

You've got to drown in it

Nia Emmanouil¹

Grounded.

Cross-legged, in dust.

We sit amongst murga. They fringe our camp, sheltering us from the south-easterly winds that blow across this country during Barrgana time.

Returning to the same buru each year.

Ground re-visited, fires re-lit.

Ashes mounding up.

Remnant coals glowing once more under fires that dot the dry, sandy creek bed.²

The sun hangs low in the sky, a sliver of a new moon chasing it down into the canopies of nearby mangroves. Across the fire Frans³ rasps a piece of irigirll (*Hakea arborescens*), shaping it into a boomerang with the same name, irigirll: tree and boomerang are one. We have sat on this same ground many times before, during previous walks of the Lurujarri Dreaming Trail.⁴ Does the country here at Wirrar (Barred Creek) remember us? Maybe some places are just right for sitting, sleeping, telling stories, if there is good feeling there.

This trail that we walk each year with the Goolarabooloo community follows a section of the Northern Tradition Song Cycle. It starts right up at One Arm Point on the Dampier Peninsula in the West Kimberly, and stretches down the coast to Bidyadanga. Our teachers on country are many: Goolarabooloo family, Frans, country itself. Each time I walk with this country, things that I have seen and heard many times before are unveiled and my sense of it deepens. This year it is the spirit trees, mamara, that I encounter with stronger feeling.

These encounters with country, our awakening to one another's subjectivity and the founding of mutual sympathy and respect,⁵ feed my curiosity about the metaphysics that are being enacted, or are emerging, as we all walk this trail together, Goolarabooloo and non-Indigenous friends. A hot enamel cup full of billy tea warms my hands and this curiosity weaves its way into conversation between Frans and me.⁶

Frans, if we could pull back what is happening on the surface, what is Trail?

Trail is the opening, it's the entrance into this world. It is opened up by the traditional people, for all of us to come together and get that experience which traditional people have had since the beginning of that process. So for us non-Indigenous people, we have a chance here on the song cycle, which was opened for that purpose, to make you see. To see through your liyan, your feeling.

I contemplate his words. Does Frans mean the *opening up* of country so that non-Indigenous people can feel welcome here? Or, is he referring to another kind of *opening up*, something metaphysical in nature? I remember my walk up Gulaga Mountain with elders of the Yuin Nation. As we walked towards a stand of rock tors on the misty saddle (these tors tell stories about the Yuin people's creation), I sensed an opening up, as though I was walking into a space with a different density and feeling. It was subtle, yet palpable and nonetheless, all I have are speculations as to what I was sensing. Yet, I hold a deep knowing that many of my experiences of being with country happen only when I allow myself to be quiet and listen, or see, through feeling; *liyan* as Frans calls it. Goolarabooloo and Frans are always talking about *liyan* and *reading the country*. For some reason it took me a long time to connect the two. I used to think that reading the country was a metaphor for reading the landscape as a text and, seeing how things are held in relationship to each other in country. I remember stories about these relationships:

1. When the black kites are flying over the dunes, the salmon are running.
2. When the eyes of the march flies turn green and they are biting, the stingrays are fat.

These Indigenous ecological knowledges are always shared in the context of the six seasons: Mankala (rainy season), Marul (hot and humid), Wirralburu (the first south-east winds start to blow), Barrgana (cool sea and nights), Wirlburu (warming up) and Larja (build up).⁷ This system of observing and working with a complex web of interrelationships becomes a world that we inhabit and become familiar with through teaching on country during the Lurujarri Dreaming Trail. Rose writes about the patterns and relationships that characterise these dynamic seasonal systems, that '... events are ordered by connections: sequence and co-occurrence (simultaneity) are of the first importance'.⁸

It is always Barrgana when we walk the Trail. Our campfires at night provide warmth during the cool nights. If we are lucky, on a still evening, we might hear the migrating humpback whales sing their songs and slap the water's surface. The walgawalga (salmon) are fat at this time of year and up in the sand dunes the ngarri jaari (bush onions) are plentiful. We gather small handfuls as we dig with cupped hands just below the surface of the sand, whilst walking from buru to buru. Then there is the sweet pleasure of pulling fresh blossoms from a jigal tree (*Bauhinia cunninghamii*) and sucking out the nectar.

It was while walking beneath tall pindan cliffs near Dugal last year that my understanding of reading the country shifted. I asked Goolarabooloo storyteller Richard Hunter how *liyan* and reading the country were related. Richard said,

That's how we read the country, through our liyan.

