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A story about doing ‘The Dreaming’

HELEN VERRAN

In the foreword to Gayatri Spivak’s *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* Colin McCabe suggests that Spivak’s remarkable contribution to postcolonial critique lies in recognising how identities are the outcome of

networks of multiple contradictions, traces, and inscriptions. [Spivak’s work] does not merely state that we are formed in constitutive contradictions and that our identities are the effects of heterogeneous signifying practices: its analyses start from and work towards contradiction and heterogeneity. Illumination is a necessarily transitory and conjunctural moment.¹

The story I tell here allows me to focus up just such a ‘conjunctural moment’. I use an ethnographic fragment from my ongoing work with the Yolngu Aboriginal community in Australia’s Northern Territory. The moment highlights alternative ways of managing contradiction. My story shows how managing contradiction in a particular way is culturally embedded, and how attempting to explore that merely plunges an ethnographer into further difficulties. Obliquely pointing at the moment is the most that might be achieved. Focusing on my own unwitting performance of a Western cultural unconscious with respect to managing contradiction, I hope to create a ‘flash’ that illuminates an ‘other’ form of management.

The illumination points to what I see as a blind-spot embedded in a Western cultural unconscious, yet which is significant for postcolonial critique. Like Crapanzano I am anxious about sustaining a ‘discursively transactional basis’ in ethnographic writing. He wonders about his strategy of duplicitously taking advantage of the authority inherent in academic genres, as he announces that he prefers his essays to be taken ‘as attempts, trials and probes [with] a tentativeness, and a speculative possibility that do not exist in the insistent paper or determined article’.² How to avoid writing in a way that subverts the possibility of transactionality? Are considerations of genre and ensuring possibilities for experimental writing all that matter here? I suggest that there is something more profound at stake: the ways we manage contradiction. A more useful way to sustain a discursive transactionality in our texts is to reflexively problematise the ways we manage contradiction in our stories. This is more easily said than done, however, for managing contradiction in Western traditions of thought engages a cultural unconscious.

In this article I refrain from explicitly articulating the ‘other’ form of managing contradiction my story illuminates. I was expressly forbidden to do so by my Yolngu Aboriginal friends, and in any case the nature of ‘the other’ is not what is at issue here. The point I want to make is that even though we might theoretically recognise the possibility of other ways of managing contradiction,

experiencing interruption through participation (even by proxy) in other forms of its management is epistemically and ontologically salient to postcolonial critique. That claim is what prompts my struggle to write this story. The figure that is central here is the ethnographer/author-in-the-text. We see that figure struggling, in spite of and because of her good intentions, to utilise a cognitive tool that at the time is invisible to her. I have previously characterised this tool as ‘Kant’s Island’: managing contradiction by a denied knowing of the unknowable.³ Kant formalises this strategy of managing contradiction in his first antinomy, which concerns the beginning of the cosmos.⁴ Kant insists that this is not a true contradiction since both thesis and antithesis are false.⁵

I began work in the Yolngu Aboriginal community in northeast Arnhem Land as a teacher educator in 1987, employed by Deakin University, then Australia’s main provider of distance education at the tertiary level. My area was specifically teacher education in remote Aboriginal communities, where Deakin Faculty of Education worked in association with Batchelor College, a local Northern Territory institution that had begun life as a ‘native welfare’ initiative by the Commonwealth Government. In 1993 when this episode occurred, I was no longer an ‘official’ teacher educator in the sense that I was employed to teach enrolled Yolngu students. By then I held a position as a lecturer in History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Melbourne, and was identified as a chief investigator in an Australian Research Council (ARC) project located at the school: ‘Aboriginal Cognitive Categories and Mathematics Education in Aboriginal Communities in the Northern Territory’.⁶ The other chief investigator was Mandawuy Yunupingu, who had been my first student in 1987.

My role in this action research project was one of curriculum consultant and critical friend. Teacher education was significantly tied up with this on-going action research and involved both Yolngu (Aboriginal) and Balanda (non-Aboriginal) teachers in the community’s two schools. Often explicitly and necessarily identified as learner in this situation, I had found that locating myself alongside those Yolngu adults enrolled in tertiary study offered very significant advantages. It afforded opportunities for formal instruction by recognised Yolngu knowledge authorities, often in English, always with opportunities for translation built in. The ethnographic fragment I present here is an account of one of these occasions.

Getting there

It takes only ten minutes to fly from Gove airport to Dhambaliya, Bremer Island on most maps of Arnhem Land, in the northeast of Australia’s Northern Territory. Those of us going to the island were disorganised. We could not find the keys to get into the school’s store-room to get the sleeping swags, and we seemed to have ordered far too much food and had no ice for the food cooler. The meat would go off. How were we to get to the airport? Exactly how many of us were going?

In the end, we made two trips across to the island in the six-seater plane. I went on the first flight along with the Yolngu student whose program of study had prompted us to organise the occasion. She was in her final year of a teacher

education course at Batchelor Institute and was to carry our research for a project on language and language learning by Yolngu children. Like many Aboriginal teachers undergoing training, she was a mature age student, and her children accompanied her everywhere. They, and all our gear, occupied the remaining seats in the plane. We were going to visit her mothers on Dhambaliya. They had agreed to conduct a small workshop, and offer instruction on a Yolngu theory of language.

