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Coming into Life

We'll run out of history, because *kartiya* fuck the Law up and [they're] knocking all the power out of this Country.

Daly Pulkara

Death and life

Stephen Muecke ventures a generalisation with which I agree: Aboriginal philosophies 'are all about keeping things alive *in their place*' (1999, 34). One of the motivations that impelled my teachers to take enormous amounts of time in remembering the past, naming plants and animals, discussing the details of the lives of plants and animals, and teaching a myriad of other aspects of life in Country was that they wanted to document all that has been or is being lost. They wanted conquest to be known to have effects that have rarely been acknowledged, much less addressed, by white fellows. Their desire was shaped by the ethic of self and other that I have discussed previously. That is, Aborigines thought that if white people understood how knowledgeable they were, there would be greater recognition of land rights, of rights to be involved in land management decisions, and other matters such as basic respect. At the same time, they held the view that memory was required because so many of the living things to be remembered no longer seemed to exist. That is, if the living things were there, one would not need memory, as one would have experiences of encounter. Presence would be face-to-face; memory picks up where presence leaves off.

In assessing white fellows, many of my teachers over the years made statements that led me to develop the phrase 'epistemological chaos': white people, my teachers seemed to be saying, were in a state of chaos, not knowing what to remember and what to forget. Further, they followed dead laws and failed to honour living laws. And further, in their power and arrogance their failures led them to promote death and to fail to honour life. Thus, memory and forgetting were intimately connected with life and death, and with the newly troubling issue of absence that is, more than elsewhere, presence. These are the connections I wish to explore in the context of time concepts.

I have discussed aspects of these issues elsewhere (1992, 203ff, 2002) and I will review the main points briefly. Victoria River Aborigines frame a period of about one hundred years as the time of ordinary human remembrance. This is a period within which the genealogies are set, within which people tell stories about things that happened to their parents and perhaps grandparents, and within which people's own life histories are set. Along the past horizon of this period, memory works by packing the present away. The main forms of remembrance are stories and songs, associated with designs and performances, that are all focused on place. Memory is thus kept available to the living by being worked into the geography of place and becoming part of the stories and songs of that place. Stories and songs do not stretch out infinitely to accommodate the lives of every generation that ever lived. To the contrary, in this system of remembrance much will be forgotten. Only events that prove to be significant over the duration of this long period will be subjected to memory work.

It does not follow, however, that that which is forgotten is thereby obliterated. To explain how the past can be packed away into non-memory without being obliterated, I consider the intersection of two time concepts and the place-based origins on which they depend. The first time concept is the ecological time in which life comes into the world. Two of the main characteristics of ecological time are that it is sequential and it is irreversible. Life comes into the world in sequential fashion (children follow parents, for example), and the dynamics of the world are such that in a seriously alive system, this is an ongoing process. The second point is that sequential time is irreversible. Living things grow and die. That is their fate.

The second time concept is that of boundedness. Individual life emerges into sequential time, lives and dies. Ecological time continues to unfold (I will discuss its fragility later). Individual time is bounded. Both are irreversible.

Ecological time coexists with and depends on creation or Dreaming. There would be no unfolding process of new life if there were not a process of life's coming into the world. The paradigm of coming into life centres on birth, as I will discuss shortly. For the moment we will confine the discussion to creation. Creation is linked to place and is ongoing. It is not sequential, irreversible or unbounded, but rather is the continuous happening of emerging life. The linking concept between ecological time and creation is the return. A good example of the intersection of ecological time and creation is the life and death of a person. As discussed in Chapter 1, when a person dies their 'spirits' go in several directions. One spirit returns to Country and joins the dead, who take care of Country and take care of the living. Another spirit joins the flow of ecological time and is reborn either directly as a new person, or indirectly through animals to human personhood. Sometimes the return is named and known, other times it is not; but even if it is not known, it is understood to have occurred, as this is how life works. The dead immerse themselves in the flow of life, and keep returning to life, often in their own Country. The dead are forgotten, in the long term, but they are not obliterated: they keep returning into life.

This culture of life in place contrasts with the western culture of death, as exemplified in Christian iconography and belief, and as analysed in secular and philosophical terms by the eco-philosopher Val Plumwood (1993, 97–103). She offers an excellent account of the west's relationship with death and concludes that from Plato through modernity our culture has failed to offer a life-affirming account of death within the domain of this world. Either it has sought to resist death, or it has sought to redeem life in an afterworld that is dissociated from this world. In contrast, Victoria River Aboriginal culture claims that death does not have the last word in this world. Death is of course grievous both to the one who experiences it and to those who have to live with the loss. Death does constitute a loss of the particular person that is irreversible. The 'spirit' keeps returning, however, and the dead do live on in their own Country. In both of these contexts, loss is not absolute, and life has the last word.

Colonising violence has a devastating effect, not only because of the massive and irredeemable death that it caused so wantonly and indiscriminately, and not only because death, as I have shown, is everywhere, but also because of the last word. In the extreme cases of extermination, death has the last word to the extent that what is gone is probably gone forever. Not only does death have the last word, but in many instances the conquerors, too, claim the last word. A modest example is the scientific inventory of currently

living species in a particular place. The inventory becomes complicit with death when it purports to be comprehensive. If taken as comprehensive it erases the lives of plants and animals who once lived there but are now gone forever from the place, or even extinct.

Often the last word in conquest is denial of much of the death that has been caused. Riley Young told a story which I have written about in detail elsewhere (Rose 1991, 259–60). He tells of an Aboriginal man who was required by the station white fellows to collect a huge pile of firewood. The man did not know, but as Riley tells the story he makes sure that we know, that the firewood was going to be the pyre of the man who was required to collect it. After he had collected a big enough heap, the white men asked him to stand before the pile for a photo. They asked him to smile, and as one man clicked the camera, another fired a gun. The man was killed and burned; what remained was a pile of ashes and photo of a smiling black man. One of the many appalling things about this terrible story is that the cunning and cruelty of white fellows encompasses, disfigures and disguises death. The fire disfigures death, leaving no body for the survivors to mourn. The photo disguises death, representing it falsely as life. If Riley's story were lost, very little would remain; most prominent, perhaps, at least in the public record, would be the photo of a happy blackfella smiling as he takes off his hat, not knowing that he is about to die. Only memory prevents the camera, and the conqueror, from having the last word.

