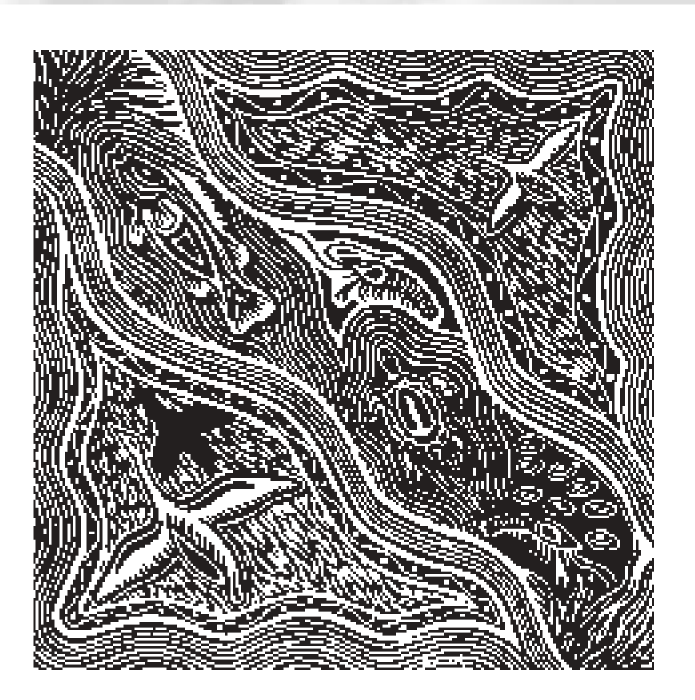
The law about singing out was made like that to make you notice that all the trees here are your countrymen, your relations. All the trees and the birds are your relations.

15 Song by Sam Mitchell, sung in Njangumarda language and translated by S. Mitchell, in C. von Brandenstein & A. Thomas, op. cit., p. 17; 67.

There are different kinds of birds here. They can't talk to you straight up. You've got to sing out to them so they can know you. ...

That's why I talked to the birds this morning, and all the birds were happy. All the birds were really happy and sang out: 'Oh! That's a relation of ours. That's a relation we didn't know about'. That's the way they spoke, and they were happy then to sing out.[16]

16 P. Wainburranga, 'Talking history' *Land Rights News*, 2, 9, July 1988, p. 46.



2

Wilderness and the Wild

WILDERNESS, David Brower says jokingly, is a place 'where the hand of man has not yet set foot'.[17] It is important to recall that 'wilderness' has not always been positively conceptualised in the 'civilised' world. Agriculturalists tilled the earth, and kept the 'wild' or untamed world at the edges of the fields or beyond the walls of the gardens.[18] Nation-states contrast themselves with the uncontrolled and wild 'barbarians' or 'savages' beyond the rivers or walls that mark the edge of centrally controlled society. On the other hand, positive evaluations of wilderness also have a long genealogy: in Jewish and Christian thought wilderness can be a place where God's presence is intensely encountered. The modern interest in wilderness is related in complex ways to the conceptual domains of the past, but adds to them a positive evaluation concerning preservation and conservation. Positive values of wilderness include: helping to safeguard biodiversity; maintaining sources of spiritual renewal; opportunities for self-reliant recreation; maintenance of significant opportunities for scientific study in natural ecosystems.[19]

Bearing in mind the complex history of wilderness concepts, the issue which gives immense urgency to our concerns about the future of our ecosystems is the egocentric quality of standard European and American-derived concepts of wilderness. They all involve the peculiar notion that if one cannot see traces or signs of one's own culture in the land, then the land must be 'natural' or empty of culture. In the context of Australian settlement by Europeans, it does not require a great leap of imagination to realise that the concept of terra nullius (land that was not owned) depended on precisely this egocentric view of landscape. Not seeing the signs of ownership and property to which they were accustomed, many settlers assumed that there was no ownership and property, and that the landscapes were natural.

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17 David Brower was the first executive director of the Sierra Club and founder of Friends of the Earth. This statement appears in 'Wilderness and the Wildness Within Us', *Habitat,* 1978, 5, 6, p. 7.

