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Footwalk Epistemology

Two different law. [One for whitefellas, and] Nother
Law belong to *ngumpin*, blackfella. You know him
bin walking on this land for many many years.
Him bin walking by foot.

Riley Young Winpilin

Aboriginal hunter-gatherers make efficient and effective use of their Country, and effective use of course dictates movement across the Country. Such movement is also embedded in an ethical context. The Country is full of messages that call to people. Victoria River nomadism was not usually a matter of being pushed from place to place as resources become scarce, but rather of being called from place to place as food comes into plenty. In land claims across the Northern Territory, from desert to islands, people speak of nomadic travels as joyful engagements with plenty. Victoria River people, like others, have stories of the hardships of drought and flood, and there are sites of refuge as well as stories of people who did not survive, but people speak of these events as exceptions. Mostly they speak and sing of sounds, smells and colours, of ephemeral actions such as march flies biting or plants flowering, of the plants and animals that form this communicative matrix. Sensuous information is a call to action, beckoning those who know what is happening. Country comes into being through the calls and responses, the departures and returns of life and life-giving action. Both a communicative matrix and a matrix of action, it lives in time and unfolds into relationships that promote serious life.

By foot

In North Australian Kriol and in Aboriginal Pastoral English as they are spoken in the Victoria River District, to go walkabout is to go out getting food. It might be fishing, hunting, digging, picking, cutting or chopping, and most probably would be some combination of techniques, employed opportunistically as events unfolded. You might take a spear, a rifle, a digging stick, your fishing gear and a hand axe, known locally as a tommyhawk. Women rarely use spears or rifles; the digging stick ('crowbar') is their iconic tool. Fishing gear and tommyhawks are used by everyone. Jessie had a carrying bag which held her essentials, and she often carried her little tommyhawk if there was any likelihood of finding native honey (sugarbag).

Walkabout is never aimless. It depends on knowledge, rights and responsibilities—one goes walkabout in Country one knows and has rights to be in; one goes with intent, and one announces that intent. The term walkabout has entered Anglo-Australian English in almost the exact opposite of its Indigenous meanings. Whitefella Australians used the term to refer to Aborigines who abandoned their jobs in order to return to Country, thus implying an abdication of responsibility (Arthur 1996, 173–74). They also used the term as a descriptor of aimless movement: 'walkabout disease' is a form of poisoning that afflicts horses who eat one of several toxic plants and then become disoriented and wander relentlessly (Toop 1958). Applied to Aboriginal people, the term suggests an uncontrollable and aimless urge for motion. On the other hand, in the pastoral world prior to 1967 or so, when Aboriginal people were turned off the stations in the wet season, they were sent walkabout, as discussed briefly in Chapter 1. This usage did not necessarily imply aimlessness, but it served to erect a conceptual barrier between Aboriginal action in Country and 'white' productive activity. In English spoken by Europeans on pastoral stations, walkabout was a holiday, and thus was clearly distinguished from the pastoralism that was held to be serious productive work. Aboriginal people, too, sometimes refer to walkabout as a holiday, clearly distinguishing the autonomy of life and knowledge in the bush with the servitude of station life.

In Anglo-Australian English the term walkabout strongly implies actual walking, but in Victoria River Aboriginal English the term means leaving camp and going for food. It always implies the return, it always implies productivity, it always implies purpose. It need not, however, imply walking.

You can go walkabout in a truck just as well as on foot, and in the past two decades as motor vehicles have become more equitably available, people often do go walkabout by truck, at least for part of the way.

When you go on foot, you 'footwalk'. In Aboriginal English the term walk includes many forms of locomotion; footwalk speaks precisely to the feet on the ground. Across the north, Aboriginal people hold that footwalk offers a privileged form of knowing. An Aboriginal man in the Kimberley explained to Richard Davis (2005, 159) that he and his countrymen 'know the land because they have walked it, not like consultants, they don't know the land, the way the water flows underground'. Footwalk connects body and Earth; the feet mark the Earth and those marks become traces of one's presence. In the days when the foot was the only form of terrestrial locomotion, all knowledge was footwalk knowledge (using the term generously to include swimming across rivers and other forms of unmediated motion). Today it is always essential to approach sacred and dangerous places on foot, and footwalking in Country is regarded as a key element in people's education.

Chris Healy writes about walking as a form of knowing along the Aboriginal tourism and Dreaming walking track in Western Australia, the Lurujarri Trail. In reflecting on experience and refusing theoretical closure he both performs and articulates an

ethic that privileges getting to know the land simply by looking and seeing and feeling the place rather than by 'showing', reading, Socratic dialogue or the routines of investigation that are the staple of intellectual, scientific and juridical inquiry. (Healy 1999, 65)

I take a similar path in exploring a footwalk epistemology. My intention goes to a set of questions that concern the embodied motion of walkabout. Motion directed toward a purpose is intentional action; I am asking about purposeful movement in Country. What is the shape of knowledge gained in motion? What are ethics in a world of motion? How does time work in a world of motion? What is motion when it is directed toward Country? What kinds of ecological understandings emerge from motion? Is motion a generative force, and if so, how and why?