To read through feeling; this idea held resonance for me. It was only my Western analytical lens of interpreting the reading metaphor as something related to sight, which had blinded me to this understanding. To read or see through feeling would mean

waking up an intuitive awareness and living a more somatic existence, one in which my intuitive sense was heightened, trusted, followed.

I place another log of gunaroo (*Corymbia paractia*) on the fire. With all sun and moonlight drained from the sky, Marella, the Emu Man, peers down at us from the Milky Way. Frans continues speaking about liyan,

Feeling is the key to it, because you can see it and keep it in mind, give it a picture or a name, but what kind of relationship do you have with that landscape? Not unless you start to connect, start feeling that landscape, do you get a different relationship. Then you start seeing the landscape differently to how you saw it before, when you were giving the tree a name and the rock a name, the place a name, or seeing a nice sunset.

Seeing. Naming. Do these not correspond to knowing? Here in the context of this conversation, the idea that I could engage with Indigenous ways of knowing through an unquestioned Western, analytic frame of thinking seems hollow, misguided.

You have to feel... you have to feel. Say if we want to look for the right wood. It's not just waiting there for you, you have to see what you want. You have to feel it and if you're not in tune, you won't get 'em. You might waste a whole day. But if you concentrate only on a boomerang, then he will come. Might not come when I want him, but all of a sudden there he is, you know. You always have to feel that when you walk in the bush.

So you've got to connect first, tune in and feel to be able to really see?

Yeah, you have to kind of get lost in it, drown in it. Yeah, drown in it, you know? First you see one world and all of a sudden there is something happening in that landscape and then we see another world emerging, a world we can have some relationship with. But the Trail is an opening, an entrance to get a dream, to get an experience, to see how everything fits in. That's how everything was organised from the beginning. That's why those trees are a good place for camping. That's why that place is no good for camping. Why those rocks are important for doing certain things. So it is there, it's all there, all the ingredients for life.

Children run past as the call for dinner rings out across the camp. The serving line snakes around tables, cooking fires and milk crate chairs. We are a big mob this year. Dinner can wait, our conversation is unfinished; it holds us close to the fire and begins to attract other trail walkers. Ruchira emerges from her nearby tent and politely asks to join us. A moment later Karlien also joins the growing fireside circle. She and I spent much of the day sharing stories about our liyan in different places on country and how we felt drawn to each place in different ways. I ask Frans about liyan in country.

Yeah, well every area got its own liyan. We see country but really you relate to an energy field or a thought pattern or what you call it, I haven't got the words for it. But it's living and kicking and it will stir something up in us. We can meditate for many years too and that will happen, but this country can release it fairly quickly. You know, that is why it is so important for everybody. It's very easy country to get that contact in this country...

Karlien is compelled to share her own feelings and judgements about liyan and finds a passage into the conversation,

I used to feel when I first came up here, I felt like it wasn't my place to have my liyan connected to country. I felt like as a white person I shouldn't be connecting to country.

Frans pauses his rasping of the irigirll and looks up to make eye contact with Karlien. He sighs heavily and exclaims,

Forget the skin for a while, it has to do with the spirit! The spirit, the Bugarrregarra doesn't look at the skin, he looks for people to wake up to help 'im looking after 'im. You know? He don't look at skin. Country want to stay alive, you know? I think it's hungry to wake people up! Make 'em alive! Make us see, country itself. I think it loves people...

Bugarregarra. Frans has been skirting around Bugarregarra all conversation, but now he allows it to come to the surface. Goolarabooloo and Frans speak about Bugarregarra as the creation or dreaming, mostly through stories about *living country* and living *with* country. Is Frans inviting us to see that we can all have a direct relationship with Bugarregarra?

... country loves people, it's always been part of it from the beginning. It wasn't country and then people, people and country always from the beginning, one time, always connected.

With Frans' utterance of the word *connected*, a deep silence falls over our circle. It feels as though nothing else exists outside of this space, ground, circle, fire, these people. The way in which Frans and Goolarabooloo people speak about Bugarregarra is evocative, it challenges my assumptions about what creation and dreaming are and might be, how as people we live in relation to country.

So there, in that, in all those Bugarrregarra stories there is this creative process happening. We come out, fire comes out, the onions come out, the landscape where that happened. From the stories, then you can read your landscape. Even if you've never been there, you can see.