18 J. Wright, 1980, 'Wilderness, Waste and History', *Habitat,* 8,1, 27-31.

19 M. Robertson, K. Vang & A. Brown, 1992, *Wilderness in Australia, Issues and Options*. Australian Heritage Commission, ACT.

Ross Gibson writes of how English people had imaginatively grasped their own home country: 'Every Old World hectare has been ridden over, written over, and inscribed into an elaborate and all engrossing national history'. He contrasts the symbolic density of the Old World with the elusive quality of settler Australian society: 'Australians, by contrast, seem to be neither here nor there'.[20] One of the reasons why it is possible, 200 years after first settlement, to suggest that Australians seem neither here nor there, is that many Australians have avoided accepting, or even attempting to understand, that at the time of their arrival this continent already had been discovered. It was already travelled, known, and named; its places were inscribed in song, dance and design; its histories were told from generation to generation; its physical appearance was the product of specific land management practices; its fertility was the product of human labour which had been invested in the land. In the words of the great anthropologist W E H Stanner, Aboriginal people moved 'not in a landscape, but in a humanised realm saturated with significations'.[21]

The egocentric view of landscape, wherein one either sees oneself or one sees nothing at all, constitutes a kind of blindness; it closes off the evidence of what really is there. Aboriginal people understand settlers well in this regard. Anzac Munnganyi, a Bilinara man of Pigeon Hole (Northern Territory), said:

White people just came up blind, bumping into everything. And put the flag; put the flag.[22]

His imagery of white people stumbling around in unknown country and yet having the arrogance to 'put the flag' and claim the land strikes me as immensely insightful.

A definition of wilderness which excludes the active presence of humanity may suit contemporary people's longing for places of peace, natural beauty, and spiritual presence, uncontaminated by their own culture. But definitions which claim that these landscapes are 'natural' miss the whole point of the nourishing Australian terrains. Here on this continent, there is no place where the feet of Aboriginal humanity have not preceded those of the settler. Nor is there any place where the country was not once fashioned and kept productive by Aboriginal people's land management practices. There is no place without a history; there is no place that has not been imaginatively grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation.

20 R. Gibson, 1988 'Formative Landscapes', in *Back of Beyond, Discovering Australian Film and Television,* S. Murray (ed), pp. 20-33. Australian Film Commission, Sydney. See also R. Gibson 1992 *South of the West: Post-colonialism and the narrative construction of Australia.* Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

21 WEH Stanner, 1979 *White Man Got No Dreaming.* ANU Press, Canberra, p. 131.

22 Personal communication.

In 1986 Daly Pulkara and I were travelling from Yarralin (an Aboriginal settlement excised from Victoria River Downs station) to Lingara (an Aboriginal settlement excised from Humbert River station) in the Victoria River District in the Northern Territory. The route was familiar to us both, but we stopped because I wanted to film some of the most spectacular erosion in the Victoria River District. I asked Daly what he called this country. He looked at it long and heavily before he said: 'It's the wild. Just the wild'.

Daly went on to speak of quiet country ~ the country in which all the care of generations of people is evident to those who know how to see it. Quiet country stands in contrast to the wild: we were looking at a wilderness, man-made and cattle-made. This 'wild' was a place where the life of the country was falling down into the gullies and washing away with the rains.[23]

Owned and Loved

The High Court's Mabo Decision marks an historic moment in the public consciousness of settler Australians: for the first time Aboriginal and Islander people's ownership of country has been formally and publicly acknowledged. While Aboriginal people welcomed the decision, it did not alter their own views of themselves, for most of the Aboriginal people of Australia never ceased to understand themselves as people who are unshakeably linked to their country through complex legal (in Aboriginal law), emotional, economic, intellectual and spiritual ways.