Answers to these questions will emerge in the chapters to follow, and later I will expand my questions to include ideas of footwalk ethics and footwalk creation. For now, I will stay with epistemology. A footwalk epistemology is embodied: you are on the ground in your person. If you are barefoot, you feel the texture and temperature beneath your feet but, in any case, footwalk

epistemology requires your bodily presence. As you are there in your body, footwalk epistemology engages your full sensorium. You are, after all, seeing and breathing, your skin is enveloped by air, heat, humidity, wind or breeze. Ants and mosquitoes walk on you, and march flies bite you. As you walk, prickly trees scratch you, and branches slap. The prickly spinifex can draw blood from your ankles, and stones and vines can trip you. You watch, listen, talk, sniff and wonder. You are there as a thinking, experiencing creature, and so you take notice. At the same time, you are in the presence of other thinking, experiencing creatures. You are noticed.

Another aspect of footwalk epistemology: you are in motion. You are going somewhere, and you have come from somewhere. You are emplaced. Footwalk knowledge may be specific, or it may be generalised, but it is always grounded. Another aspect: you are in time. Your motion is taking place in time and as you come from somewhere, so you have a history, a memory, a fund of knowledge that relates to where you are *not*, as well as to where you are. Then, too, you are going somewhere. Along with memory you bring your expectations, your foreknowledge and your purpose. Emplacement situates you; time connects you to many places.

Footwalk epistemology is never isolated. Embodied, emplaced, situated in time, you are also in the presence of other living things. Some are human, some are extra-human, there are ancestors and Dreamings, and there are all the ordinary living things—the trees, birds, insects, marsupials and mammals, fish, amphibians, reptiles, trees, shrubs, grasses. To some of these you are related. So, you are in the presence of your relations, and thus you are enmeshed in reciprocities, obligations, benefits and shared objectives. You are not alone.

You are not alone, and thus you are enjoined to ethics. Not only the morality of observance of Law, but a broader ethic of connection, belonging and encounter, call to you in this way. Footwalk epistemology arises in the in-between. It is motion connecting the here and the not-here. On walkabout you are between here and there, you are in motion rather than stasis, you are in a state of encounter, and thus in flowing moments of presence. On walkabout you are enmeshed in connectivities: between self and the other selves of the encounters; between self and place; between memory and event. If your hunting is successful, you are also working between life and death.

The motion and the embodied presence give rise to authoritative knowledge. The knowledge of old people, for example, is said to arise not only from time but also from place: they know a lot because they have ‘been here’

for many, many years. Their knowledge is thus a part of the here and the not-here, the motion and the return. Big Mick Kangkinang was a man of impressive knowledge; Darrell and I privately referred to him as the old man who knows everything. He explained that the knowledge of old people who have travelled widely is a map. To have a big map, or the biggest map, and to have the right map for the place where one is, is to hold invaluable knowledge. He explained that when he was a young man his father took him all over the place. That's why he's got 'the right one map'.

The map tells of origins and Law. Jimmy Manngaiyarri explained:

I mean, you know, on this Earth. On this ground ... You know, every Aboriginal people know, what the Dreaming bin do. This ground, he's sort of a map. Map. Map for the people. That way, this one ground. We got to follow that. Don't matter where we are, we got to follow. By Dream. What the Dreaming bin do, we got to follow.¹

Riley Young Winpilin framed the political message of located knowledge, challenging 'government' to pay attention to Aboriginal people because of their specific epistemologies:

You know why blackfellow know this land? Him been here many many times over this Country. He walk it, he riding horse, and him been muster, he know where the creek, he know where to go, he know where everything. Why government can't realise this?²

The locatedness of knowledge is also signalled by the concept of 'sitting', which means staying in place. My teacher Hobbles Danaiyarri told long stories of colonisation that were addressed to white people (see Rose 1984), and in one of his narratives he implicitly spoke to the widespread perception that settler Australians are confused when confronted with contentious issues. He told them: 'If you want to believe, believe for the Aboriginal people. He's the one sitting on the land.'³

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1 Jimmy Manngaiyarri, tape 110, recorded at Yarralin, 13–14 August 1991.

2 Hobbles Danaiyarri, tape 16, recorded at Lingara, 11 April 1982.

3 Hobbles Danaiyarri, tape 1, recorded at Yarralin, October 1980.

All this emplaced and time-binding motion emerges from a cosmogony of movement. Creation starts with the travels and actions of the great creative ancestral, or Dreaming, beings who walked the land and sea. All through their travels the Dreamings brought into being the differences that matter. The Australian continent is crisscrossed with the tracks of the Dreamings: walking, slithering, crawling, flying, swimming, chasing, hunting, weeping, dying, giving birth. They were performing rituals, distributing the plants and marking the zones of animal distributions, making the landforms and water, and making the relationships between one place and another, one species and another. They were leaving parts or essences of themselves; they would look back in sorrow; and then continue travelling, changing languages, changing songs, changing identity. They were changing shape from animal to human and back to animal again, and they were becoming ancestral to particular animals and particular humans (totemic groups). Through their creative actions they demarcated a world of difference, and they made the patterns and connections that crosscut difference.

Dreamings travelled and they stopped. They stopped, they changed over into permanent sites and into other living things, and they stayed. In stopping and changing over they became ancestral: Owllet Nightjar Dreaming, for example, became the owllet nightjars and the owllet nightjar people of today. Equally, however, they kept going. Dreamings are masters of the art of being here and not here at the same time. They also are both then and now: both origins and contemporary presence. People interact with Dreamings in daily life as they do their hunting, fishing, gathering, visiting and resting. And people interact with them powerfully in ceremonial contexts which I will discuss later.