Riley's story was not the only one founded in relations between the living and the dead. Another of my teachers, Old Johnson Bididu, told me that he stayed at Lingara, which at that time was a small community with marginal land and uncertain tenure, because there they camped on the blood and bones of their people who had been murdered. The evidence that white people sought to disperse through fires or drownings, or unmarked graves, or through silence and lies, has for Old Johnson and others become part of the place. Memory, place, dead bodies and genealogies hold the stories that tell the histories that are not erased, and that refuse erasure. Painful as they are, they also constitute relationships of belonging, binding people into the Country and the generations and the knowledge of their lives.

I am pressing us to think about how these stories configure life and death. Western culture pervasively imagines the relationship between life and death as a battle. In this battle the grave will always claim at least a temporary victory, as death is inevitable, but numerous cultural practices seek to redeem life. The conceptualisation of death as sacrifice is foundational

not only to theology, but also to society and nation (Muecke 1999). Paul's triumphal assertion to the Corinthians that through the resurrection 'Death is swallowed up in victory' sets out the matrix of the war with death (I Corinthians, 15:54, RSV). In the contemporary world, historians are deeply implicated here, as Anne Curthoys and John Docker (1999) note in their analysis of nineteenth-century history's desire 'to defeat time and death'. History, they contend, is a continuing act of defiance.

My Aboriginal teachers know the pain and grief that death entails, of course, but the grave is not given victory. In part this is because life is not at war with death, but more significantly, a culture of life promotes relationships, connectivities and patterns that sustain life. Living things emerge, and continue to emerge, for as long as life has the last word. As often as they are erased or exterminated, the sting of death walks the land. As long as death amplifies itself so that living systems are impeded from being self-sustaining and self-repairing, death carries on the work of obliteration.

Creation

As previously observed, the Australian continent is crisscrossed with the tracks of the Dreamings: walking, slithering, crawling, flying, chasing, hunting, weeping, dying, giving birth. Performing rituals, distributing the plants, making the landforms and water, establishing things in their own places, making the relationships between one place and another. Leaving parts or essences of themselves, looking back in sorrow; and still travelling, changing languages, changing songs, changing skin.¹ They were changing shape from animal to human and back to animal and human again, becoming ancestral to particular animals and particular humans. Through their creative actions they demarcated a whole world of difference and a whole world of relationships which crosscut difference.

Where they travelled, where they stopped, where they lived the events of their lives, all these places are sources and sites of Law. These tracks and sites, and the Dreamings associated with them, make up the sacred geography of Australia; they are visible in paintings and engravings; they are sung in the songs, depicted in body painting and sacred objects; they form the basis of a major dimension of the land tenure system for most Aboriginal people.

1 Minimally this term 'skin' refers to social categories, the English technical terms for which are section, subsection, semi-moiety and the like (depending on the precise organisation of the skins).

To know the Country is to know the story of how it came into being, and that story also carries the knowledge of how the human owners of that Country came into being. Except in cases of succession, the relationship between the people and their Country is understood to have existed from time immemorial—to be part of the land itself.

The relationship between other species and Country is that they too belong there because they have their origins in Dreaming. Other species act as they do, communicate as they do, live where they do, and interact as they do because Dreaming made them that way.

The life of the flesh is the life of the spirit, and the Law that brings life into being is a Law that is managed by women and by men. The major rituals, said once to have been held exclusively by women, are now shared between men and women. As well, there are, of course, many portions of restricted ritual which are participated in by both women and men; there are rituals which are managed by women and are also carried out in the presence of men; and there are rituals, or portions of rituals, which are exclusive.² The organisation of ritual parallels the organisation of geography: there are places which are managed jointly; places to which men may go but are not allowed to know the meaning of; and places where men can never go. In this physical landscape, all of which is spiritual, there is women's space and there is men's space—absolutely.

Male Dreamings, too, imprint themselves on the Earth, and leave behind the traces of their activities, the sites of their actions, and their specific presence. When the salt water pulled back, as Victoria River people say, life emerged, or was 'born' from the Earth. Some of this life was male, and some was female. Males and females, whether flying foxes, or possums, or human beings, travelled the Earth creating a gendered landscape. The land does not privilege women to the exclusion of men, nor does it set women

2 Women's ritual life is described and analysed in detail in Diane Bell (1983), Catherine Berndt (1950), and P.M. Kaberry (1939). There has been some discussion about the content of women's ritual. Bell emphasises Country and nurturance as key foci; Berndt emphasises sexuality and the control of men. Annette Hamilton (1986) criticises Bell's emphasis (see also Hamilton 1981), as does Francesca Merlan (1988a, 1988b). In my work I have seen less nurturance, but intense focus on Country, Dreamings, sexuality and the control of men. It seems to me that women's ritual ('business') is broad enough to accommodate the range of women's life issues in their historical contingency. No single focus ought, I believe, to be taken as the defining feature of women's ritual life. Peggy Brock's (1989) edited publication presents a number of essays which indicate a range of approaches and issues. Elizabeth Grosz (1989, 1994) provides an excellent analysis of the issues I explore here; as far as I know, she was the first to take Aboriginal women's religious practices truly seriously.

in opposition to men, although it does acknowledge the competitive quality of desire. Gendered land locates women spatially and cosmologically. The process of bringing life forth into the world is Indigenous, and it is female.

Daly Pulkara, one of the men who taught me, explained that this Earth, referring to the Country for which he is an owner within Aboriginal Law, has an Aboriginal culture inside. Other people made similar statements; for example, that everything—language, Law, kangaroos, trees—all come from the Earth.

Gender

Gertrude Stotz has offered what I believe to be one of the most powerful interventions in the study of gender amongst Australian Aboriginal people. Her research was carried out with Warlpiri and other desert people to the south of the Victoria River region. The exposition that follows is based on Stotz (1993) and is interpolated with my own evidence and further analysis. I can lay out the analysis first as a series of statements. Sex, as the distinction between male and female, is one boundary in defining and separating human beings. Country (mine, yours, others') is another boundary in defining and separating human beings. Countries are separated first by Dreaming creation, as discussed above. Each Country is associated with its own group of people, and each Country is exogamous. An individual has relationships of connection with the Countries of their ancestors: mother's (father's) Country, father's (father's) Country, granny's (mother's mother's) Country. Each Country has gender-restricted business that is for the Country, and for the people of the Country. The business for each Country requires descendants of women and descendants of men.