Another Yolngu woman, who worked as a resource teacher for the region's twenty or so tiny Homelands Schools, came across on the second flight. Along with her, a young Balanda man who had first come to the area as part of his study for his Master's degree in linguistics at the University of Melbourne. He had settled here permanently and now worked as a tutor with Yolngu tertiary students. On that second trip, several children belonging to the island took advantage of the spare seats in the plane to get home the easy way.

The small plane landed at Gutjajan where there is an airstrip, two houses, and a school building. The island usually has a population of around twenty. A short walk from the airstrip, the two houses—verandahs and two rooms—faced down to a beach, and into the wind. A raked communal area lay behind and between the houses. Flowers, boulders, and fruit trees had been planted to delineate the area. The leaves of the banana trees were shredded by the constant southeast trade winds which sweep the island at this time of year. We sat to chat with the old people, waiting for the others. A silent group of fit, young men carried our belongings from the airstrip to the school building. Just fifty metres or so further up the slope, it is separated from the houses by well-kept rock-gardens.

The school building is a large, open, galvanised iron 'cube' with a square pyramidal roof. It was still new and shiny in 1993. The square of its raised floor is set diagonally across the square of the walls, leaving gaping triangles of space for cool air to seep upwards from under the floor. The walls are all louvres, with galvanized iron roller doors that can be raised or lowered depending on the direction of the wind and sun. The pyramid roof has a large fluted topknot, a ventilation dome, reminiscent of Byzantine buildings, that twirls continually, gently rattling in the wind and creating a draught through the building. Unusually for this time of year, the wind is bringing rain.

Planning the work

Perhaps inappropriately, but knowing some clumsiness on my part would be forgiven, having greeted everyone, I quickly turn to our agenda for the next few days. As part of her study, the student I was accompanying needed to do research, to make a study of Yolngu language. Here I would act as ethnographer and record the episode as fully as I could for my own purposes. I would not be the only one recording the event; the visiting Yolngu teacher and the young linguist would also record it for the community magazine *Yutana Dhäwu*.

The student had been instructed by her lecturers to research the ways Yolngu children acquire language, and following advice from her college lecturers had sought help from her mothers. In part at least, the work must be presented in English for assessment purposes. The tertiary institution where this student was

enrolled is unique in Australia. Attempting to meet the tertiary education needs of Indigenous Australians living in northern Australia, it has developed a research-based approach to curriculum and pedagogy, particularly in teacher education. This assignment on language learning in children was formulated in terms of Western understandings of language, since that is the intellectual tradition in which the teacher educators are placed. Nevertheless there was the explicit expectation that as part of carrying out the assignment students would respond by working within the theory of language that had currency within their own community, even though the conflict with Western theories of language might be quite profound.

Theories of language hold a special place in Western intellectual traditions. Language occupies a boundary position, and is the medium of traffic with respect to many of the West's most central dualisms: mind and body; nature and culture; the material and the symbolic; reality and knowledge, for example. Theories of language abound in the Western tradition; it is an arena of hot contestation. Claiming language as part of the material world as Chomsky does in having it 'hard wired' into the brain's structure has certain consequences—political and moral. Similarly having it as a 'social art' as Quine does, or an instrumentalist in a Derridean manner, implies separations and connections that matter in human affairs. All this lies inside this seemingly banal exercise that this Aboriginal student has been set by her well-intentioned lecturers. Much is at stake here.⁷

In tomorrow's work, we will be given a Yolngu text; a story will be told. The old people will make a gift to their daughter and to me. It is a contribution to our education, and public recognition and endorsement of the schools' radical curriculum. We can write the story down and use it in our enterprises. We plan it. The student researcher tells what she needs and how she will use it. Speaking English, I tell of my interest in Yolngu accounts of their languages. I say I plan to use what they give me in writing a book, but that is still far in the future, because I do not yet understand much. The student translates for me, speaking to her mothers in Gumatj, which is her fathers' language, but not her mothers'.

It is agreed. We will all sit here in the shade and do it tomorrow. We will sit with our tape recorder and paper and pencil. These old people will perform the narrative of the journey of the world-making spirit beings, the Djang'kawu sisters.

Some background

As I have come to understand it, in Yolngu Aboriginal cosmology particular clan languages as particular groups of people in particular places came into being in and as *Wangarr*—The Dreaming. The Djang'kawu sisters in undertaking their journey were agents in that beginning. The story of the Djang'kawu sisters' journey is a central part of an important intellectual complex in Yolngu intellectual life. It is sets of songs, dances and sacred objects which, performed together, constitute long and complex ceremonies, sometimes called *nara*.⁸ The Djang'kawu sisters have long been the subject of anthropological interest.⁹ Yolngu cosmology enacts a reality that is simultaneously dual and singular. The

sacred realm of *Wangarr*, often referred to in English as The Dreaming, is a realm of ultimate being. As well as being a transcendental eternal realm *Wangarr* is expressed in actualities achieved in a secular domain—the here and now.

Clans and their lands, differentiated in part by their languages, are, like The Dreaming, exhaustively divided into two sides—the Yirritja and the Dhuwa. The agency of these people-places (re)accomplishes The Dreaming in the secular domain. At crucial points, during ceremony, the eternal and the secular become one.