As the *Native Title Act 1993* is beginning to have some impact on the nation, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on specific cases of ownership. The Meriam people have had their say and won, and their words are in the public domain. James Rice explained ownership in his terms:

This area, this land is ours. Our ancestors were living here. There were no white people here ... I know my boundaries; I know my areas. I can name them where the ancestors been naming all these places. These are not any white people's names ... I say Basmet ~ this is my ancestor's name. And this land belongs to my ancestors.[24]

Inscribing the Human Spirit

Back in the 'wilds' of the Daly River reserve, a Marringarr woman named Ataying sings of a hill named Yendili which is located in her country. The song was given her by the spirit of a deceased man who appeared to her in a dream:

23 Some of the implications of Daly's statement are explored further in D. Rose 1988 'Exploring an Aboriginal Land Ethic', *Meanjin,* 47, 3, 378-387.

24 Quoted in N. Sharp, 1994, 'Malo's Law in Court: The Religious Background to the Mabo Case', Charles Strong Memorial Trust Lecture, Charles Strong Memorial Trust, Adelaide.

yendili yendili arrgirritni
yendili yendili arrgirritni;
aa ... yengina

You will hang onto this Yendili country,
my dear daughter [25]

Not only the hand of humanity, but the spirit and mind as well, have been active on this continent for millennia. Thus, the nourishing terrains of Australia have offered people joy, beauty, and celebration. Through labour, imagination and spirituality Aboriginal people have managed and celebrated their country. Some of their songs, like this Yawuru song-poem, tell of the utter joy of life:

Glowing like the sacred blood
you appear.
Riding up and down on the waves,
quickly the stranger arrives.

The turtle arrived
from the south
glistening and glimmering in the waves,
shining and glittering on the waves.[26]

Song-poems almost invariably situate the singer in known, named, created, and understood country:

Whirlwind

A whirlwind rises high.
I am bound for Pilanu,
Where the Rainbow-Snake cut open the ground.[27]

Since 1788, with the progressive cessation of Aboriginal land management practices (discussed in greater detail below), with the increasing congregation of Aboriginal people in settlements, and with the introduction of new forms of land use and land management, there is developing a pervasive 'wild'~a loss of life, a loss of life support systems, and a loss of relationships among living things and

25 Transcribed, translated, and discussed in A. Marett, 1991, '*Wangga* songs of northwest Australia: Reflections on the performance of Aboriginal music at the Symposium of the International Musicological Society '88' *Musicology Australia,* vol. xiv, 37-46, p. 40.

26 E. Worms, 1957 'The Poetry of the Yaoro and Bad, North-Western Australia', *Annali Lateranemse,* v. 21, 213-29. Worms notes that this song, sung by a man named Mangana, was sung while spearing turtles from the top of the sandstone cliffs of Roebuck bay. People said that the turtle arrives regularly from the south towards the end of the trade wind season, in October-December.

27 C. von Brandenstein & A. Thomas, op. cit., p. 6.

their country. For many Aboriginal people, this 'wild' has the quality of deep loneliness. The hauntingly beautiful song of the Chrysophase Band from Central Australia tells its own story:

***Tjanu Anu Wilurara* (They all went West)**

One time I was standing, staring
As the sun was setting in the West
I was feeling so sad.

What's happened to all the people?
What's happened to all the people?

A child told me
They have all gone West
It's wonderful out West.

It's the land of our Grandfather
The Western Land
The Western Lands.

I've kept it in my mind
And now whenever there's a wind blowing
I get a stabbing pain
Right through my eyes.

What's happened to all the people?
What's happened to all the people? [28]

28 The Chrysophase Band, by Peter Watson and Richard Kanari; on the album 'From the Bush', CAAMA Music, Alice Springs.

3

Nothing is Nothing

QUEENSLAND PEOPLE, according to Peter Sutton, an anthropologist with broad experience of Aboriginal cultures, have a saying: 'Nothing is nothing'. The corollary to this profound statement is that everything is something. Nothing is nothing because everything has an origin in the creation of the world.

Sutton explains that any one person or other living thing is capable of knowing only a portion of what can be known. And while some meanings are more significant than others, 'there is no alien world of mere things' or of things with no meaning.[29]

Living Things

Nourishing terrains are the active manifestation of creation. This does not mean that everything that happens is right or good, but it does mean that everything that happens has creation as its precondition. For many Aboriginal people, everything in the world is alive: animals, trees, rains, sun, moon, some rocks and hills, and people are all conscious. So too are other beings such as the Rainbow Snake, the Hairy People and the Stumpy Men. All have a right to exist, all have their own places of belonging, all have their own Law and culture.