Stotz goes on to argue that within the gender-restricted domain of business a further gender division is effected. Women do the work of fathers in their father's Country and do the work of mothers in their mother's Country. Men, according to this argument (which must be partially hypothetical because neither Stotz nor I have access to that domain) do the work of fathers in their father's Country and do the work of mothers in their mother's Country. The argument is, thus, that each person is both father and mother in respect to the bringing forth of the life of their particular Country. Gender-restricted domains depend on sex, age and status in initiation. They consolidate domains of women, and domains of men, and the difference between the two is a difference that really matters.

As many scholars have noted, failure to respect the difference, to breach the boundary of gender-restricted business, is to risk life itself. There is nothing ambiguous about it at all. However, within that restricted domain, gender is re-ambiguous. Women are not only women, and men are not only men. Each is a generative and nurturant partner in the rituals that bring forth the fertility of Country.

Stotz contends that the procreative unit is 'mother' and 'father'. The ambiguation of this seemingly predictable fact lies in the nexus of Country. Each person acts toward their own mother's and father's Countries. Husband and wife have different Countries. In respect of every given Country, therefore, the procreative female and male are not 'wife' and 'husband', but rather 'sister' and 'brother' (because they share the same mother and father Countries). In fact, of course, gender-restricted business ensures that brother and sister will not act together as a procreative couple; each acts as mother or father within their own gendered domain. Their similarity is that they are 'mother' and 'father' for, or in, the same Country. In *Dingo Makes Us Human* (1992) I discussed some of the metaphors of birth and continuity in relation to bodily substances; my argument there is identical to the argument here. If relationships of connection are inherited from mother and father, and passed on to one's own children, but do not mingle and merge, then the separation of spheres of ritual action, and the ambiguity surrounding the parental contributions of substance to the new person, preserve the integrity of the difference between sister-brother and wife-husband.

Procreation

In the world of change, where everything is in the process of becoming different to what it was, one of the great philosophical questions is: What is the quality of change? Philosopher Lev Shestov (1970) addresses this issue in a remarkable essay entitled 'Children and Stepchildren of Time: Spinoza in History'. He contends that mainstream western philosophy, for more than two thousand years, has identified as one of its two main projects: to love that which is immutable and eternal. A love for the immutable is, in western philosophy, a lack of love for, or indeed a denigration of, the ephemeral world that lives through change. Thus, time and change are the poor relations of western philosophy, and so, too, is the world. As Shestov puts it:

Those who have meditated on this question have established ... so strict a bond between the idea of death and the idea of change that the two ideas at present are only one. That which changes now appears as insignificant, as miserable, as that which is condemned to die. (Shestov 1968, 406–7)

Shestov's argument is against this focus on death, and toward a focus on birth as the critical moment of our lives. He equates eternity with death and values birth as the entry of living things into time and motion (Martin 1970, 37).

As is well known, for decades western scholars debated Aboriginal people's understandings of conception. Did it take two to make a baby, and if so, which two? A mother and a father? A mother and a baby spirit? A mother and a Dreaming? Or did it take three? Mother, father, spirit? Perhaps four: mother, father, spirit and Country? Is it more complex than that? Most recently, scholars have started debating the history of previous generations of debates (Wolfe 2000). Given that much of the information that might resolve these debates is locked away in secret business, the perverse tenacity of the scholarship suggests that it may depend far more on western concerns about human knowledge than about Aboriginal people's declared and undeclared knowledge.

I do not propose to intervene with answers, as some of the information is not available for public discussion. I hope my questions have been sufficiently suggestive (see Rose et al. 2002, 30–32 for discussion of 'conception Dreamings'). Setting human reproduction aside, it is clear from a variety of other contexts that the bringing forth of life into the world is work done by men and women. It is work that engages with the life which is contained within sites or sources, and it seeks to bring life forth from the site of containment to active life in the world. I understand it to be work that triangulates across women, men and Country, bringing contained life into permeable and ephemeral bodies, and sustaining the relationships of connection.

Baby spirits

Dreaming Women left unborn babies at various sites in their travels. These are the repositories of future generations. They are contained in the Country, they are for the Country, and new generations of people are born by being shifted from a baby spirit site out into its mother's womb to be nurtured by her blood and later to be born onto the ground in the mother's blood.