Snatches of Djang'kawu narratives are frequently recounted by Yolngu in everyday contexts. Often their telling is prompted by a visit to a particular place which features in the story/songs/dances, but any pretext is good enough for even a young child to launch into recounting some actions of the sisters. Many aspects of this complex of story, song, dance and image vary in confusing ways, and the contradictions inherent in all cosmologies are managed in particular ways. As I narrate the performance that was made for us on Dhambaliya in 1993, you, the reader, will glimpse some of the conflations and elisions which are a necessary part of performing any cosmology. You will also recognise the ethnographer struggling to recognise this choreography as a Kantian *noumena*—an unknowable that is knowable. In doing this, in trying to understand, I behaved in a way that was both unacceptable and offensive, and was severely disciplined.

Djang'kawu stories come in many versions, this is not accidental nor is it regarded as a problem. Some versions told in some contexts, by some people, include a brother in the action. Stories of ancestral doings are a constant accompaniment to everyday Yolngu life as well as being performed in the many varieties of sacred ceremonies. Story-tellers draw on past experiences of participating in ceremonies. In performing the narrative, people sometimes explain that they are using memories of actual ceremonies and memories of actual landscape features at various places, to prompt their performance. As they tell the story, in prose, song, dance and/or image, the experience of the ceremony and actually being in the place meld together to become one. As an eminent Aboriginal Australian Professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, my own university, who has worked closely with the Yolngu Aboriginal community, put it,¹⁰ the Aboriginal knower

is conceived of, not merely as a body enclosing a singular conscious being, but rather as spatialised by virtue of totemic affiliation. Persons with inherited spiritual essence shared with non-human beings share the world of those beings including their natural habitats, as a most personal responsibility.¹¹

Insisting on transgressing modern categories, the spokeswoman insists that Aboriginal subjects, the knowers of Aboriginal knowledge, *are* The Dreaming, along with the non-human inhabitants of the secular ('spatialised') world. The realities of The Dreaming are very different from scientific realities. Live objects *are* the Dreaming, just as humans are. The rest—non-living objects—symbolise and *are* The Dreaming by virtue of being generated within the transcendence of The Dreaming. Performance of Yolngu knowledge, as in the workshop performance we had come to the island to be part of, is *literally* The Dreaming. It is not

a representation of a hidden transcendental reality. Certainty about a particular evocation of *Wangarr*, The Dreaming, is ensured by unanimity of performance by people performing as one even though they are necessarily situated in multiple and various ways to what is performed. Yolngu knowledge is right and accredited practice.

The Djang'kawu sisters are Ancestral Beings. Dhuwa, they came from far away and met up with Yirritja Ancestral Beings. The work they did as their journeys today has reality as northeast Arnhem Land. With their coming, and going, singing and dancing as they went, the Dhuwa side of the world emerged into formation. Other Ancestral world makers interacted with them, Barama, Baywara and others on the Yirritja side, as well as the Wawilag sisters, daughters of the Djang'kawu. For all these Ancestors there are ceremonies, complexes of story, songs, dances and images.

Settling in

The plane arrived with its second set of passengers. 'Where's the meat?' one of the new arrivals calls out on arriving, seemingly as a greeting. 'Here', I call back, assuming she is talking about the dripping plastic bag of steaks and sausages that I, on seeing the interest it provoked amongst the camp dogs, had carried from the airstrip. I am now protecting it by sitting next to it, feeling rather foolish about my self-appointed role as meat minder. She smiles indulgently and inspects the turtle meat hidden under wet grasses in the wheelbarrow parked in the deepest shade.

The eggs, removed from inside the turtle caught out at sea yesterday, left turned on its back last night, killed and butchered just this morning, are boiled for us. Turtle eggs, hard-boiled in their leathery shells; they have a runny white to accompany the rich buttery yolks—a little salty. Amongst the gossip, I hear the plans we have just made for tomorrow relayed to the newcomers. The organisational details have already taken on an aspect of some importance. The light is beginning to fade. We need to cook and find places for our swags.

The sausages and steaks, bread and salad feed the entire community that night. We send plates back to the old men. Later, sitting around the fire makes a high comfort zone. Although we are sitting outside on a low and wind-swept island, I have a feeling of welcome, of being enfolded. It feels to me like being in someone's comfortable living room that has been lovingly assembled, where every corner has its role, a much-loved place. My Yolngu friends tell me that it is the spirits of this place. It is because of them that we trek in pairs to the pit-toilet—just in case.

The performance

Next morning, although it is the dry season, it looks like it is going to rain. The mothers send a child with a message. They are coming over to the school to do the work. It is best to work inside. We push the school tables to the sides of the square floor, and spread a pale green woven cotton blanket. Swags are laid along two sides of the square. The old people come with their tins of tobacco and

Macassan pipes. Hollowed sticks with bowls made from the well-polished brass off-cuts of old shotgun cartridges. Tissue paper or bubble gum is packed around the seam between the bowl and the stem. The pipes are smooth and painted with ochre—red with two yellow stripes, the very tips painted black.