Many of the super-ordinary beings interact with people. Stumpy Men, for example, give people new songs,[30] as do the Munga Munga women.[31] Many of these beings also act as guardians of country ~ taking care of the people who belong there, and harming people who do not belong there. They are powerful and unpredictable beings, and are often associated with particular places where people ought not to go. Some of these beings are regarded as secret and thus are not to be discussed publicly: they guard the country especially during ceremonial activities when people and other beings may be particularly vulnerable.

29 P. Sutton 1988 'Dreamings', in Dreamings; *The Art of Aboriginal Australia,* pp. 13-32. Viking, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Vic, p. 13.

30 Marett, op. cit., p. 40-1.

31 See D. Rose 1992, op. cit., pp. 95-7.

Percy Mumbulla of the south coast of New South Wales told Roland Robinson about one extra-ordinary being ~ Dulagal (also Doolagarl):

My father, old Jacky Mumbulla, and a woman Nardi, who was good at climbing trees, took some old warriors out with them once for company. They were going out for gum-boughs, koala bears, or anything they could find.
One old-man wanted to go off alone. They say to this old-man, 'You knock on a tree if you find anything'.
This old-man goes off and climbs a tree after a gum-bough. He goes out along a bough. He throws his tomahawk and hits a bear. The bear falls down, thump! Then this old man slips on the bough and falls. He breaks his back. All this time old Jacky Mumbulla and his tribe do not hear a knock on any tree. 'Right-oh', my father sings out, 'gather up all the gum-boughs or whatever you've got. We start back home to the camp' ...
My father says to the tribe, 'If that old-man is not back by daylight, we must go out to find him'.
'Right-oh,' the others call out.
Daylight. The old-man has not come back. My father wakes up the tribe. 'Come on, all you young fellows, we have to go out for that old-man'.
They find tracks and follow them to where the old-man had dragged himself to a big log ...
The old-man told them that at night a doolagarl, a hairy-man, had smelt him out. The doolagarl came over to where the old-man lay behind the log. But the old-man was a clever fellow. He called out and spoke to the doolagarl. That hairy-man stayed and looked after the old fellow all night ...[32]

The presence in the world of a range of beings which European cultures define as supernatural conveys a strong sense of vivid presence ~ of country bursting with life. Areas which Europeans have often seen as desolate and lacking life, and which are certainly inhospitable to many species, are likely to be seen quite differently by the Aboriginal people who belong there. In 'The Spirit Song about Lake Eyre', Jimmy and Leslie Russell sing a song which was given to them by an older relative who was taught it by a spirit who led him all over Lake Eyre country. The song refers to a mythic being; his body is the whirlwind, and only his eyebrows show. The song also refers to the piyatja 'goblins' who live on the slopes of Mt Margaret. In amongst these creatures are other living creatures ~ crows, and the poet himself:

32 Percy Mumbulla in R. Robinson, 1968, *Aboriginal Myths and Legends,* Sun Books, Melbourne, pp. 211-2.

'Only Eyebrows' he is called,
He is only eyebrows.
'Only Eyebrows' he is called.

'Only Eyebrows',
'Only Eyebrows',

He travels crossways, across the lake,
Crossways indeed
'Only ...

'Only Eyebrows',
'Only Eyebrows',

He travels crossways across the lake,

The piyatja *goblins, the* piyatja *goblins are painted up*
Like banded snakes they look,
Yes, like banded snakes.

They are dancing now, painted up
You see them sleeping by the creek.

They are painted, all painted,
Like banded snakes they are painted.

They resemble dark flowers
Flowers in the distance by the lake
Flowers in the distance by the lake
Dark flowers
In the distance the huge flock
Of crows.

In the distance the huge flock
The flock of crows
Flowers in the distance by the lake
Dark flowers.[33]

33 'The Spirit Song about Lake Eyre', sung by Jimmy and Leslie Russell in the Wangkangurru language; Recorded, translated and annotated by L. Hercus, 1990, in *The honey-ant men's love song and other Aboriginal song poems,* R Dixon and M Duwell (eds), pp. 112-5., University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.