Footwalking with Ivy

Ivy Kulngarri and I worked and travelled together in the mid-1980s to document sites and other matters pertinent to Indigenous ownership of Country. Her home settlement in those days was Pigeon Hole; her language was Bilinara, and her Country was crisscrossed by several great Dreamings, including the creator women known as the Nanganarri Women. These great Dreaming Women brought the people, Law and ritual for this Country; and their presence empowers women today. Stories, designs and songs tell of Dreaming actions, as does the land itself. Where they travelled, where they stopped, where they lived the events of their lives, all these places are sources and sites of a dynamic gendered system that is called Law in Aboriginal English.



Figure 2.1. Ivy Kulngarri, Nancy Jalayingali and Mollie at the bullwaddy tree at Kamanji, Pigeon Hole area, 1984.

Source: Photograph by Darrell Lewis.

We made a trip to a billabong where the Nanganarri Women had stopped and bathed. It is a beautiful little pool of water tucked away in an otherwise dry and scrubby area. Pandanus trees surround the billabong and are themselves Nanganarri Women transformed; their roots and other aspects of the billabong are deictic features of women's bodies. Ivy and I saw the remains of an old campfire. Lying on the ground amongst the charred sticks were the rusting remains of some burnt tin cans. I felt shocked: rubbish, litter and junk right here at the place where the Nanganarri Women walked and where they are, even now, today.

We were standing near a billabong that is sacred to the Dreaming Women. Ivy looked at the tin cans and she burst into a happy smile. She pointed to the remains of the fire, and she explained:

That fire, we had a dinner camp, oh, long time now, we came walkabout, and we got fish, and we had a dinner camp. You remember Roy, my son Roy? Roy was here that day. We had a dinner camp here, we got fish, and we had damper and tea, and fish. Only Roy, Roy had tin of beans. That tin there now, Roy had that one, baked beans. We had dinner camp right

here, and Roy had that baked beans. After, when we went back, they grabbed Roy, and took him away for young men's business. You remember that ring (ceremony) place, eh? You were here then.⁴

This is a Dreaming place, and it is Ivy's home. She lives in her Country, raises her family here, does her Law business here. The remains of the fire tell an intimate story about Ivy and her son Roy, and their fishing trip, so it is a story of kinship and nurturance. Ivy nurtured her children, and their Country nurtured them all. They got fish. They cooked and ate them, and they left the remains. Dingoes might have come round later, and crows, for sure. No doubt the ants worked there too.

This is also a story of belonging; they were here because they have responsibilities here. This is where they belong. The place holds the traces of the lives that have been lived here, and the traces tell the stories, but the stories are not unambiguous. The story of belonging can only be apprehended in the first instance by those whose presence here is called forth by their relationships with the place itself.

My initial reaction emerged from a western story of keeping places beautiful by keeping them tidy. According to government publications, the concept of litter, defined as waste improperly discarded (in public places), is a fairly recent invention. In Australia it is treated first and foremost as a problem that combines aesthetics with citizenship: 'Litter is unsightly and is visible evidence of antisocial behaviour' (Australian Environment Council 1982, vii). The idea is that a good citizen picks up after herself; she keeps Australia beautiful by erasing the traces of her presence. Her citizenship and her care of place are demonstrated most responsibly by her absence.

I hold no brief for litter; it is a serious problem in both Aboriginal and settler communities, and it impacts on human health and the wellbeing of other species. However, the idea of self-erasure is far more problematic. Ivy absolutely does not erase herself. Rather, she announces herself. When they went to that billabong that day, she would have called out to the Dreamings to say who she was, and she would have called her ancestors saying: 'Here we are, I've brought the kids, we're hungry.' She would have used the kin terms that connect her to her deceased relations. The Nanganarri Women made the Bilinara language and left in the Country the future generations of Bilinara people. Ivy and her children originated from Nanganarri action

4 Taken from rough notes—eds.

and are known by the Dreamings. And so, by human ancestors and by Dreamings, the Country would know them, and would feed them. We know that they were cared for: the remains of the fire are the proof of her Country's nurturance.

Ivy made this fire here quite a few years ago. She knew, but probably Roy did not, that this was Roy's last day as a child, so this is also a story about gender and Law. The story reaches out through space to neighbouring communities and neighbouring Countries. Many people came to Pigeon Hole to work to make Roy into a young man. Perhaps Ivy had taken him walkabout to get him away from the community; perhaps she wanted a last day in the bush with her little boy. When they returned to camp, Roy was grabbed.

This story leads back to the billabong and the tin cans, and it reaches out across people, places and times; it reached out and captured me as well. A few days after they took Roy, they brought him up to Victoria River Downs (VRD), and all of the mob I was with at Yarralin went over for the business. Along with a lot of other women, I worked all night to effect Roy's transformation from little boy to young man. The men had made a ceremony ground, or ring place, by inscribing concentric circles into the ground to mark the area for singing and dancing. The men sang and we danced, and the marks of this event, the tracks of our feet cutting across the inscribed circles, remained until the rains washed them away.