The story-tellers sit along two sides of the square, on the swags. We, 'the students', the two Yolngu school teachers, myself, and the young Balanda man, the tutor who is in charge of the tape recorder, sit in a semicircle on the rug. Several other young women, sisters to the student teacher in whose honour this occasion has been organised, form a second tier along one side of the rug. Children tumble about them. Behind, the older boys are listening. In all, around thirty people. I glance at the school clock prominently hung in the centre of the room. We have begun at 9 a.m. The weather is cold, windy and rainy.

The old mothers, my sisters, and the two old men, the younger one a father for me, the elder a husband, plunge straight into the Djang'kawu story. One minute we were talking about the tomatoes growing outside against the wall of the school building, the next we are with the sisters. The student researcher is taking notes in Gumatj—her clan language. The tutor and I are taking notes in English. The Yolngu teacher plots the narrative's journey on a map which, conveniently, is on the back cover of the current *Yutana Dhawu*—the monthly community magazine. We had brought copies of this with us to distribute to those living on the island. I realise just how important this map is in this performance.

Sometimes the mothers speak English. It is primarily they who do the telling—it is their story to tell. I receive help with the spelling; being a journey of place making, there are a lot of place names in the story. I am grateful for the tutor's linguistics training. When the mothers tell the story in Rirratjingu, or when the men interrupt in Gumatj, the young women translate into English.¹²

The narrative

They started at Burralku. They were coming towards Yala\bara and they were singing while they were there in the boat, paddling. As they sang about their journey they named all the wâyin (animals) they came across. |arula (tern) and miyapunu (turtle). They were naming in singing and introducing all the part of the world. Nobody knows where Burralku is. But when that place is sung of by the old people today they sing of all the animals and birds that lived there. The two sisters paddled (galiyan) towards the land in their canoe.

The canoe was called Guluwurru. As they paddled they were chanting (yuku'u'u). They were chanting the animals and birds, fish and sea-weeds. They chanted their names and called them into being as named beings (yâku nherrala). They were chanting in Rirratji'u language but the things that they were chanting were both Dhuwa and Yirritja. From Guluwurru they saw and chanted |urula (tern), Gunuyu'yu' (bird), and Yinydjapana (dolphin); a turtle called Mu[uthun; and when they saw Dhinimbu (tuna) they chanted Yirritja yuku'u'u.

As they neared Yala\bara the sisters passed and chanted the islands Gakuba'wuy, Walinyina and Bawuli. They were chanting in Rirratji\u and these places are Rirratji\u places. Near a place called Wu`pinypiny one of the sisters wet her feathered arm-band in the surf and the sisters chanted this event too.

When they arrived at these places the rays of the sun were just reaching over the horizon from below. This time and place is called 'walu'a go\\a' which means 'at the hands/fingers of the sun'. This has a special significance for women and also means women's pubic hair. It is sung in special women's ceremonies. It is also called Barawun—pubic hair of women. The sun looked like strands of pubic hair shining through these islands.

The senior of the mothers spreads out the fingers of her hands to show us the strands of pubic hair, the rays of sun shining through the islands. In response, we women do the same, placing our hands downwards, laughing.

As the sisters neared Bilapinya island they were circled by birds called Gathaka (oyster catchers). They saw these birds and chanted them. The names come out in the songs they were singing in Rirratji\u.

The name of one of the sisters is Gurrulkurrul.

The story-tellers confer with each other. 'What's the name of the other sister?' Meaning, I suspect, 'What name is it appropriate to give her in this context of telling?' 'The name will come as we talk' they assure us.

The name of the canoe is Guluruwurr. As they were paddling they emptied, from the bag called |a|arra, all the Rirratji\u men. They kept the women in the bag because they like the women and wanted to keep them with them.

The sisters finally arrived at Yala\bara. They pierced the ground with their sticks and that's where the fresh water springs are on the beach. They were heavily loaded with sacred dilly-bags called 'a]inya' and 'a]marra'. The bags were tied to their arm-bands and to their feathered head-strings as well as on their shoulders. The bags were full of the Dhuwa languages and the people who were to populate the Dhuwa lands that the sisters would sing into being. This heavy load is called Gu`gurr`gurr and you will see people loaded up with bathi in this way every time the Dja`kawu ceremony is performed.

When they got to land, the canoe Guluruwurr turned into a rock. The sisters were pointing and naming places. They left the canoe and walked (struggling really) heavily laden up the sand-hill. The load they were carrying was Gugurrku`gurr. This is a special place for men now, and women and children should not go there. But it used to be a women's place.

From the beach the two sisters made their way up the high sand-hill to the top. As they were carrying Gu`gurr`gurr, their heavy load, up the hill they dug their digging-sticks (wapitja) into the ground, one in each hand, and leant on them to walk up the hill. Where they planted their digging-sticks fresh water sprang from below the sand and these fresh

water wells by the salt-water are there at Yala\bara. Wapitja is the walking stick.