It has been a quiet year for stories along the Lurujarri Dreaming Trail. It is the first time that I have walked trail without Richard telling these Bugarregarra stories. The younger men are starting to take on this role, but becoming a storyteller takes time. A moving image of Richard plays on in my mind. We are sitting high on a sand dune at Daburdabugun. More than *telling*, Richard is performing a story about the Naji spirits and first people with animated hand gestures, facial expressions and a soft voice. He points west out to the sea, where these Naji spirits came from, eyes squinting as he faces into the quickly setting sun. Each story is told in its proper place - an emanation site or burning off⁹ site - invoking creation and tracing the transmutations from spirit form into physical form; weaving a narrative about the unity of people-country. Standing adjacent to Ngunungkurrukun,¹⁰ another emanation site, Richard once said to us,

Bugarregarra is everything, it's a way of life...

I tried to comprehend this as a reality: Bugarregarra as creation, a complex system of knowledge, a way of life, totality. Richard continued on to say,

Country change and people change, together.

If we can be made or generated together, can we be unmade and re-made together? Can my Western metaphysics stretch to accommodate Bugarregarra as more than just mythical dreamtime stories? I entertain the possibility that people-place are all subsumed in a process of co-creation as we walk country as one mob.

One mob. One mob... Frans shifts his weight on his haunches and it is as though he can read my thoughts as he stares deep into the pulsating glow of the fire.

... it is the coming together of all the individuals from different ways of life to be as a mob of people moving through country. It's subtle, but then after a while people realise it is all one mob. It's not neighbour this, neighbour that, and that's the beauty of it. That one mob gets

absorbed within the system, the song cycle system. I mean, community survived within a song cycle, a living system and it had to behave according to that dream and had to send out dreams in order to keep on going. No, they are a very important part of culture.

You mean *dreams* are an important part of culture?

Yes, definitely and communication and feeling. You can receive a dream, you can send one out, you can be taken up in a collective dream. And sometimes you're just there watching it all and you're not doing anything and other times you get probed to do something. But what we forget I think, in our fast moving world is that there is a complete, entire spirit world surrounding us all the time, especially in nature. You know, every area has an entity that looks after it.

My recent encounters with mamara evoke a feeling of spirit on country. Is this what Frans speaks of? I close my eyes and trace in my mind the forms of the enormous twisted karigooloo tree (*Celtis philippensis*) in the monsoonal vine thicket, the red gubinge tree (*Terminalia ferdinandiana x petiolaris*) which stands like a giant sentinel on the sand dune at Minarriny and the sprawling jigal tree (*Bauhinia cunninghamii*) that envelops the high sand dune at Bindinyankun. It is the distinct, palpable presence of each of these trees that induces in me an urge to find out their meaning, their story. When I sit with these, I feel compelled to be with them as subject, rather than object, bound by the kind of inter-subjectivity about which Mathews writes.¹¹ My *being with* embodies a receptivity to mutual recognition; the meeting of my presence with a presence in country and a 'seeing' of one another.¹²

How is it that each time I walk and sit with this country, new things become apparent to me? I sink a little deeper into this place and different actors in country emerge, performing in ways that I had not previously observed. Last year it was the brolgas, double-barred finch and bowerbirds that I re-met with a fresh sensibility; this year it is the mamara.

Frans, why is it that after all my years of coming to this country, that it is only now that I can see and feel the mamara?

Country reveals itself to you when you are ready to see things, see things as whole, not separate. It's the way our Western cultures try to make sense of something, they don't really want to go into the depths of it. Instead of seeing the totality of it and how it all fits together, we break it up.

A suggestion emerges from between Frans' words, an idea that we need to cultivate receptivity, a readiness, to *see things as whole* in order for country to reveal itself. Deeply embedded within this notion is the assumption that country holds agency, the agency to perceive our readiness and reveal insights to us.¹³ It throws into question the way in which I frame myself as a learner of Indigenous knowledges on country. Here in this place, it is Bugarregarra from which narratives of wholeness emerge and the big story we seem to be yarning about around this fire.

A final dinner call cuts into the awareness of our circle. The spell of the fire dissipates and yet countless threads of conversation lie unravelled, awaiting contemplation and discussion. The more immediate arousal of my hunger pulls me away from the fire and our unfinished conversation.

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Lying on my swag I try to take in all of the night sky. I see Marella gazing down at me; his head and beak, neck, body and long legs stretch out across the dark clouds and dust lanes of the Milky Way. Underneath my sense of peace in being in this place, is a growing disconcertment about my earlier conversation with Frans. I consider how limited my language is in allowing me to talk about the way in which I experience connectedness in place. My ontology of being in the world is bereft of a language that allows me to articulate *being with*.

Dropping into

knowing through feeling.

Rips appear deep within.

I reach in.