Dreaming

Silas Roberts, first Chairman of the Northern Land Council, stated:

Aboriginals have a special connection with everything that is natural. Aboriginals see themselves as part of nature. We see all things natural as part of us. All the things on Earth we see as part human. This is told through the ideas of dreaming. By dreaming we mean the belief that long ago, these creatures started human society. These creatures, these great creatures are just as much alive today as they were in the beginning. They are everlasting and will never die. They are always part of the land and nature as we are. Our connection to all things natural is spiritual.[34]

In some parts of Australia Aboriginal people use the term 'Dreamtime' referring to a period of time located in the distant past; sometimes this term is also used to refer to the creative beings of that time: the Dreamtime beings. Other Aboriginal people use the term 'history' to refer to the creative period; creative beings are then often spoken of as having acted 'in the history'.[35] Still other people use the term 'story'. Jim Wafer, a gifted student of Arrernte (Arunta) cultures of Central Australia, discusses the term *altyerre* (alchera, altjira) about which there has been a great deal of debate among non-Arrernte people.[36] Wafer's research indicates that one of the primary meanings of the term is 'story'. In Arrernte cosmology, a central term is *altyerre ileme* ('to tell a 'story''), and this term also means 'dream'.

> In the Arrernte view, the primary evidence of the events which happened in Story is that they created phenomena which have a tangible presence in the world of everyday reality. Such phenomena include petroglyphs, cave paintings, rocks, mountains, rivers, and other artefacts and natural features, which are referred to by the term *altyerr-iperre* ... [This] term means something like 'things that come into being as a result of events that happened in Story.'[37]

Whether the world comes into being by Dreaming, by history, by Story, or in Dreamtime, Aboriginal people's explanations about this on-going creation of the world are similar throughout the continent. Mussolini Harvey, a Yanyuwa man from the Gulf of Carpentaria explains:

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34 Quoted in B. Neidjie, S. Davis & A. Fox, *Kakadu Man,* Mybrood P/L inc, NSW, p. 13.

35 See for example, D. Tunbridge 1988 *Flinders Ranges Dreaming,* Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, p. xxviii.

36 J. Wafer & A. Green, 1989 *The Simpson Desert Land Claim; Area 1: The North-West Simpson Desert, Anthropologists' Report,* Central Land Council, Alice Springs, p.46. Wafer notes that Spencer & Gillen and the Strehlows have offered explanations of this multi-faceted term. More recently, Patrick Wolfe takes a critical look at the terminology (P. Wolfe 1991 'The Dreamtime in Anthropology and in Australian Settler culture', *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 33: 197-224).

37 Wafer & Green, op. cit., pp. 46-7.

White people ask us all the time, what is Dreaming? This is a hard question because Dreaming is a really big thing for Aboriginal people. In our language, Yanyuwa, we call the Dreaming Yijan. *The Dreamings made our Law or* narnu-Yuwa. *This Law is the way we live, our rules. This Law is our ceremonies, our songs, our stories; all of these things came from the Dreaming. One thing that I can tell you though is that our Law is not like European Law which is always changing ~ new government, new laws; but our Law cannot change, we did not make it. The Law was made by the Dreamings many, many years ago and given to our ancestors and they gave it to us.*

The Dreamings are our ancestors, no matter if they are fish, birds, men, women, animals, wind or rain. It was these Dreamings that made our Law. All things in our country have Law, they have ceremony and song, and they have people who are related to them ...

The Dreamings named all of the country and the sea as they travelled, they named everything that they saw. As the Dreamings travelled they put spirit children over the country, we call these spirit children ardirri. *It is because of these spirit children that we are born, the spirit children are on the country, and we are born from the country.*

In our ceremonies we wear marks on our bodies, they come from the Dreaming too, we carry the design that the Dreamings gave to us. When we wear that Dreaming mark we are carrying the country, we are keeping the Dreaming held up, we are keeping the country and the Dreaming alive. That is the most important thing, we have to keep up the country, the Dreamings, our Law, our people, it can't change. Our Law has been handed on from generation to generation and it is our job to keep it going, to keep it safe.[38]

Nganyintja Ilyatjari, a Pitjantjatjara woman from the country around Mt Davies, described the origins and significance of her country:

Our country, the country out there near Mt Davies, is full of sacred places. The kangaroo Dreaming has been there since the beginning, the wild fig Dreaming has been there since the beginning, many other women's Dreamings are also there. In other places men and women's Dreamings were together from a long time ago ...