At the top of the hill the two sisters walked round in a circle with their digging sticks. They chanted and sang all of the animals into being. They chanted Beyay (Goanna), Buwa = a (bustard), Ma = tjurr (fruit-bats)—both the big black Dhuwa Ma = tjurr, and the small brown Yirritja Ma = tjurr—Guku (wild honey bees)—the Duwa honeys, ~irrawar and Yarrpany, that are found high in the trees, as well as the bitter Yirritja honey Gåmu, that like the sweet Yirritja honey Na\la is found high in the trees, and the Yirritja honey Bar\gitj that is found low down or even in the ground and whose bees sting. These things they chanted as well as the waterbirds Yeyi', and Djur'djur, and all of the animals that fly in the air or crawl on the ground. On the top of the sand-hill they stood and looked around and named all the birds and animals, introducing them. They were dancing and singing very strenuously, naming all the wayin (animals).

That place where they introduced all of the animals is called Gåwara. Once it was a special place for women and now it is a secret/sacred place for men. Women and children are not allowed to go there now.

The names come from the songs sacred to Gåwara.

The area is called Bipinyina, it's that place between the beach and the sand-hills. A little valley where the bore is and one house. The name of the whole area is Muwala\ga. The sisters didn't sleep, they headed East and looking South. They are singing all the time as they walk and the language they are singing in and talking in changes from one to the next language as they walk along.

Confusions

I am in confusion about Yirritja and Dhuwa and the work of the sisters. As I hear the story, Djang'kawu are naming both Dhuwa and Yirritja animals. That does not fit with the mutual exclusivity of the domains. I compose a question carefully, but in voicing my confusion, I unwittingly precipitate an episode of tension and discomfort. 'Are they singing Yirritja songs in Yirritja languages when they name Yirritja *wäyin* (animals)?' I ask in English. Following my lead the student researcher takes it up in Gumatj. 'How did they know the Yirritja names to give the Yirritja *wäyin* (animals)?'

Seeking to support us as learners, others begin to ask questions too. As the chorus of questions continues, the senior old man gets up, distances himself from the group. He paces around a little. The elder of the women looks sharply at us. We all immediately desist from asking questions. The old man picks up his pipe and retires to the sidelines, alternately looking out at the wind-driven rain, and at us. 'No questions', the senior woman telling us the story raps out. 'What's the language? Rirratjingu. They are Dhuwa sisters! They are carrying all the languages with them in the bag; they are the people, but only the Dhuwa languages of course. The language was already there in the ground as it was created with the people, and this little spot and that little spot, as well as the

creatures and plants. This is why every group of people with their own *wānga* (land, territory) has a completely different language. The really important bits of their language are the names, but also the *likan* (elbow) and *bundurr* (knee) [that is, particular ways of linking up]. They [the Djang'kawu] are just naming Yirritja animals with their real names because those are their names. But they are saying the names in Rirratjingu.¹³ They know whether the animals are Yirritja or Dhuwa and they use the right words to name them as they see them. The Djang'kawu went first then Barama (a Yirritja ancestor). They're carrying the Dhuwa languages in the songs. They're still speaking Rirratjingu. They can't sing in Yirritja languages!

We return to the performance of the story and slowly the tension eases. The old man comes to sit down again.

From Gårawa the sisters went on to Bipinya where the old house and bore are now standing at Yala\bara. They went through that place and now there is fresh water there coming up from under the ground. The yindi-yāku or big name for that Yala\bara area is Muwala\gal.

From Gårawa the sisters headed West across the peninsula to the other side, to a place called Gumarra\ra. All the time they were travelling they were chanting the places and they were chanting in Rirratji\lu language because these places are Rirratji\lu land. At Gumarra\ra the sisters knelt and dug their digging-sticks into the ground. Because of that there now grows a sacred 'arrani (wild-apple) tree. These trees usually have red fruit but this one has fruit that is white and is never bitter.

They put on other languages which they were carrying with them. And we use the same word for putting on clothes. They were singing all the time. At Lirri\ja where they left the bilma clapsticks they were still speaking Rirratji\lu and carrying all the other Dhuwa languages. This is where they make holes with the walking sticks and where the apple trees have white fruit. They go North to Gulu\ga, likan Bi\panpuy

The digging-sticks have their own names too. They were called 'Gajinyijl', 'Dhurrtjiyurrtji', and 'Mawalan'.

We stop here for tea and biscuits, fruit and cheese. The senior instructor gathers a small group of us together; speaking slowly and carefully in English she initiates a commentary on what it is we are doing here, and instructs us on appropriate behaviour. She tells us that we just have to listen to the journey, and how things were established; not ask questions inside, which cannot be answered here. She implies that there are other times/places when these questions might be answered if the correct people are asking them. I apologise for my bad manners.

Refreshed and equipped with mugs of tea, the large group assembles and the performance begins again. We are treated to a further account of the nature of this episode of performance. This explanation was mostly in English, leaving no doubt about to whom it was addressed. This is what I understood: the beginning of knowing is the song, and the song was sung first on this world-making journey of the two sisters that we were being told here. But, this is only their

song; there are many others, both Yirritja and Dhuwa. This is the story of that journey in which they sang all the time and first said all the names of the Dhuwa parts of the world as they went on singing.

The senior old man has the name of the second sister: Bitjiwurrurr. The two names: Bitjiwurrurr and Gurru`kurru.

Continuing the performance

From Gumararra\`a the sisters went South to ~irrina chanting as they went. At ~irrina they left their clap-sticks and fresh water came from underground. They then went back North to Guluru\`a.