Places are full of presence, both present presence and absent presence. Charred sticks and tin cans hold a story that extends through time, but the extension is not infinite. Ivy and Roy, and that fishing trip, are present in this place for as long as the traces of the day remain. Ivy occupies her Country by inscribing in it the passage of her life. The places hold her presence in the periods of her absence. Living things return, and leave again, crossing time and space. To live morally one must return and return again. Traces of presence are thus knots in the dynamic of interlocking places. Such traces are time binders: they mark the returns as separate events and thus articulate time as difference. Similarly, they bind time and place into the lives of living things.

My Aboriginal teachers speak about and act toward place in a dialogical mode, so that place can be understood as a site of multiple presences and encounters. Place is the product of the lives of many living things, including extraordinary beings and non-human beings. Thus, the lives of animals

and plants, of insects and rainbows all contribute, in their coming and going, their presence and non-presence, to the life of the place. Footwalk epistemology works in the encounters between real people with their multiplicity of connections and other parties to those encounters. Place, I am saying, bears and holds the marks of encounter, and thus becomes densely saturated with intersubjective presences.

Presence

Thus far I have used the words 'presence' and 'absence' quite casually. I now want to bring contemporary western philosophy and theology into conversation with the kind of presence entailed by walkabout. Daniel Boyarin, in his magnificent essay on ocular desire (1990), takes issue with the idea that Judaism introduces to the world the idea and ideal of an unseen God. In contrast, he points to the many places in Torah where God is seen, particularly in the book of Exodus, where Moses encounters God face to face, and others see at least some part of Him. This face-to-face encounter with God is, in Boyarin's view, an encounter with ultimate Presence. Hereafter, says Boyarin, those who love God long for His Presence, and seek to overcome his absence through a recuperative hermeneutic, leading into a moment when God was not absent.

Boyarin differs from many philosophers and theologians in treating God as an embodied being (thus seeable and knowable), but his work points to a central nexus of thought in the west: loss, absence, separation. One strand of Christianity can be seen to follow this path: God walked in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, but when they were expelled, they were banished not only from the Garden but also from the daily presence of God. Christians in some periods saw nature as God's creation (e.g. Gurevitch 1985, 57), while another strand of Christianity devalued the world because it was 'fallen' (Merchant 1980). According to some views, God's hiddenness was overcome in Christianity in the person of Jesus; and so, Michel de Certeau (1992, 81) argues, the missing body of Jesus haunts western Christian imagination. The foundational moment of Christianity is the disappearance of the body. Marcel Gauchet contends, not dissimilarly perhaps, that Christianity signals the exit of God from the world. His point is that Christianity imagined God as so beyond human experience that He took a human form in order to have contact with humans at all. Nothing, it seems, that humans could experience on Earth would offer a trace of God (Gauchet 1997).

Plato posited another form of loss or separation. This is the separation of spirit from body, and the organisation of value such that full value resides in a transcendent plenum of spirit, while the remaining material world is of lesser value (Plumwood 1990, 1993). According to Stephen Tyler's (1984, 34) analysis of the dominance of vision in western thought, Plato's ontological gap between the real world and the ideal world created an inconsolable sense of separation from the real. Plato, along with other founding figures in western thought such as St Paul, works with modes of thought that are pervaded with loss, and their longing is to attain presence—to close the ontological chasm and be returned into the one. Susan Handelman describes Paul's project vividly: 'To rend the veil, attain the pure presence of the ultimate referent, collapse differentiation, bridge the gap between all signs and the ultimate signified' (Handelman 1982, 89).

Against this sense of loss and longing for return into undifferentiation, the Enlightenment appeared to offer another path entirely: that of the ultimate knowability of the universe, and the ultimate achievement of human satisfaction. Zachary Braiterman (1998, 143–44), for example, asserts that the term 'presence' has been synonymous with 'logos' in western thought and that it thus refers to certainty, communicability, identity, encounter with God, end to alienation and redemption. Postmodern theologians advance counter-themes of absence, fragment, deferral, dispersal and difference. In a post-Holocaust world marked by rupture, violence, eradications and extinctions, the concept of a transcendent plenum no longer carries conviction. If God registers at all, it is as a partial and fleeting trace (Levinas 1994).

A view of presence that locates the greatest Presence of all in a transcendent plenum suggests a definition of presence that is as far removed as I can imagine from the presence I refer to in an Aboriginal context. I do not intend the term to mean *either* distant and desired transcendence *or* the broken and fleeting fragments of a lost transcendence. I use the term rather to speak to the particularities of living things in their intersubjectivities. Presence is thus always located in the world in living beings and in places. Presence is not all-encompassing. One is present to others, not subsumed within a greater presence. Therefore, to be present is always to be in relationship: one is always present to another. There is no desire for undifferentiated unity; to be present is always to be particular. Particularity involves embodiment, emplacement, history and ethics.

My use of the term 'absence' follows from my definition of presence. Absence denotes the state of being departed—it is an absence known by contrast with presence (see also Fuery 1995, 1). It is not to be construed as an existential or ontological empty space, but as the consequence of mobility. Absence is the not-here that alternates with the here. In this usage, absence is part of an ethic of multiplicity and motion. To return one must depart, and thus ethics in motion entails absence as an alternative to presence.