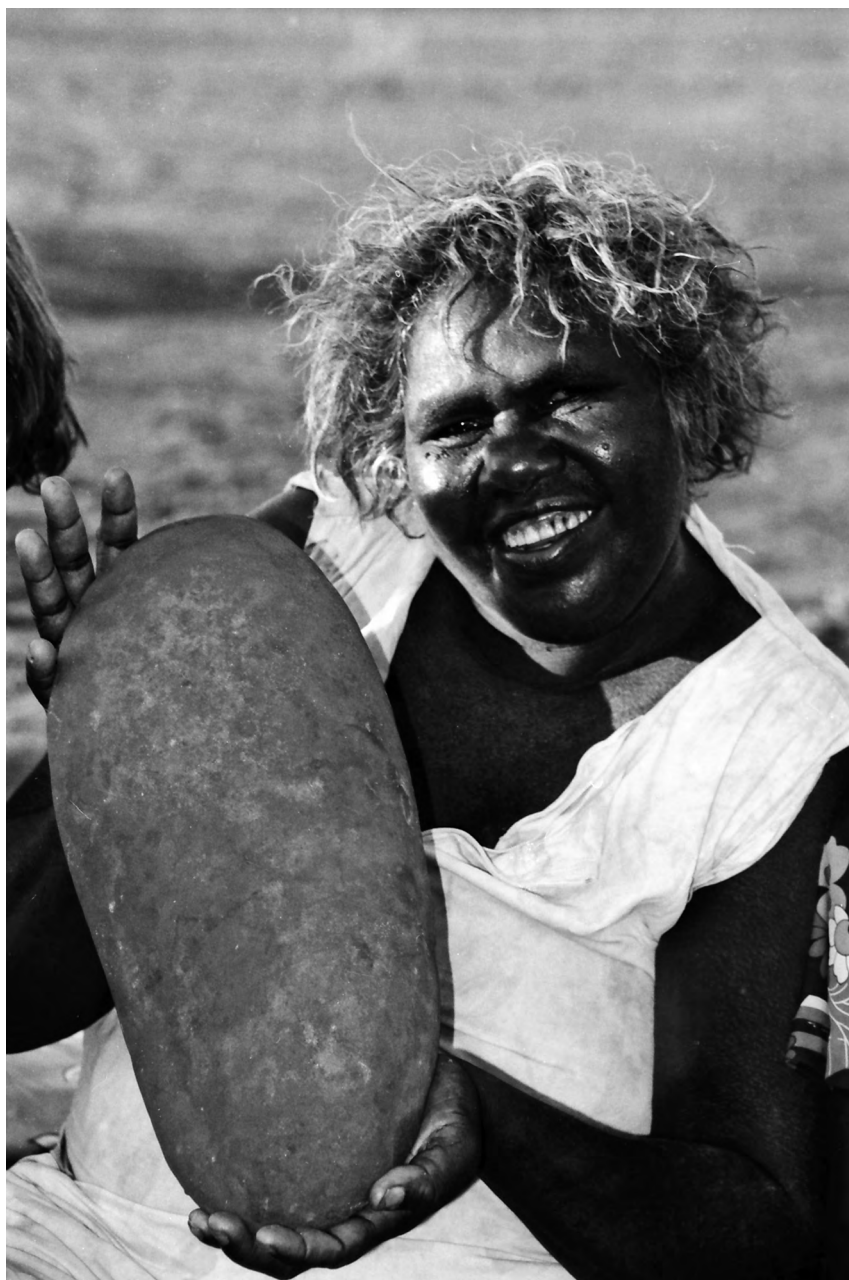


Figure 9.1. Ivy Kulngarri holding a Baby Spirit Dreaming stone, Pigeon Hole, 1986.

Source: Photograph by Darrell Lewis.

Stories about how the shift from a baby source to a mother's womb is effected vary, as, indeed, ideas about the number and sources of animating spirits may vary to some degree (see Rose 1992, 58). In general, however, an unborn baby who is looking for birth will leap into an animal. The father kills the animal and gives food to the mother, the mother eats, and through one or another sign (most frequently vomiting) the mother comes to know that a baby spirit has inhabited her. The transition of spirits from earthly source to motherly source is thus mediated by animals and effected through hunting and eating. Chains of connection give the person a genealogy that not only includes parents, but also Country, Dreaming source and the mediating animal, as well as embedding the person's very existence in relationships of connection, vulnerability and death.

Hobbles's genealogy is a good example. He was a barramundi before he became a person. His father speared the fish, his mother ate some, and the spirit became the baby who grew into the man known as Hobbles Danaiyarri. On his right temple he had a small mark where his father speared the fish. Hobbles was born well within the period of colonisation, and his genealogy demonstrated that. In the early days a group of Aboriginal people had been fishing somewhere in the Wave Hill area and were shot by white fellows. One of the men died in the water. His spirit became a barramundi; the barramundi became Hobbles.

Permeable bodies

The Dreaming Women who came walking across the land were shapeshifters. In their woman form they carried babies and gave birth, and those places remain as sites of origin for the people and the Law of birth and belonging that goes with that land. In other places they menstruated, and the blood remains in the ground today. Such sites are dangerous: the blood of the Dreaming Women is powerful still today. Many of the blood sites are red ochre deposits. Some belong exclusively to the women of the Country where the site is located; some belong exclusively to the men. Both men and women have an interest in protecting the integrity of the blood of the Dreaming Women, and both men and women use that blood/ochre in bringing life and growth into the world.

Menstruation and menstrual blood are not suitable topics for public discussion, and even in private they may be dangerous. I do not delve beyond the surface of these issues, but I want to accomplish two purposes.

The first is to show some of the contrasts with western views of menstrual blood because the differences are instructive in thinking about life and death. The second is to show that blood works to bring forth life, and thus is valued as life is valued.

Feminist studies of gendered bodies in the western world have taught us to understand bodies as corporeal repositories of particular kinds of subjectivity. Thus, western liberal democracies hold a concept of subjecthood, or subjectivity, which is implicitly male, and which is incorporated individually. The individual subject is an individual body with clearly and cleanly demarcated boundaries. Julia Kristeva's concept of '*le corps propre*' speaks to this cleanly and clearly bounded entity (discussed in detail in Rosengarten 1996, 16–27). Elizabeth Grosz makes the further point that the good subject is in control of a good body—that is, the body is fully enclosed, and is solid. In contrast to these images of the bodied subject, women's bodies appear to be excruciatingly transgressive (1994). The wetness, fluidity and the 'leakiness' of menstrual blood escapes the requirements of a clean and proper body. The fact that blood, unlike tears, urine and other substances, cannot be suppressed at will contributes to the out-of-control sense of women's improper bodies. The permeability alluded to by the leakage of blood suggests a lack of proper subjecthood, so that for women to achieve subject parity in western societies, menstrual blood must be hidden, and the fact of menstruation concealed from public knowledge (Rosengarten 1996, 27–66). Thus, as Marsha Rosengarten (1996, 33–37) shows, advertisements for sanitary napkins emphasise protection against the shame of blood escaping into sight. Their absorbency is promoted for preventing leakage and thus overcoming imagery of a wet and out-of-control body. Advertisements for tampons refigure the imagery further, emphasising a complete absence of blood exterior to the body, and thus offering liberation from the need to deal with boundaries. The tampon-imagined body is in control of its boundaries and in parity with male bodies.

I offer this summary of feminist analysis because it is so massively contradicted by what we learn from *Dreaming Women* and from Aboriginal action in respect of menstrual blood. I will track ideas about life and permeability in Victoria River culture before returning to further discussion of blood.