From Guluru\`a they surveyed the land to the North, through the West. They were still chanting as they looked across the water and they were chanting the names of the places that they saw. They chanted Bi`pam-buy, at the end of the inlet, and G`ayana and Bol`u on the other side of the water. All of this time they were still chanting in Rirratj`i\`u. From Guluru\`a the sisters crossed the water to Wapilinya, an islet in the bay, and then they crossed to Ma`tjarrwuy on the other side of the bay.

Ma`tjarrwuy is a place where the fresh and salt water meet on the mainland, West of Wapilinya. The meaning of the name Ma`tjarrwuy is 'Wapitja', or 'digging-stick'.

From Ma`tjarrwuy the sisters travelled up the bay to the North to Bi`irri where they saw Wulma (thunder clouds). They pointed to Ganyu`iyala and to Bokinya to the South-west and surveyed the lands around them. As they pointed to the lands they were still chanting and they chanted in the language of the land that they were pointing to.

Ma`tjarrwuy is a place where the fresh water and the salt water meet. It's on the mainland and you can see it from Wapilinya, the island in the bay. This is mil`urr a spring made by the digging-stick. Bi`irri. Milipa is another name for mil`urr.

Here they are talking Galpu. Galpu and Rirratj`i\`u are both Dha\`u.

Then |aymil—Bulupuwuy and Gumi\`u\`buy. They change language and they sound quite different in B`apurru.

From Bi`irri the sisters headed inland to the North-west to Gominybuy. They were still chanting as they went, but now their chanting had changed to |aymil language. From Gominybuy they travelled through Bulupuwuy where the water-hole is, and which is also called Milipa, through to B`a]buy. All the time as they went they saw animals and chanted their names. They saw and chanted the Dhuwa fruit-bat Banyiki, Buwa = a the bustard, Bo]ba (butterflies), Beyay (goanna), as well as the birds Birrkbirrk (plover), ~indirritj (red-collared lorikeet), Gurruma = tji (magpie goose), and |a = ili (black cockatoo).

At B`a]buy the two sisters emptied all of the |aymil boys from their dilly-bags onto the ground, then they left that place and went on to a place called |arwiwuy. At B`a]puy when they were talking they tipped out

all the boys names (hence all the boys) because they didn't want them with them.

Mala bu\unbu\un mitji is all the boys at all the places that the sisters tipped out of their bāti. The name of the bathi which held everything is na]iya or another name \a]marra.

At |arwiwuy they saw a Mānyarr (grey mangrove) tree. On the tree was a ~indirritj (red-collared lorikeet). They also saw there Yirripalan (water-goanna). They saw shellfish: Mālal (Judas ear shell), Batimurru\, Dhu]ku, and Djinydjalma (mudcrab), Bunybu (mud whelk), and Guwita (witchetty grubs). They saw fish: Wanhdhuma, Birrkuku (butterfish), and We[u (catfish). All the while the sisters were chanting the names of the place, and all of the things that they saw there, only now they were chanting in {ā = iwuy language.

They saw Wulma the thunder cloud and then they changed to Dātiwuy. Wulma was gumunbur puryuna standing tall over Djarrwalawa` the islands seen to the North-west from Rorruwuy. They saw the cloud and changed to Dātiwuy, a Dhuwal language.

From |arwirwuy the two sisters saw Wulma (the thunder clouds) standing tall over the island Djarrwalawa` and they changed back to chanting in |aymil language. The |aymil clan is made of two parts, Dhu[i (bottom/inland) and Gupa (top/saltwater) |aymil. Both of these speak Dha\u language. Dātiwuy is a Dhuwal language and |aymil is Dha\u. And |aymil have two bāparru Dhudi |aymil and Gupa |aymil. Dātiwuy and |aymil are one Wā\ā. Some people of likan Ganambarr speak Dātiwuy.

Seeing the Wulma again they changed back to |aymil, because they turned around and went back. They went |aymil-Dātiwuy-|aymil.

Balanda connections

Those of us listening are exhausted. Several plead for the older people telling the story to stop. 'We need a break.' 'We'll finish tomorrow.' The story-tellers protest. 'All the names are coming, welling up inside my head. We must go on, I can't possibly stop.' We compromise. We will take a break. A cup of tea and some biscuits.

During the break the women remind us of one of their fathers: Mawalan (Maṭaman). He told this story to Balanda—'A professor or a doctor, Born or Bern or something'. She remembers Mawalan telling the story of this journey to those men way back, in the fifties. 'Berndt' I finally identify. 'Yes, that old man, he sat for days and weeks recording this story. He was wiping his sweat away with a cloth, and just going on.' Our senior story-teller tells us about her experience of being part of a group of health workers who went to Perth in 1982. Professor Berndt met them and he asked if there was anyone from Yirrkala. She told him her name and he replied that he remembered her in Yirrkala as a little girl. Then she looked directly at me, suddenly fierce. 'What happened to that work? Why didn't they give it back to us? What did they do with it? My father gave it to Berndt because he felt it was time for Yolngu and Balanda to really

understand each other and begin exchanging things. But what came back?' She evinces anger, as well as a genuine puzzlement over what happened. 'It was recorded on one of those old wheel recorders. That old man he talked for days and weeks into that machine. It sucked up his words. He was sweating. What's happened to it? We should be given a copy of that recording. It would help us to see if there's anything we are leaving out. What did those professors make with that? Where is it?'