Perhaps I also need to clarify my use of the term 'world'. In some western traditions, the world has been classed as a poor relation to the transcendent plenum known as God. Whether the world is fallen, or abandoned, or simply the lesser reflection of eternity, the term can invoke connotations of lesser value: the body as a lesser thing than the mind, the material as lesser than the spiritual, the world as lesser than God. It will become clear that I am not dealing in these binaries at all. I aim to engage with an ecology of place that works with living beings and places who are present to each other in the particularities of their being and in the intersubjectivity of their becoming.

The implications of this difference really matter. From a postmodern theological position, Richard Rubenstein argues that humanity had best forsake the quest for redemption and accept the 'what-is' of this world (in Braiterman 1998, 99). His position raises significant questions concerning what is the 'what-is' of the world, but my more immediate point is that he seems to offer engagement with the world as a default position to which we are thrown back after experiencing the absence, loss or hiddenness of God. I raise this point because I think it is profoundly western and yet often quite obscured. The foundational event of Jewish and Christian culture is expulsion from Eden. For the descendants of Adam and Eve, the world always already is a second-best option, the position that is there when your preferences disappear. Carolyn Merchant (1980) traces the expulsion story into today's shopping malls via a route that follows science in claiming the ability to know and to remake the natural world. That is, she sees the contemporary world struggling in the wake of an Enlightenment paradigm that asserted humans' ability to remake the world into a better and more manageable place. The 'what-is' of this Enlightenment paradigm is a set of processes to be discovered and problems to be overcome. In the wake of the Enlightenment, in the post-Holocaust west, the 'what-is' of the world is a broken and wounded terrain of catastrophe and risk, as well as being, of course, a world in which modernity continues to wield great power with many mixed benefits.

It could be said that my Aboriginal teachers also engage with the ‘what-is’ of the world. Their ‘what-is’ is an ecology of crosscutting and overlapping connections that call living beings into emplaced intersubjective becoming. The care of the world *as it is* is not a default position undertaken in the absence of God or in despair over the world, or out of dissatisfaction with the given, but rather is the vibrant practice of engaging one’s living presence with the world of living things. This is not to say that they do not recognise catastrophe and damage; rather the ‘what-is’ of the world contains rain, drought and floods, plenty, scarcity and serious hunger, life, death and continuity.

The ‘what-is’ of this world is creation, Law and all the conditions that enable serious life. The ‘what-is’ comes from the Earth itself. One side of Dreaming is that which creates and endures, and the other side is this ephemeral world: the living things, the relationships between and among them, the waters that support their lives, the cultural forms of action and knowledge that sustain the created world. Aboriginal people’s daily lives, as well as their ritual and other forms of care, unfold in an ecological poetics of connection. The work of creation continues to happen in the world precisely through the ephemeral. Both daily and ritual work seek to ensure the continuous flourishing of ephemeral life. Dreaming is thus actualised in present time; the perduring life of creation is carried in contemporary time and place by ephemeral life forms.

Law is Dreaming, and it is literally the Law of land and water, of all life, of connection and relatedness. Law is about how the world works; the term is *yumi*. ‘*Yumi*, that’s Law for Dreaming side all the way—what Dreaming bin done before, you can’t lose that Law. Our Dreaming bin do that, we got to hang on [do the same].’⁵

Dreamings imprinted themselves into the world, and thus the world becomes the source of knowledge. According to Jimmy Manngayarri:

What he did, world bin made, well he got to stay like that. He can’t broke that Law. No! That’s the way the *ngumpin* [Aboriginal, in this region] Law. You know. Just like, you know, *kartiya* [non-Indigenous people], he go different his school, eh? Well same as the *ngumpin* on this Earth. This Earth give him all the idea.⁶

5 Doug Campbell (source not recorded—eds).

6 Jimmy Manngayarri, tape 110, recorded at Yarralin, 13–14 August 1991.

Connectivities

The ‘what-is’ of the world is held together by connectivities. Kinship is a primary mode for talking about relationship and, like other patterns of differentiation and connection, kinship both separates and connects. Plants provide an important and unexpected context for exploring connectivities.

The vast majority of plants that my teachers and I looked at in the course of our ethnobotanical surveys are named separately, just as the western Linnaean system identifies separate species. My experience is similar to that of others in Australia and elsewhere: at certain levels there is a significant correlation between ‘scientific’ and ‘folk’ taxonomies. This is an extremely powerful fact. It indicates that cross-culturally humans are attentive to many of the same cues in their efforts to discern differences, to categorise and to classify. That we attend to many of the same cues suggests that there is a fundamentally detailed and accurate quality to classification that is built upon overlapping ranges of observations and interactions. This fact tells us something important about humans: about how our observations and interactions with the world are fundamentally similar at certain necessary and important levels. It also tells us that the idea that the world is only knowable through language must be inadequate. If knowledge was all cultural, if the ability to know was based solely on language, then there would be no reasonable explanation for the extraordinary convergence of systems of classification cross-culturally. The fact of convergence also suggests that there are regularities in the world that impress themselves on people.