38 Mussolini Harvey, quoted in John Bradley, 1988, *Yanyuwa country; the Yanyuwa people of Borroloola tell the history of their land,* Greenhouse Publications, Richmond, pp. xi-xi.

These places have been part of the sacred Dreamtime since the beginning of time, they were made then by our Dreamtime ancestors ~ like the kangaroo. Our country is sacred, this country is sacred.[39]

Animals, trees, rains, sun, moon ~ all are conscious. They watch us humans, and think about us. No one person, animal, tree or hill knows everything, and the purposes of much that exists may remain obscure to others. It is important, therefore, to bear in mind that obscurity, from a human point of view, is not the same as purposelessness. There is a profound sense that this world was not created specifically for human beings. Wisdom for humans lies in being aware of life systems and in behaving responsibly so as to sustain the created world. Aboriginal people in many parts of Australia see and understand that other living things ~ birds, kangaroos, flying foxes, Rainbow Snakes and all the rest of them ~ also know that wisdom lies in being aware of life systems and in behaving responsibly.

Totems

I have occasionally experienced scepticism toward the term 'totem', perhaps because of its textbook quality. Like other anthropologists I have queried the appropriateness in Australia of a term deriving from the Ojibwa language of North America. However, my conversations with Aboriginal people in many parts of Australia have led me to accept the appropriateness of the term. The best definition is that developed by the late Professor Stanner:

> What is meant by Totemism in Aboriginal Australia is always a mystical connection, expressed by symbolic devices and maintained by rules, between living persons, whether as individuals or as groups or as stocks, and other existents ~ their 'totems' ~ within an ontology of life that in Aboriginal understanding depends for order and continuity on maintaining the identities and associations which exemplify the connection.[40]

While Stanner and others have generally thought of totems in terms of the relationships between the person or group of people and the species, it is the case that many totemic relationships also involve country. With land-based totems there is a three-way relationship between the people, the species, and the country. The totemic relationship invariably requires that people take responsibilities for their relationship with another species, and learn that their own well-being is inextricably linked with the well-being of their totemic species. Where the totemic relationship also involves land, people are further implicated in a set of responsibilities toward that land, and their well-being is linked to the well-being of that land.

39 'Women and Land Rights', 1983, in *We Are Bosses Ourselves,* F. Gale (ed), Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, p. 57.

40 WEH. Stanner 1979 op. cit., pp. 127-8.

In the course of my work with the Mak Mak (White-breasted Sea Eagle) Clan of the flood plains south-west of Darwin, I asked a few people to tell me what the Sea Eagle (their totem) meant to them. Their answers included:

~ ***My strength. The strength of that land.***

~ ***You can feel it in yourself, you belong there. It's your country, your dust, your place.***

~ ***You remember the old people.***

~ ***They [the birds] always greet me. It's home.***

~ ***Safety and security.***

~ ***You see the birds, you see the country, and your senses come back to you. You know what to do and where to go.***

Countries were created to be nourishing places for all the living things who belong there, and humans have the responsibility, by Dreaming, to care for the country. The late David Burrumarra, a senior Yolngu man, discussed the Dreaming figure Lany'tjun who gave law and life to the Warramirri clan:

[Lany'tjun] ***said everything in Warramirri areas comes under Warramirri people. Don't trouble the land', he said. 'Don't spoil the land. Be careful in the use of the land'.***[41]

They Were All People Too

Individual Dreamings walked in the shape of humans and in the shape of their particular species or being. Ancestral to the people and the animals of today, it is from them that it is possible, and indeed imperative, to trace a kinship among the living things of the world.