It is time to begin again. It seems like the story is impatient to tell itself.

Completing the performance

And speaking |aymil they went on towards Dhâlin and Gurrumurru. Mayul they were pointing to places East and South and giving the languages to the South. Djapu and Marrakulu, and Djarawaku [a place?] is half Dhalwa\u and half Galpu. Djapu is Dha\u, Gâlpu is Dhuwal.

Gurruwundubundul—wâyin (animals) at Mâyulwuy and Meyuru is maypal (witchetty grub). After they saw the cloud the sisters turned South and went to Mâyilwuy which is on the coast between Dhâlinybuy and Gurrumurru. From Mâyil they looked inland and pointed to and named the Dhuwa countries and gave them to the Dhuwa clans by chanting the names of the countries in the language of the clan that owns the land. Garrimala is a place that belongs to the Gâlpu and Djarwarak clans. Gâlpu people speak in Dha\u language and Djarwarak people speak Dhay'yi language.

At Mâyil they saw |a = ili (black cockatoo). They chanted it again but this time as Garralitalita, so now there are two kinds of black cockatoo. They are the same bird but with different names.

Here they sang kinds of \atha (vegetable food): Galun (*Cariata trifolia*), Gomili (*Clitoria australis*, and/or? *Psoralea badocana*), Dhatam (waterlily—*Nymphaea* sp.), and Dhuwurryuwurr (*Nymphaea? gigantea?*).

They sang waterbirds: Yeyi', Guminyi\u (whistling duck), Gurruma = tji (magpie goose), Birrkbirrk (plover), Gurruwitpit, and Gurruwundulpundul They sang the Guwita (witchetty grub) in all of the stages of its life cycle: as Mambuthuthu, the cocoon, and as Meyuru, the witchetty moth.

Then they left that place and went on to Gambuka where they made a Mil\urr ma\utji gapufresh water spring. They chanted Gomili (herb, esp. its edible roots, *Clitoria australis* and/or *Psoralea badocana*), Djanda (lizard/small goanna), Biyay (lizard/large goanna), and ~indirritj (lorikeet). Then they saw Wulma (thunder cloud) again and said to each other, in Gâlpu language: 'jali bala \arru\, wa[itj, Balana |anhdhark'i' ('come on, sister, let's go to Balana/|anhdhark'—|anhdhark is another name for Balana but it also means 'thirst'.)

They went South to Balana and they chanted there in Djapu language. From Balana the sisters travelled West to Dhuruputjpi. There is a story of what the sisters did in that area but it is for the dhu|i Djapu people of that area to tell that story.

Here we are at Dhuruputjpi, a Djapu speaking place, and we go North and West to Garrima`a. There is djambi—a change in language Djarrawak Dhayi`yi. It is like the Yirritja language Dha`wa\u but it is a Dhuwa language.

Here they saw Wi = itj (rainbow python) in the water. He made the river at Garrima`a a Dhuwa place. They are still talking Djarrawak. They are following Wulma the thunder clouds. The cloud is showing them where to go from Dhuruputjpi.

From Dhuruputjpi the sisters went on to the West and they came to Garrimala where they chanted in Djarrwark language which is Dhay`yi but also sounds a bit like a Dha\ language. At Garrimala they saw Witiitj (olive python). They sang the snake and it was brown so they sang Djâri (rainbow) onto the snake and left that place because the snake was there before them and had made the river that is there.

At Garrimala, after they had sung Djari onto Witiitj, the sisters looked and saw Wulma (thunder clouds) again. They decided to follow Wulma and it led them to the North to Dhâmiyaka (a place inland near the Lekivela turnoff). At Dhâmiyaka the sisters decided to make another Mil\urr ma\utji gapu (fresh water spring) and they stuck their digging-sticks into the ground and sang the fresh water up from below the ground in Djambarrpuy\ language.

At Dhâmiyaka the sisters emptied more Yawirriny (boys) from their dilly-bags. These yawirriny were all Djambarrpuy\ yawirriny. The Djambarrpuy\, |aymil and Rirratjil\ clans (including {â = iwuy, who share land and sacred designs and objects with |aymil) are one Mi = `tji (grouping) today because they all came from those boys whom the Dja\kawu sisters tipped out of their dilly-bags. They are known by the names Ya|[alya][al, Bu\unbu\un, and Mâtjarra.

From Garrima`a to Dhâmiyaka and here they change to Djambarrpuy\ . At Dhâmiyaka they tipped out more men. There is milngurr at this place which they made by sticking the walking sticks into the ground and singing the water into existence.

Still speaking Djambarrpuy\ they saw Djambuwal\y Waterpouts (Dhuwa) at Dhuwalkitpuy near Dhâmi`yâka. They went on from Dhuwalkitpuy and saw a lot of animals which they named.