Attempts by European peoples to make sense of the Australian flora offer a test case. By the eighteenth century, botany had become an important aspect of colonisation. Captain Cook had with him Joseph Banks, a noted naturalist specialising in botany. Augustus Gregory, who explored the Victoria River District in 1855–56, was accompanied by the botanist Ferdinand von Mueller. From my convergence perspective, I am struck by the fact that right from the start botanists were able to work with a system developed in Europe and begin to make sensible classifications of Australian flora. I am not overlooking the fact that the early classifications required a great deal of subsequent refinement, and that there is always more work to be done, and that some aspects of Australian ecosystems posed very interesting difficulties (Robin 2005). My point is that the world is not infinitely variable. There are patterns to the forms that life takes, and those patterns are widespread. Further, humans are part of those patterns: our

ability to recognise and make sense of the patterns we encounter indicates that pattern recognition is constitutive of our human capabilities, and thus of our engagements with the world.

A good scientific account of a species includes a broad classification (tree, shrub, grass, etc.), along with descriptions of the bark, the leaves and flowers, the growth pattern, the habitat and flowering patterns. These same indicators inform much of the Indigenous system of classification. To make a set of classifications is not the same as to make a set of meanings. The convergence of classifications between colonisers and colonised was by no means a convergence of meanings. Gregory saw rolling downs and grassy plains and wrote to extol the magnificent grazing lands of the Victoria River District. Aboriginal people did not see grazing lands, although they kept the savannas open for herbivores. Their landscapes were mosaics of land systems and plant communities within which a multitude of plants, animals and human groups thrived. These landscapes were made up of eco-places with their own histories and imperatives.

The two systems of classification diverge in their meanings, and they are not fully identical even in their classifications. The Indigenous system makes a few distinctions at the level of terminological classification that are not made in the Linnaean system. An example is *Terminalia platyphylla*. My understanding is that this one species (Linnaean system) is terminologically distinguished in the Indigenous system. *Marntayark* (*T. platyphylla*) grows along the rivers; it is named for its edible gum (*marnta*) and also provides food for black cockatoos. *Pijpangu* (which also seems to be *T. platyphylla*) grows around springs. It has the same uses. Ivy Kulngarri explained that it has the same leaf and same ‘everything’, but it is for spring Country.

More commonly, a single species is undifferentiated by name but can be differentiated by habitat or other factors if required. For example, the aromatic *manyanyi* (*Streptoglossa odora*) grows on the black soil and in the stone Country. The black soil type is the main or unmarked type, and the stone Country *manyanyi* can be specified as *wumerangarna* (stone dweller). Similarly, a Melaleuca species, *kungun* (undescribed in the VRD), is differentiated as large and small, the small one being for stone Country.

Unlike the Linnaean system, the Indigenous system does not aim for exhaustive separations. It classes together numerous species that the Linnaean system differentiates. This is particularly evident among the grasses and forbs. Those which have both distinctive features and a known

use are named separately. The remainder are commonly classed under the generic term *yuka* (grass). The category *walayinkarri* is a real catch-all: several species of vines and trees are all classed as *walayinkarri*. Other inclusive terms are descriptive; *wuju* (sharp grass) includes several sharp grasses, but not spinifex. *Pakamali* (having *paka* or prickles) and *murulumpu* (generic ‘cheeky’) both refer to plants with prickles and thorns, while *pirrpul* labels a number of scrubby acacias.

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I have examined the major similarities and differences in our two systems of classification because I believe it is important to show that both exist. I have remarked on the massive similarities and have commented on some of the differences. I now turn to a much more fundamental difference. The Linnaean system is built upon levels of inclusion, and with the scientific acceptance of concepts arising out of Darwinian evolution, inclusion comes to imply relatedness to a common ancestor. The system is built on cladistics, a method of inclusion on the basis of degrees of separation from a primal source.

Frank Zimmerman (1996) suggests that many folk taxonomies are built on different principles. Rather than focusing on levels of inclusion, they focus on connectivities. The Indigenous system I am describing here is indeed a connectivity system. Of the 165 plants of the riverine zone which I discussed in detail with my main teachers, fully one quarter are connected to others through a system of relatedness that draws on the language of kinship. Kinship is, of course, the root conceptualisation of connection (Chapter 9). My teachers most frequently used the term ‘mate’ in talking about connections between plants. The term is delightfully inclusive in its lack of specificity: cross-cousins are mates, people who share the same physical flesh within the system of matrilineal co-substantialities (discussed below) are mates. More expansively, people or others who share a common interest or have something significant in common can be classed as mates.

The mateship connections link up separate species; some are linked within a genus, and some of them cross genera. Within a given genus there are mates that are connected by their similarity (same genus) and their differences in habitat or other criteria. They are ‘same, but different’, as people say, and therefore ‘mates’. Among the eucalypts there are many intra-genera mateships: *narrka* (*Corymbia polycarpa*) lives by preference in the limestone or in the hill Country. It is mate (cross-cousin) for *jartpuru* (*C. terminalis*)

that lives out on the plains. *Kunjai* (*Eucalyptus* sp. aff. *argillacea*) is mate for the coolibah tree, *wulwaji* (*E. microtheca*). It is differentiated from the coolibah not only by being its own self, but also by its behaviour: coolibahs grow around billabongs, while *kunjai* is more widespread: it can 'sit down anywhere'. One of the trees labelled *lunja* (*C. aspera*) is a mate for *kunjai* because it is similar and is also said to be mate for *parayinparayin* (*E. miniata*). This latter species does not grow south of the Stokes Range, a major boundary between ecological zones in the region (see Chapter 4), so the mateship here crosses into another zone and links up similar trees.