Charlotte Williams of Woodenbong in the New England ranges told the story of the Vine:

***There was a vine whose spirit was a man.
These forest vines, they were not made by men,
they were the spirit-people's vines. And someone
cut this vine and there this man is struggling
to be alive. This is my own grandfather's song.***

41 David Burrumarra in I. MacIntosh, 1994 The Whale and the Cross; *Conversations with David Burrumarra M.B.E.*, Northern Territory Historical Society, Darwin, p. 75.

'I am here,' the song says. 'I am this vine.
My life is going away from me, from this ground,
this place, this dust. My ears are ringing.
Gaungun the spirit-woman is making my ears no good.
My ears are ringing. I'll see this world no more'.

And one man came along and saw this vine
struggling to be alive. He covered it with dust.
When I think of my old people, how they would
sit down and sing their songs to me,
I could cry ... [42]

Dick Donelly's story of the Platypus in the Clarence River region of New South Wales tells of the creation of specific features of the land, and the close kinship between humans and animals:

The Platypus

Djanbun's the platypus. He was a man one time.
He came out of Washpool Creek, the old people said.
Djanbun's travelling, a firestick in his hand,
across the big mountains to the Clarence River.
He's blowing on the firestick to make it flame.
But it won't flame, and wherever the sparks
fall down from the firestick they turn to gold.

The platypus man's mouth starts to get wide
from blowing on the firestick. We used to blow
on the firestick when we were young. My mother used to say to us,
'Don't blow on the firestick
like that, or you'll be like Djanbun the platypus'.

When Djanbun gets down to the Clarence River,
he's got a big mouth from blowing on the firestick.
He starts to wonder, 'What am I going to do now?'.
He'd got tired of trying to make the firestick flame.
So he throws the firestick down, and he thinks,
'I'll jump into the water'. As soon as he jumps
in the water, he turns into a platypus. That's him,
that's Djanbun now. He was a man one time.

42 C. Williams, in R. Robinson, 1970, op. cit., p. 53.

Now Billy Charlie, he found this nugget of gold
at the place where Djanbun jumped into the water.
When I heard about this, I thought, 'Well now,
that's the firestick he found'. Because he found
that gold where the firestick was thrown down.

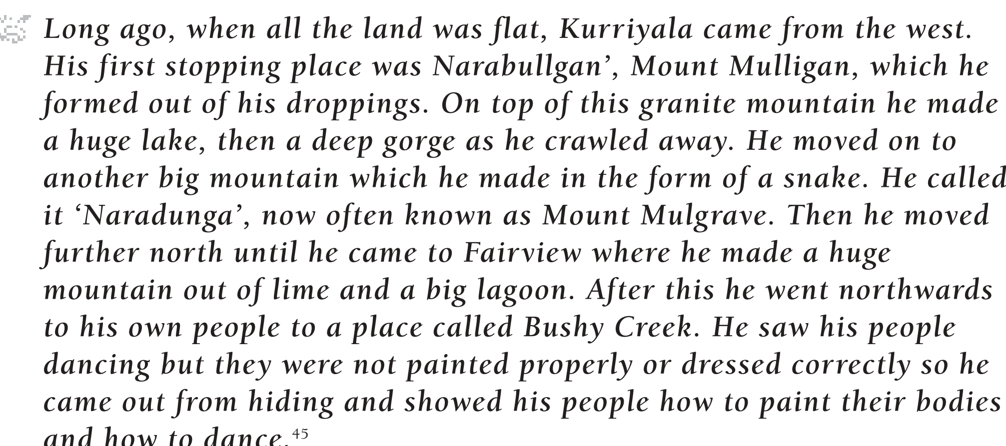
The old people told me this story. They showed me
the way Djanbun went across the mountain range.[43]

Knowledge

It is one thing to know that nothing is nothing, but it is quite another thing to know what any given thing is. Aboriginal law is land-based, by which I mean that it is specifically associated with and applies to particular country. In her work with Adnyamathanha people in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia, Dorothy Tunbridge formed an understanding of the intimate links between Dreaming, land and Law:

> To Adnyamathanha elders the Dreaming signifies two things above all, the land and the law ... For the people, the stories are the land. In the language Yura Ngawarla, 'telling (someone) a story', *yarta wandatha,* means simply 'telling (someone) the land (*yarta*)' or 'linking (that someone) to the land'.[44]