Dhabalaynha a Dhuwa ri\gti Mâri wâ\ for that land. So speaking in Djambarrpuy\ , the sisters decided to go on to Dhuwalkitpuy. They went North, but when they reached Dhuwalkitpuy they found that Djambuwal (Thunderman/waterpout) was blocking their way so they left that place and went on to the North-west to Marapay. On their way there they saw and chanted lots of animals and birds and this was all in Djambarrpuy\ language. When the sisters reached Marapay they made a Ri\gitj (sacred site) called Dhambalay, then they rested. They rested to have oysters, of all sorts.

They decided that they would go and get oysters so they hung up their dilly-bags and their digging-sticks and went into the mangroves to look

for oysters. The tree they hung their sacred objects on is called a Dju = a and when the Dja'kawu journey is re-enacted in ceremonies the Dju = a is made from a Dhurr'tji (wattle), and on the Galiwin'ku side a M'anyarr (grey mangrove) tree is used.

Djota they put everything on this tree, a special tree, bags, girri, everything (on the Gapuwi'ak side they call it Djorritji, a different sort of tree). They went to get oysters. While they were gone the men came.

The performers are silent for some minutes. We are all getting tired. It's beginning to get dark. When they begin again, there is a change in the form of the telling. The story is now dictated word for word in Gumatj for the main recipient—the student researcher. The old men are listening intently.

The men started dressing up. Behaving like naughty children excitedly putting on the things that didn't belong to them. They started dancing.

The men saw the b'ati and girri. While the sisters were hunting in the mangroves the men, perhaps those that the sisters had tipped out of their dilly-bags at Dh'amiyaka, came across the dju = ta with all of the sacred objects hanging upon it. They took the dilly-bags and tried them on and took the digging-sticks. They climbed the dju = a tree and whooped and called out and they danced around the Dju = ta dressed in the sacred objects.

The sisters were in the mangroves, they were speaking Djambarrpuy\, they came out from the mangroves. The men were dancing.

From the mangroves the sisters heard the noise of the yawirry dancing and climbing around the dju = a tree and they were worried. They said to each other 'Come on! Let's go and see what they're doing. Quickly!'

As the sisters emerged from the mangroves they saw the yawirry all dressed up in the stolen dilly-bags and digging-sticks, dancing and carrying on, and they were distraught, saying to each other 'Oh no! What have they done to us? Why have they taken all this from us?' Then, still speaking Djambarrpuy\, they said 'Baythi, \ali thu walala\ dj'amirrinha' (Oh well, we'll let them have all of this work). With that they gave everything to the yawirry and turned and went away to the West, where their story continues, wearing only their feathered head-strings and a sacred dilly-bag on each arm. And the sisters kept on going to the West. Their load was much lighter now with their walking sticks, headbands, armbands and waistbands.

Finishing, our main performer turned to me and explained in English. 'So ever since the men have been responsible for singing, and they are still carrying this heavy load. Having stolen the things, the men must do this work for ever. But, they need the women's help because the women were never thrown out of the *bathi* (the bags) and they still know the original version, so they are the final bosses. We can see this at times like during that old man's burial ceremony earlier this year.¹⁴ The men and women—two from Yalangbara (Rirratjingu),

and two from Dätiwuy-Ngaymil—made the sand sculpture. It was the women who had to do the dance to open the sculpture so that all could see it.’

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Notes

- ¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York: Routledge, 1988, p ix.
- ² Vincent Crapanzano, *Hermes’ Dilemma and Hamlet’s Desire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, p 1.
- ³ See for example Michele Le Dœuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, London: Athlone Press, 1989, p 171, and Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- ⁴ N Kemp Smith (trans.) *Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd edition, London: Macmillan, 1933.
- ⁵ For what it is worth (which in the necessary absence of evidence, is not much by Western academic convention), my feeling about the way my Yolngu friends manage similar contradiction around the beginning of the cosmos is that they strategically celebrate it as true by insisting on both thesis and antithesis as truths.
- ⁶ The outcome of this ten-year action research project at the schools was the development of ‘The Garma Maths Curriculum’. See *Living Maths: The Garma Mathematics Curriculum of Yirrkala Community School*, Boulder Valley Films, 1996.
- ⁷ See chapter 9 of Helen Verran, *Science and African Logic*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- ⁸ An account of a nara ceremony constitutes the first anthropological text written about Yolngu people, a classic anthropological study: W L Warner, *A Black Civilization*, New York, 1937.
- ⁹ Warner, *A Black Civilization*, R Berndt, *Djanggawul: An Aboriginal Religious Cult in North-eastern Arnhem Land*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952.
- ¹⁰ Marcia Langton, *Burning Questions: Emerging Environmental Issues for Indigenous Peoples in Northern Australia*, Centre for Indigenous Natural and Cultural Resource Management, Northern Territory University, Darwin, 1998.
- ¹¹ Langton, *Burning Questions*, pp 27–28.
- ¹² The English version of this telling that I give here is a compilation from my notes and the tutor’s which I later checked out with the tellers. This is the story-telling of Langani Marika-Yunupingu, Banygul Yunupingu, Bälun Yunupingu, and Märipala Dhamarrayndngu, at Gutjanan, 18 and 19 August 1993.
- ¹³ A Dhuwa language with no Yirritja words.
- ¹⁴ This was a significant ceremony for Roy Marika MBE held in 1992.