Other examples abound. *Nampula* (*Ficus racemosa*) is mate for *tinpali* (*F. leucotricha* var. *leucotricha*). Both are fig trees; one is for river Country, and one is for stony hill Country. *Pirkili* (*Melaleuca nervosa*) is mate for *pakali* (*M. argentea*); one is for dry Country; one grows only along the river. Brachychitons offer another example. One kind, *yingki* (*B. diversifolius*) is 'mate' for another kind, *jaringkal* (probably *B. paradoxus*). The differences between the two are habitat and location: *yingki* is a river species and *jaringkal* does not grow in the riverine area under study. *Jaringkal* itself has another mate: *miyaka* (probably *B. multicaulis*): *jaringkal* is the tall one and *miyaka* is the short one. *Miyaka* also does not grow in the riverine area under study, but as I will discuss (Chapter 4), it is emblematic of Mudbura people and their desert Country.

When we turn to mates that cross genera, we find comparable issues of similarity and difference. Within one genus it seems that mates are the same, but different. Across genera, it seems that mates are 'different, but the same'. *Ngamanpurru*, the conkerberry (*Carissa lanceolata*) is mate for *kumpulyu* (white currant, *Flueggia virosa*). Both are shrubs and carry edible berries, one white, one black. Similarly, *panganpangan* (*Terminalia erythrocarpa*) is mate for *mawunji* (freshwater mangrove, *Barringtonia acutangula*). Both grow along the banks of the rivers and creeks, and both produce food that falls into the water and is eaten by fish and turtles. *Manyingila* (*Excoecaria parvifolia*) is mate for *pirijpirij* (*Terminalia bursarina*); they look almost exactly alike, but one grows in the riverbed, and one grows out on the dry ground. Other mates include different trees with identical-looking bark, and two trees, one acacia and one grevillea, that have long needles. When the wind blows through the needles it makes a similar sound in both trees.

Some, but not all, of the mate relationships discussed above were further specified as cross-cousins. This is an interesting relationship for the same/different contrast. Cross-cousins trace their ancestry back to a shared

grandparent, and thus are 'same' in the context of the group of descendants of that person. On the other hand, cross-cousins are the parents of children who are the preferred marriage partners and because marriage must take place outside the group of people classified as close kin, cross-cousins by definition are 'different'. If they were not different it would not be appropriate for their children to marry. Cross-cousins are thus 'same' with reference to their shared ancestor, and 'different' with respect to the next generation.

There are a few other relationships among plants that are designated in terms of specific kinship. Another of the trees labelled *lunja* (snappy gum, *E. brevifolia*) is brother to bullwaddy (*Macropteranthes kekwickii*). Brotherhood here speaks to matters that fall within men's business, but the relationship is not random. *Lunja* and bullwaddy alternate as dominant species in the Mudbura *kaja* Country north of the great grassy plains, and while *lunja* is not restricted in its distribution the way bullwaddy is, a familiarity with Mudbura Country suggests that regular and predictable contiguity also counts as a form of connection. Where one lives, the other does not, but in Mudbura Country they are always side by side.

There are other such relationships: *wanymirra* (*Vigna lanceolata*) is 'mother' to *wayita* (*V. lanceolata* var. *lanceolata*). The issue here is size. *Wanymirra* is much larger than *wayita*: mother and child. An acacia called *minyngatj* (probably *A. megalantha*) is the child of *parrawi*, the fish poison (*A. holosericea*). *Cassia notabilis* is mother for *A. nuperrima*, and both are medicines. Among the lilies there are also mother-child relationships.

In sum, patterns of relatedness work with connectivities of similarity and difference, and thus produce a system that is more in keeping with phenetics than cladistics. The abstract pattern is familiar: differences and similarities crosscut each other to produce mosaics of connectivities.

A short walk with cattle

I do not wish to provide a history of cattle in Australia.⁷ I limit myself to an overview of the four-legged soldiers and the radical and (often) irreversible changes they and their human masters wrought in Australian ecosystems. I then turn to a more detailed study of ecological change caused by cattle in the Victoria River region. Here I anticipate that discussion in order to make the point that cattle and white settlers have brought a new kind of absence into the Victoria River Country. This is the absence that does not return: an ontological absence marked by an empty space where something that once existed no longer does so. This absence presages 'double death'.

Australian mammals do not have hooves. The millions of years of mammalian life in this continent never impacted upon the soils the way hoofed animals do. Cattle were brought to Australia on the first fleet; they came from Cape Hope and were mainly Afrikaner breeds, but within a few years settlers were importing cattle from all over the world (Rolls 1984, 18–19). One of the great early estates was named 'Cowpastures' because it was discovered by cattle who wandered off when their attendant fell asleep. In Eric Rolls's pithy words: 'It was the most successful exploration in the first twenty-five years' (1984, 12, 18–19). Cattle were in advance of settlement in many areas, and the wild cattle, small and tough, took over degraded areas as well as causing degradation. For example, wild cattle moved into portions of Queensland that had been taken over by the introduced prickly pear; their tongues atrophied to the point where they could ingest the cactus. They never drank water and lived only on prickly pear; their gait changed, and they could outrun horses (Rolls 1984, 22).