I pull.

Tear.

Stretch the fabric that once looked solid.

What do I touch when I reach through,

to the other side?

Postscript

Physical landscape and the spirits that imbue these forms are storied through an ontology of being in the world, as I walk the Lurujarri Dreaming Trail with Goolarabooloo. A code of ethics and culturally appropriate ways of relating to place also emerge. Bugarregarra is the context in which these elements seem to dance with each other and co-create, rather than one simply causing the other.

Yet, what stories do I have to make sense of this world and my being with it? I am unable to escape my Western epistemological lens, it hobbles my ability to see and write about my perceived connections with a country that feels alive and in conversation with me. Walking this country offers a direct experience in communicative engagement,¹⁴ what I describe as *being with* country, and stretches the parameters of my knowing and being in the world. *The world? This world? Or maybe just my world?* Writing and speaking about my encounters with country is problematic. Disconcertment arises from dwelling in a language vacuum, unable to properly articulate and story living in a world infused with inter-subjectivity. It is within conversations about metaphysics, panpsychism¹⁵ and onto-poetics¹⁶ that I find threads of a discourse that may offer some way of elucidating *being with* country. They act as bridges, connecting an evolving Western metaphysics to ways of being in the world such as liyan. This essay is one small conversation to that end, a place in which liyan might erupt into literature about people-place relationships and ways of being in the world.

Liyan is a word that has much agency amongst people who walk the Lurujarri Dreaming Trail. Sometimes liyan is used to describe feelings more generally. At other times people refer to the liyan *of* a place, inferring that each place has an essence or spirit that can be sensed in a particular way. Is it a *genius loci* that people are perceiving? My own experience of liyan is highly textured; it is underpinned by a sense that I am

engaging with physical forms in country as *subject*. Perhaps it is within the habitat of new (or maybe ancient) metaphysical frameworks like panpsychism that I might 'radically destabilize old epistemological certainties'¹⁷ and find ways to articulate my *being with country*.

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1. Nia Emmanouil is a PhD candidate at Charles Darwin University and is exploring the emergence of people-place relationships along the Lurujarri Dreaming Trail, through the thesis *Being with Country*.
 2. Murga are saltwater paperbarks (*Melaleuca alsophila*) and buru is a camping or highly significant spiritual place. Plant and place names come from a number of different languages used by the Goolarabooloo community, including Ngumbarl and Bardi.
 3. Frans Hoogland has been educated in the law and culture of the Northern Tradition. He has lived and worked with the Goolarabooloo community since the 1980s and together with the community co-ordinates the annual walking of the Lurujarri Dreaming Trail.
 4. The Lurujarri Dreaming Trail is an annual 9-day walk along a section of the Northern Traditions Song Cycle and is facilitated by the Goolarabooloo community.
 5. F. Mathews (2003), *For love of matter: A contemporary panpsychism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, pp. 78–9.
 6. This conversation took place at Wirrar (Barred Creek) during a walk of the Lurujarri Dreaming Trail in July 2013.
 7. Goolarabooloo website: www.goolarabooloo.org.au/six_seasons.html (accessed September 10, 2013)
 8. D. Rose (2005), 'Rhythms, patterns, connectivities: Indigenous concepts of seasons and change', in T. Sherratt, T. Griffiths & L. Robin (eds), *A Change in the Weather: Climate and Culture in Australia*, National Library of Australia Press, Canberra, p. 39.
 9. Burning off is a process that Goolarabooloo use to describe the transformation of entities from Bugarregarra, from spirit to physical form.
 10. Ngunungkurrkun is an emanation site along the Northern Traditions Song Cycle. The cliffs of Ngunungkurrkun lie behind the coastal dunes and next to a tidal lagoon. They are in relationship with the reef that runs in parallel, just off the coast. When the tide turns the cliffs call out to the reef and warn people fishing there that they need to come back to shore.
 11. F. Mathews (2003), p. 4.
 12. D. Mowaljarlai and J. Malnic (1993), *Yorro Yorro: Aboriginal Creation and the Renewal of Nature*, Magabala Books, Broome, pp. 53–4.
 13. M. Graham (2009), 'Understanding Human Agency in Terms of Place: A Proposed Aboriginal Research Methodology,' *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, no. 6, pp. 71-8.
 14. F. Mathews (2003), p. 43.
 15. *ibid*, p. 4.
 16. F. Mathews (2007), 'The World Hidden Within the World: a Conversation on Ontopoetics,' *The Trumpeter*, vol. 1.
 17. F. Mathews (2003), p. 6.