Kuku-Yalanji people of the rainforest of North Queensland tell of the origins of ceremony:



Long ago, when all the land was flat, Kurriyala came from the west. His first stopping place was Narabullgan', Mount Mulligan, which he formed out of his droppings. On top of this granite mountain he made a huge lake, then a deep gorge as he crawled away. He moved on to another big mountain which he made in the form of a snake. He called it 'Naradunga', now often known as Mount Mulgrave. Then he moved further north until he came to Fairview where he made a huge mountain out of lime and a big lagoon. After this he went northwards to his own people to a place called Bushy Creek. He saw his people dancing but they were not painted properly or dressed correctly so he came out from hiding and showed his people how to paint their bodies and how to dance.[45]

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43 D. Donelly in R. Robinson, 1970, op. cit., p. 43.

44 Tunbridge, op. cit., p. xxix.

45 J. & S. Erbacher, 1991, *Aborigines of the Rainforest,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Ownership and transmission of knowledge is a crucial key in understanding people and their country. The actual information which people possess, teach, exchange, and inherit constitutes intellectual property. And knowledge, in all Aboriginal systems of information, is specific to the place and to the people. To put it another way: one of the most important aspects of Aboriginal knowledge systems is that they do not universalise. Moreover, the fact that knowledge is localised and specific is one of the keys to its value.

Eric Michaels developed this understanding from his work with Warlpiri people in Yuendumu:

> Aboriginal society de-emphasises material wealth, and values information. Lacking writing, most information is personal property, stored mentally. Dances, designs, stories, and songs are all formats for storing information and for displaying it in ceremonial and educational settings. The subjects of these are usually narratives describing how ancestral figures create and recreate the land and its resources. This occurs in a special form of time/space which is translated as 'the dreaming'. The sum of these stories is called 'the law'.[46]

Law belongs to country and to people. It is embedded, of course, in society and culture, and it is intellectual property which is not freely available to all. Essentially, if knowledge is constituted as evidence of relationships among persons and between persons and country, then it is most assuredly not available to all and sundry. Such a system is subverted through any form of 'freedom of information'. If there is one thing that is absolutely not free, in Aboriginal land tenure systems and in Aboriginal politics, it is knowledge. This point is often misunderstood by settler Australians who, when told something, feel free to use that information as they wish. In truth, the fact that a person has been told something does not mean that they therefore have the right to tell others. Rights to knowledge are graded, and the best rule is the same as the rule for country (discussed below): always ask.

As the Ginytjirrang Mala (clan) indicates in an oblique way, in addition to group ownership of intellectual property, gender and age restrictions apply to some knowledge:

In the Yolngu world view, water is the giver of sacred knowledge, all ceremonies and lands. Whether it's fresh or salt, travelling on or under the land, or in the sea, water is the source of all that is holy. The word gapu, meaning water, is for anyone to use, including women and children. But there is another deeper meaning for the word which is only for the elders to know, that is why talk about water must be 'at

46 E. Michaels, 1986. *The Aboriginal Invention of Television in Central Australia 1982-1986*. Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, p.3.

the feet of the old people'. There is 'surface' water and 'inside' water. The land carries it along an 'inside' path. And then it comes out as spring water in the sea. The salt water is on the surface and the fresh water is inside. And Yolngu stories are the same ~ there are stories which go outside and there are inside stories too.[47]

Knowledge is intimately detailed at the local level, and belongs to the people of the country. It is therefore incumbent upon strangers to respect the knowledge (secret and open) of the local group. People, too, are not nothing. Riley Young put it this way:

Because I know this Law. Aboriginal people follow this Law now.
You know, because we know this land.
We know so much ...
Don't reckon Aboriginals only muck. We know! [48]

47 Ginytjirrang Mala, op. cit., p. 5 (inverted commas reproduced in conformity with the original).

48 Personal communication, Riley Young, see also D. Rose 1990 'A Distant Constellation' *Continuum, An Australian Journal of the Media,* 3, 2, 160-173, p. 170.