Throughout the continent, cattle, horses, sheep, goats and other hoofed mammals brought rapid and often irreversible changes. The immediate impacts were on soils and grasses. Rolls describes the changes vividly:

[The native grass] roots had run in a spongy soil full of humus. They were accustomed to fire, to drought and flood, to deficiency of nitrogen and phosphorus, to the gentle feeding of sharp-toothed kangaroos at their clamped butts, and the picking of their seeds by parrots and pigeons and rats. They had never had their whole seed

7 This chapter is meant to provide a brief overview. There is a quantity of excellent and detailed studies which include Beale and Fray (1990); Bolton (1981); Flannery (1995); Lines (1991); and Marshall (1966).

heads snatched in one mouthful; they had never been trampled by ... hooves; their surface roots had never had to run in hard ground. (Rolls 1981, 28)

Destruction of palatable native grasses enabled more hardy and less palatable grasses to colonise widely, and subsequently settlers introduced English and other grasses that were adapted to trampling (Rolls 1981, 28).

The explorer Thomas Mitchell saw the inland plains and recognised the interactions of Aboriginal people, their cultural fires, the nourishing grasslands and the herds of kangaroos. He wrote in 1848:

Fire, grass, kangaroos and human inhabitants, seem all dependent on each other for existence in Australia, for any one of these being wanting, the others could no longer continue ... But for this simple process, the Australian woods had probably contained as thick a jungle as those of New Zealand or America, instead of the open forests in which the white men now find grass for their cattle ... The omission of the annual periodical burning by natives, of the grass and young saplings, has already produced in the open forest lands nearest to Sydney, thick forests of young trees, where, formerly, a man might gallop without impediment. (Quoted in Rolls 1981, 249)

Aboriginal people managed their Countries to sustain productivity, and that productivity became the foundation of European settlement and prosperity. The rapacious and destructive practices in many parts of Australia, however, meant that settlers had to move on once they had consumed the productivity they had appropriated. From New South Wales, cattlemen took their cattle north into Queensland, and from Queensland they moved west into the Northern Territory and the Kimberley region of Western Australia.

In a recent and constructively critical study of settler Australians' land use practices, William Lines describes the pastoralists' trek across vast portions of Australia as a wave of devastation:

Heavy stocking and the practice of annual burning off led to a rapid deterioration of pasture. Stock ate the country bare, leaving the exposed soil vulnerable to erosion. Only the hardy, poorer type of vegetation survived ... Those who came in the 1860s land rush [in Queensland] took up run after run, worked feverishly for quick returns, and abandoned each degraded pasture for virgin land further out. (Lines 1991, 106)

Lines notes as well that much land was taken up in speculation, and that absentee owners pushed stocking numbers way beyond carrying capacity (Lines 1991, 106). By 1890 there was an estimated 100 million sheep and nearly 8 million cattle grazing over a huge array of ecosystems that were becoming diminished and impoverished (124).

Almost three-quarters of Australia's land mass is rangeland. A wide variety of environmental regions are rangelands, including the semi-arid inland areas of Queensland and Western Australia, the floodplains, savannas and deserts of the Northern Territory, the inland plains and subtropical areas of New South Wales, and the high mountain plains of New South Wales and Victoria. With low population densities of humans and much higher populations of grazing animals, it is cause for extreme concern that at least one-third of the rangeland area suffers from land degradation. Productivity of grazing animals is in decline, and the loss of native plants and animals is severe. A report prepared by scientists of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) on the future of the rangelands in Australia indicates that nearly half the rangelands' original native mammals (some 72 species) are no longer found in rangelands. Eleven species have become extinct, and 20 species survive only in isolated pockets. In any one region, up to 60 per cent of the mammals that were there before colonisation are now gone (Beale and Fray 1990, 98).

The rate of mammalian extinctions in Central Australia is reported to be the highest in the world.⁸ CSIRO scientists ascribe this ocean of loss to three main factors: introduced grazing animals (and overgrazing), feral animals (particularly rabbits, cats and foxes), and cessation of Aboriginal burning (Morton 1990). I will return to issues of burning and other practices of care in Chapter 7.

Cattle are not the only species implicated in these changes. In North Australia, water buffalo, pigs, donkeys, camels, horses and cats have all had their impacts. Of these major species of introduced domesticates, all have gone feral. In the area under study, only pigs have not thrived.⁹ Camels are rare, but donkeys have gone feral in pest proportions. Programs to eradicate feral donkeys have been undertaken at regular intervals, and another one (c. 2000) is currently in process. In 1970 the Australian Government

8 The precise source for Debbie's statement has not been located, but similar assessments have been made within the past decade. See e.g. Woinarski, Burbridge and Harrison (2012); Stebbings (n.d.)—eds.

9 Based on personal observation by Darrell Lewis, since Debbie wrote this statement (2003) pigs have spread throughout large areas of the district—eds.

initiated the 'Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign' to clean up all Australian herds in order to bring meat exports up to world standards. North Australia posed particular difficulties and costs of disease eradication were correspondingly high. The campaign offered the opportunity to eliminate feral bovines across much of the north. Cattle were eradicated where they could not be controlled, wild buffalo were completely eradicated over huge areas, and compensation was paid to pastoral lessees (Stoneham and Johnston 1987).

Control of cattle has required more fencing, more bores and dams, more imported hay and even some local cultivation of hay. Each measure of control involves an intensification of land and water use, and each intensification triggers more loss.

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