Connectivities

Connections go deep. They implicate people, other living things and places in the wellbeing of each other's lives. As I have earlier discussed, flesh is shared across species so that human life is implicated in the lives of other species; Country provides nourishment and is always at risk of flood, drought and other major forms of change. An event has consequences that ripple across connections, and the subjectivity of any given living thing is not confined by the boundaries of the skin, but rather is sited inside, on the surface of and beyond the body. Subjects are constructed both within and without; subjectivity is located within the site of the body, within the bodies of other people and other species, and within the world in trees, rock holes, on rock walls and so on. And of course, location is by no means random; Country is the matrix for the structured reproduction of subjectivities.

Several points of contrast stand out. First, for Victoria River people, permeability is a sign of connection rather than a sign of loss, and thus is the desired state of being. Second, the flow of blood from inside the person to outside the person generates powerful forms of connection. Third, blood is not something to be kept hidden; Dreaming Women's uterine blood is located in the world and is named (often elliptically) and visible, and women's menstruation is subject to knowledge and management. Fourth, bodies are not bounded in all contexts; the opening up of the body to the release of blood, or for childbirth, or in other (ritual) contexts is a key process in bringing life forth into connection.

As a substance, menstrual blood is exceedingly powerful. It is a gift from the Dreaming. It is powerfully related to life, and also to love and to lust. Menstrual blood incites men to desire, and young men are particularly cautioned to stay away from women and to have no contact with women's blood. Improperly managed, blood makes men 'wild'. Blood is dangerous because it is powerful. In the 1940s Catherine Berndt visited Aboriginal settlements at Wave Hill and a number of other cattle stations south and south-west of Victoria River Downs. She formed the view that women's blood is sacred, and while I will dispute the sacred/profane dichotomy (below), I believe that her statement accurately expresses the quality of the power that pervades anything to do with blood (Berndt 1950).

As an event, menstrual blood is an announcement: something is happening. The question is, what does menstrual blood announce? Cross-cultural anthropological studies of menstruation, meanings and taboos, indicate

that blood may be seen as neutral, it may be understood as a sign of failed pregnancy and thus is associated with death, or it may be understood as a sign of life, and thus is associated with fertility (Rosengarten 2000). My evidence shows without doubt that in the Victoria River region menstrual blood is a sign of fertility. It announces that pregnancy may occur.

Recent studies in the frequency and regularity of menstruation suggest that Aboriginal women formerly would have experienced very few menstrual periods in the course of their lives. Later onset of menstruation (compared to the present) combined with long periods of lactation, and in all probability with periods during which body fat was below the critical threshold for menstruation, would have ensured that there would be long spells between periods. Diane Bell has stated that in her interviews with senior Aboriginal women, she found that women could remember each menstrual period of their fertile lives and count them on their fingers (quoted in Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, 45). Comparative perspectives suggest critical fat levels would have been most reliably sustained in resource-rich regions (generally coastal), and least reliably sustained in the demanding desert regions (see Cowlishaw 1981; Rosengarten 1996). In the Victoria River region, there was a period of abundance (late wet, early dry) and a period of stress (late dry, early wet, see Chapter 1). It is probable that amenorrhoea (absence of menstruation) would have been most common during stress times (especially during droughts), and that women who were ready to menstruate would be most likely to do so in the period shortly after the wet season when food was in abundance. This was also a period when people gathered for ceremony, and as most ceremonies concern fertility their efficacy may have been confirmed in part by the onset of menstruation amongst appropriate women, followed by pregnancies in due course.

Childbirth blood

In the recent past, before childbirth was medicalised, women gave birth onto the ground. The umbilical cord is a profound sign of the connection between mother and child, as is the placenta. Both were handled with care, according to Dreaming Law instituted for women in childbirth. The blood itself flowed into the ground and became a powerful form of connection between the person, the mother and the site of the blood. Riley Young spoke of these matters, and because he is a man it is clear that he is speaking from general (shared) knowledge. He links the Earth as mother with his own mother and his own birth, and links both with rituals that women perform

in camp for newborn babies (mentioned in relation to various plants in Chapter 7). He pulls these different strands of birth and blood, mother and ground, together as Law (see Rose 1992, 61–65):

Because this ground belong to Aboriginal people.
Aboriginal people been born la this ground. What
they call it this ground, he's [she's] the mother. He's
the mother. We used to be born la this ground.
No hospital, no needle, no medicine. Used to be
working by cooking by ashes. Make this. Any boy
been born la this ground, him [mother] bin makem
strong by cooking by [rubbing with] ashes. Make
it [that baby] strong. Because this ground is the
hospital. Even me, [I] been born la this ground.
My mother been used to rub me with the ground,
makem me black one, same as that coal. Used to get
that coal, grindem up. Or get a pandanus, or spinifex.
Put em in and roastem up in the ground [rub the
ashes on me], making me strong. That's what they
been do: this Law, la this place. Early days. Because
I never been born by top of the hospital. I been born
by ground. Because I know this Law.

I will not pursue the discussion of the rituals for newborn babies, as that is discussed in detail elsewhere (Rose 1992, 61–65). Rather, I will move on to discuss birth as a paradigmatic metamorphosis by which life comes from the state of being contained within to the state of being on the ground outside the mother (or site of containment).

Metamorphosis

Woman Dreamings/Dreaming Women: Aboriginal Australia comes into being from the generative woman/body. From inside to outside, from life to life, from birth to death and back to birth, there is no transformation that does not emerge from and rely upon Dreaming Women and their human descendants, female and male. For Victoria River people, women's blood, the blood of menstruation and childbirth, is integral to the process of generating life. In talking about women's blood, especially the blood of the Dreaming Women, I am entering dangerous territory. The main point I want to make here is that in its sacred and powerful substance, women and men both manage it.

Much of what I know about how men manage women's blood derives from the category of information which is publicly available but never subjected to public exegesis. It consists of hints, clues, indirections, metaphors and sometimes even culturally consistent misdirections. Rather than going through these clues to construct an image of the knowledge and practice that lie behind them, I will develop an analysis out of published material that speaks to the pertinent issues. I take a short cut and quote from Lloyd Warner, an American anthropologist who worked with Arnhem Land men in the 1920s. He quoted an explanation offered by one of his Aboriginal teachers:

That blood we put all over those men is all the same as the blood that came from that old woman's vagina [referring to a creative female Dreaming being]. It isn't the blood of those men any more because it has been sung over and made strong. The hole in the man's arm isn't that hole any more. It is all the same as the vagina of that old woman that had the blood coming out of it ... When a man has got blood on him ... he is all the same as those two old women when they had blood. (1958 [1937], 268)³

In the Victoria River District, subincision is the mark of a mature man, and the blood is let from the penis as well as the arm. It bears a value similar to what Warner explained. Warlpiri men whose homelands are out in the desert proper perform ceremonies which are restricted to men only, and which have the intention of invigorating the fertility of the Country (both in reference to specific totemic species, and more broadly in reference to overall fertility). In some ceremonies, certain men dance a dance that is similar to women's dancing (Wild 1977–78). The practice in one such dance is to reopen the subincision wound on the penis, so that as they dance their blood splatters their thighs and flows down their legs (19). Some authors have contended that this use of women's blood by men is a symbolic appropriation of women's reproductive power (Wild 1977–78, 1984; Swain 1993). I think this is misleading. Ideas of symbolic appropriation set men and women in opposition whereas they are actually in complementary and procreative relationships. More profoundly, however, it sustains, and even reinforces the idea that gender categories are given in nature. Culture, in these explanations, is a mechanism whereby the naturally given can be culturally supplemented, or even supplanted.

³ I quote Warner for the quality of his teacher's explanation, and not for his own analysis which, in this context, is heavily grounded in a sacred/profane dichotomy and fails to do justice to the multiplicity of sacred substances, beings and events.

With a more subtle understanding of the complexities of gender, we can see that ritual as a performative situates men as mothers so as to engage in the procreative rituals which bring forth the life of the world. Wild states that 'in men's rituals, the ... men for whom the country is mother's country are substitute women; on occasions when they dance they perform in women's ... styles' (1977–78, 18). It thus becomes clear that the blood from the male 'mother' is a flow of fertility making male menstrual blood. In any given ceremony, then, the men who dance for their mother's Country dance as 'mothers' and the men who dance for their father's Country dance as 'fathers'. Together, 'mother' and 'father', they dance into being the fertility of the Country.

Men's accounts of how they came to have a Law that originates with women emphasise both the competitive quality of a perceived lack of symmetry, and also the shared project of bringing forth new life. To emphasise one aspect (competition owing to asymmetry) and ignore another aspect (shared responsibility for new life) is to pull the Aboriginal evidence back into a domain of envy and appropriation that apparently is more congenial to western (male) thought.

An alternative way of engaging with men's and women's use of blood and the vehicles of birth in ritual contexts is to consider the co-substantiality of brother and sister. The effect of men dancing as women is to produce an equivalence between brother and sister (not husband and wife), but this is not subject to public verification because it is accomplished in gender-restricted domains. The published literature contains numerous statements that ensure the understanding that when men let flow their own blood in ritual, they are releasing the powerful blood of the Dreaming Women (Warner 1958 [1937], 268; Wild 1977–78).

I will close this dangerous topic with the conclusion that there is blood, and then there is blood. In ritual and in creation, women's uterine blood and its cultural equivalents such as arm blood, penis blood or red ochre is powerful and transformative. Who uses that blood, and what transformations they effect with it, is deep and secret business. The process of bringing the world into being is the work of women and of men, and it is never finished.

Desire

The Earth itself, both in its locatedness of Country and by extension more generally as the basis of the life in the whole world, is female. Everything comes out of the Earth, and in the beginning of creation all the Dreamings came out of the Earth; the holes or caves of emergence are wombs. Earth is mother, living things are all connected to the Earth, and by implication to each other in some unspecified network of kinship.

Somewhat to my surprise, at least one scholar has interpreted my writings, and some statements by Riley Young, as evidence both for my desire to find an Earth Mother, and Riley's invention of a cultural form in which to express some of the pain of invasion (Swain 1993, 195–96). I do not want to belabour an argument that deflects me from what I take to be the serious issues here, but I also want to be sure that I am clear in what I am saying. Tony Swain claims that in *Dingo Makes Us Human* I offer only one 'very brief piece of ethnographic data referring to "Earth as Mother"' (his capitalisations), and his opinion is that this one example is 'quite evidently a recent post-colonial creation' (1993, 196). He also suggests that I draw on Gaia 'to illuminate [the] Aboriginal data' and that this proves the circularity of academic traditions. Swain evidently missed portions of my book that quite explicitly refer to the origin of things within the Earth and their emergence to the surface of the Earth. I had intended to be clear, if sometimes elliptical, in equating this process of emergence with the process of birth. My reference to Gaia was not a reference to the Greek goddess but rather to James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis—named for the Greek goddess, but actually defining a very recent move in ecological thinking that treats the planet (including the atmosphere) as a self-regulating organism (Bouissac 1998; Lovelock 1979). The reason for citing Lovelock was to identify a shift in western thought, not to bolster Indigenous thought.

The actual statement that Swain contends proves my complicity in 'Earth Mother', or as he also phrases it, 'All-Mother', thinking is a quote from my teacher Riley Young: 'This ground she's my mother. She's mother for everybody. We born top of this ground. This our mother. That's why we worry about this ground' (Swain 1993, 197; see also Rose 1992, 220). Clearly, Riley Young is not talking about an Earth Mother goddess or an All-Mother. He is talking about kinship. From kinship to a common mother, he asserts the basis of claiming kinship with other people and other

living things. And from these kinship connections he asserts a community of care. In other statements he wonders why the necessity for a community of care is not perceived by white fellows.

Another prong of Swain's analysis is that certain of the Dreaming figures are the product of contact with Macassar and other foreign visitors. He believes that they articulate new social and land issues that arise out of contact with strangers, and that they are ultimately traceable to the Rice Goddess of Southeast Asia. In his view, these Dreaming figures are Earth Mother goddesses, modified by Aboriginal thinkers to articulate an Aboriginal ontology.

Many aspects of Swain's analysis are arguable and have been and will continue to be argued (Keen 1993; Rose 2000). Ian Keen, an anthropologist with long and deep experience in Arnhem Land, exposes many of the flaws in the argument both in relation to Arnhem Land and more generally. He notes, for example, that Dreaming tracks of creator women are so widespread across Australia that they are unlikely to have come into being in the recent past. I do not have ethnographic expertise in Arnhem Land, and I have no opinion on the possible influences of the Southeast Asian Rice Goddess. Swain quite correctly identifies a new religious movement focusing on female fertility, and it is well established in the Victoria River region, and among the Warlpiri people to the south who have over the years shifted emphasis from male to female (Wild 1977–78) in the ceremony. Does this mean it had to come from Asia? Nothing in my work suggests that the Dreaming Women are a new appearance in the world, and nothing suggests that female fertility is a novelty that had to be stimulated by contact with foreigners. It seems perverse to imagine that for some 60,000 years Aboriginal people ignored fertility, and that then in the past few centuries they entered a period of cultural innovation in which they took up concepts of fertility (including female fertility) as a key problematic, and as root metaphors for life in the ephemeral world.

Swain also argues that some recent statements by Aboriginal people concerning Earth as mother actually reference a recent idea—that of Earth as the colonised and defenceless Mother. His desire to cast Riley's statement in a mode of defenceless Mother is absolutely untenable. In Riley's view, the ground (which one might gloss both as 'nature' or as 'Earth') is a non-negotiable force in the world. He considers, for example, government plans to alter the course of rivers:

Why that government reckon he gonna changem everything? Change him round? How you going to change him round? You can't change ... that big hill there. You can't change him this ground. How you going to change him? How you going to change that creek? ... Put that creek this side, he'll come back to flood this side. You can't! No way!

I know government say he can change him rule. But he'll never get out of this ground. (Quoted in Rose 1992, 57)

There is no defenceless and pathetic All-Mother in this statement. There is a vigorous critique of 'government', and of the idea that it can control the Earth.

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Returning to my main purpose here, Earth was the originator of life in a kind of completion that is not procreative as I am using the term here. Earth existed and brought forth Dreamings without other agency. The Dreamings walked around creating diversity, connectivity and pattern.

In thinking about the stories of Dreaming origins, I contemplate the relationship between static power and power in motion. The ordinary Earth holds the power contained, and origin stories tell us that the life contained is life in some sense unfulfilled. Creation overcomes this lack: the Earth gave birth to the Dreamings, the Dreamings came forth and walked the Earth, giving shape, boundaries, connections, Law.

I believe it is reasonable to say that the power contained within the Earth has desire. That desire is to be embodied and mobile. Life wants to go walking around on the surface; it wants to live in the ephemeral world of bodies and motion, as well as in the inside world of containment. Furthermore, it desires pattern and connection; it wants to flourish. Life thus exists as both the enduring potential contained within and a dynamic and flourishing ephemeral actuality that lives and dies on the surface.

Earth contained the life within, and Earth brought it forth. Today, however, things are different: the continuing bringing forth of life requires a plurality of agency. The relationships are between Earth as original and containing source and the ephemeral life that now works in procreative action to bring forth more life. I have discussed fire as one of the major forms of action

that promotes life. I now turn to ceremony as another context within which primary life paradigms are expressed and renewed, in which life's desire to be mobile is reconciled with life's desire to be contained.

Ceremony

Many ethnomusicologists and anthropologists have found that Aboriginal people assert that ceremonies work to bring Dreaming power and presence into the time, place and bodies of the performers (see Ellis 1985, 94). Different scholars use a range of terms for talking about this process, but Cath Ellis, more than many, seeks to unpack the performative elements that make possible this coming together of ephemeral human life and the world creative Dreamings.

Ellis asserts that time is a crucial technique in music, and she analyses the complex interlocking of a multiplicity of patterned elements:

From the smallest element of the fixed duration of the short notes setting the song text, through the beating duration, the repeated rhythmic segments, rhythmic patterns, text presentations, to melody, small song and songlines—each using its own time-scale, and each a series of intermittently emphasised patterns such that first one, then another occupies the centre of attention—a ceremony ... is unfolded. (1984, 160)⁴

Elements are nested within broader elements, according to Ellis, and each element has its own time. The genius of Aboriginal performers is to interlock these multiple patterns into a whole pattern. Ellis explains:

The total pattern, apparently known in advance, is divided accurately and proportionately, at points of no other musical significance, even when the pattern does not commence at the beginning of a line of the song text. These divisions, therefore, occur in advance of the total pattern having been presented. (1984, 163)

There are patterns within patterns, all of which have to mesh. Aboriginal people, far from being a people without time as some scholars have suggested, have the time equivalent of the gift we know as perfect pitch. Some Aboriginal performers, Ellis contends, are masters at organising

⁴ I am not attempting to deal with Ellis's discussion of time, which I have previously discussed in Rose (2000).

patterns in advance so that mathematically complex divisions fall correctly into the total pattern. This is done without reference to mathematics, and thus depends on some other faculty which Ellis (1984, 184) labels 'perfect time'.

In Ellis's view (1985, 109), the correct interlocking of all the nested and coexisting patterns generates the strength by which song draws the power of the Dreamings out of the Earth. Moments of perfect pattern constitute cosmogonic action that lifts the Dreamings up from the Earth and enables them to become mobile, being carried by the participants. This is serious business. As Ellis says, to lose the power of Dreaming or ancestral connection in ceremony is 'unforgivable' (1985, 109).

Ceremony is performative—it brings the Dreamings up out of the ground and carries them through the Country. Ellis's work is directed toward song; here I expand her analysis and link it to dance and other aspects of ceremony. In the part of the Victoria River valley where I have danced on many occasions, the ceremony is called *Pantimi*. The songs sing the track of a group of creative Dreaming Women. The men sing the songs and the women dance. I learned to dance, and so I learned to work the ground with my feet and learned to make the dance-call that is integral to the pattern. Thus, I learned that the body connects Earth and air when you dance. The call comes from deep within and is propelled by the impact of your feet on the ground. It comes to feel as if the ground itself propels your voice out into the night sky. That call starts somewhere below your feet and ends somewhere out in the world. The call is a motion, a sound, a wave of connection. You are dancing the Earth, and the Earth is dancing you, and so perhaps you are motion, a sound, a wave of connection. You are a bearer of the call, and perhaps you are also a bearer of an answer.

I draw on Ellis's assertion that Aboriginal music is 'iridescent'. She explains this unexpected concept with reference to the phenomenon that occurs when background and foreground suddenly flip. Everyone experiences this phenomenon in visual form, particularly with art or photos that are designed to generate the flip between background and foreground. The flip phenomenon is also experienced aurally, as one or another pattern is heard as foreground. The song becomes iridescent through the complexities of the shifting ground of interweaving patterns.



Figure 9.2. Yarralin women, Debbie and her daughter Chantal dancing *Pantimi*, Yarralin, 1981.

Source: Photograph by Darrell Lewis.

For the dancer there are also embodied iridescences. There is the flip between the feet on the ground and the ground on the feet: who is the dancer and who is the danced? If I hold the analytic privilege on motion, I find that both are dancer and danced, and that the significance of this mutuality is located in the flip back and forth. In dance one is always engaged and always in motion, and in the moment when all is iridescent there is an exultant awareness of life in action.

Each segment of song and dance, however, is set apart by a counterpoint of non-dance. Each small song is punctuated by a pause, a break in the music. The rhythms of the song and dance are thus set within a larger oscillation of music and non-music. Ellis (1984, 170) notes that the pattern of the music is retained perfectly across the breaks within which there is no music, and the breaks are dedicated to joking. It is not a break in the ceremony but rather a contrapuntal engagement with the musical portion of the ceremony.

In the Victoria River District, there are some set joking themes, particularly the theme of women beating their mother's brothers, and uncles swearing at their nieces. The joking runs concurrently through the intervals, carrying themes of gender, sexuality, authority and spontaneous inventive delight.

Ceremony thus works with two interwoven event types: the music and dance are Dreaming Law and are internally and complexly patterned; the joking is spontaneous. Each joking interval is a qualitative and purposeful withdrawal from the song. Each song is a qualitative and purposeful return.

It would not be accurate to privilege either the musical performance or the joking. Nor would it be accurate to subsume one within the other. Rather, analytic privilege belongs in the movement back and forth between musical performance and joking performance and includes the dance/non-dance movement as another form of iridescence.

In *Pantimi* ceremonies, joking speaks of the ephemeral; of the spontaneous, the partial, the incomplete and the contingent. Performance engages Dreaming power as it is contained within the Earth; the call is performed in patterns that already are given, are intensely rule-governed and require proper execution. Joking and music call participants back and forth between the ephemeral and the enduring, until each can be seen to be implicated in the dance of the other. The ephemeral draws close to, and withdraws from, enduring creation power which itself approaches and withdraws. This motion captures a mutual embeddedness of the ephemeral in the enduring and the enduring in the ephemeral.

In ceremony, one becomes part of the pattern, and to become part of the pattern is to join in the call. In the between place of iridescence, a further question arises: Who is calling and who is called? To become part of the call is also (when things go properly) to become part of the response. One is transformed from agent (calling) to vehicle (being called or moved through) and back and forth all night long.

To dance, therefore, is to move within a generative, liminal matrix of between—between the caller and the respondent, between the ground and the foot, the Earth and the air; between the many interlocking patterns and flips, and between the enduring and the ephemeral. In the transformative between, one becomes connection. Life's desire flows through the Country and the person in waves and patterns of connection.

‘Holding’

Allan Young spoke of ‘holding’ the Country when he said that his people never burnt the Country (with the implication that they never burnt it out); their work was to hold the Country. His words are like those of many other Aboriginal people (for example, see Mussolini Harvey in Bradley 1988, x–xii; see also Bell 2002, 265).

Ceremonies are episodic, and between the episodes are the periods of daily life (non-ceremony). In daily life Country holds the lives of its living things. People hunt and gather, animals and plants nourish themselves and each other, seasons shift, living things respond, the ephemeral world lives and dies. The alternative moment is ceremony. In the interplay between ceremony and daily life, creation nourishes the ephemeral and, episodically, the ephemeral calls up the enduring and brings it into the Country in new waves of patterned life. Daily life, one therefore would have to say, is not an interruption of life’s dance, but is rather the counterpoint to the ceremonial part of the dance. It would not be appropriate to privilege either. Daily and ceremonial life, and flips between them, generate their own iridescences. The movement between is the continuous becoming of the created world.

The second point follows from the first. When people paint the designs on their bodies, they are carrying sites and species into the arena of ceremony. In this way, places within their Country such as rock holes, hills and specific landforms are brought into the full experience I have described for a person. So, too, are all the plants and animals that are carried on the body in the form of marks. Just as the person experiences the iridescence of ceremony, so too do the places and other living things brought into ceremony. Just as the person flips back and forth, enhancing and revitalising connectivities while being enhanced and revitalised by them, so too do places and other living things. And just as the person becomes both agent and vehicle, so too do places and other living things.

Life itself thus comes into being in between. It cannot be located wholly in the enduring potential, or in the ephemeral actual, but arises in the dance between them. And so again we have to ask who is dancing? It seems that life’s desire dances with life’s forms and patterns, and that the dance becomes the flow and form of life itself.

Immanence/‘holding’

The great Arnhem Land sage David Burrumarra explained many complex things in language that is so suggestive as to be always open to more engagement. One can read his words and ponder them, have conversations with them and dream about them, but one can never fully fathom the depths of his insight. He tells us that *motj* (a term that is variously translated as power, spirit, the sacred) is power, that it is the source of all life. In comparing his sense of the sacred with Christianity, Burrumarra said:

The Bible and the Cross help us to remember Christianity and to believe in God ... They are like eyeglasses. Without these glasses would we see God in our image (and vice versa) or would God look different? Would he look like the natural world? (Burrumarra with Ian McIntosh 2002, 10)

I understand Burrumarra to imply that the answer to his last question is ‘yes’. Power, without the metaphysical glasses of Christianity, is visible in the living world around us. I link this metaphysics to desire. Power desires its own becoming; it wants to enter the world of transience; it loves life and wants to live. This world of transience, passion and joy is the form power takes on the outside. Origin myths tell us this, and we learn this also in ceremony.

This text is taken from *Dreaming Ecology: Nomadics and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, Victoria River, Northern Australia*, by Deborah Bird Rose, edited by Darrell Lewis and Margaret Jolly, published 2024 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/DE.2024.09