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**To cite this article:** Anne Poelina, Marlikka Perdrisat, Sandra Wooltorton & Edwin Lee Mulligan (2023) Feeling and Hearing Country as Research Method, Environmental Education Research, 29:10, 1486-1501, DOI: [10.1080/13504622.2023.2239531](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2023.2239531)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2023.2239531>



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Published online: 06 Aug 2023.

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## Feeling and Hearing Country as Research Method

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explains Feeling and Hearing Country as an Australian Indigenous practice whereby water is life, Country is responsive, and Elders generate wisdom for a communicative order of things. The authors ask, as a society of Indigenous people and those no longer Indigenous to place, can we walk together in the task of collectively healing Country? The *research method* uses experiential, creative, propositional, and practical ways of knowing and being in and with local places. Evidence may take many forms based upon engagement with an animate, sentient world. The research method can generate new meanings, implications and insights, and regenerate practical knowledge of Country. As an Indigenous tradition, Feeling and Hearing Country can enable the regeneration of healing life energies. It can help freshen up stories, knowledges, and help link ancestral wisdom to the present while co-creating healthy futures. Feeling and Hearing Country can enliven the human spirit, landscapes, and all beings *via* a participative, creative process that is helpful for the planet at this climate time, when many humans have forgotten their place in the world. As a research method, Feeling and Hearing Country can support the unlearning of epistemological errors for reinstating vitality in things.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 February 2023

Accepted 12 July 2023

### KEYWORDS

Feeling and hearing country; cultural landscapes; indigenous research method; feeling and hearing country as research method; kincentric ecologies; indigenous local knowledges; co-operative inquiry; post-qualitative research

### Opening: cultural landscapes

Water is life. Land is our first teacher. (Tuhiwai Smith, Tuck, and Yang 2019, p. 1)

The purpose of this paper<sup>1</sup> is to describe one way people of all ancestries can research with Indigenous people using ancient wisdoms of Water and Country<sup>2</sup> as a source of intelligence for a new direction for society. In the paper we offer ideas for new culturally creative beginnings beyond apocalyptic possibilities. To take the reader into this Australian worldview, Poelina and Perdrisat come as Indigenous Nyikina women from the Fitzroy River, Martuwarra, living on their Kimberley River Country. Mulligan is a Walmatjarri and Nyikina man, also from the Martuwarra. They are 'deep-insiders'. Wooltorton, a multi-generational Australian-born woman colleague of

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Anglo/Celtic ancestry, is a *'Mooja'*, a friend of Martuwarra. Wooltorton's lived experience is clear witness that as humans we can all learn from the wisdom of Indigenous people, and we can be transformed as human beings, united and belonging to a collective in a *'coalition of hope'*. In terms of life stages, Poelina is an Elder and both Poelina and Wooltorton are grandparent age. Perdrisat and Mulligan are youthful and highly knowledgeable.

We invite people of any backgrounds to deepen their identity through respect for Indigenous people, stories, and landscapes. In this paper, when possible we have intentionally used references that illustrate people of all ancestries collaborating to deepen their experience of sentient, animate places (Kurio and Reason 2022). Whilst the setting for this research is the West Kimberley in the Australian northwest, our work links conceptually with some international Indigenous research. For instance, the work of Maori and Canadian researcher Williams (2019, 2021), Williams et al. (2017) address resilience and improving climate justice through Indigenous wisdom and re-indigenisation, in common with our research. The nub of our research is the sentience of places and the Indigenous experience of profound reciprocity and enmeshment with Country and River, which underlies wellbeing within biocultural landscapes. We need more humans to value this knowledge, to comprehend their role in right-sizing the planet. This is also a common Indigenous idea, for example see Claxton and Rodriguez (2018) who describe revitalising their Saanich reef net fishing tradition for bio-cultural well-being and to create Indigenous and non-Indigenous paths for a shared future.

In the Kimberley, First Law – the Law of the Land – sustained these Lands, peoples, living waters and biodiversity for millennia, where Country is the heart, purpose and life force of intergenerational cultural transfer of Indigenous knowledges. The Martuwarra Fitzroy River Valley comprises 97,000 square kilometres of West Kimberley cultural Landscapes (Martuwarra, McDuffie and Poelina 2020). Here, people recognise persons of all species such as plants, birds, and animals together with rocks and living waters, as extended ecological family members – kin – with shared ancestries and origins. Everyone and everything exist as relations. All relationships and behaviours within this kincentric ecosystem support Indigenous people's worldview, values, and an ethic of care, through which all human interactions preserve and enhance the ecosystem (Milgin et al. 2020; Salmón 2000).

Salmón (2000) argues that any environment is viable only when humans recognise the life around them as kin – as relations. He says that unless humans recognise their role within the complex life of a place, thriving diminishes. Using this Nyikina logic, Milgin et al. (2020) argue that sustainability crises are crises of relationship. Kincentric ecologies are part of Kimberley cultural landscapes, which represent a long, intimate, and often, continuing relationship between people and their environment (Milgin et al. 2020). Around the world, cultural landscapes may be cultivated terraces, gardens or perhaps sacred places, which the World Heritage Convention (2023, np) write, 'testify to the creative genius, social development and the imaginative and spiritual vitality of humanity. They are part of our collective identity'. This cultural framework underpins the discourse often expressed in the Kimberley: care for Country and it cares for you. There are implicit obligations and rights within this discourse, as well as a living, vital quality of place. (Griffiths and Kinnane 2011).

## Colonial antithesis

There is an antithesis to cultural revitalisation in the Kimberley. Continuous colonial domination takes the form of decisions made about Indigenous peoples and Land without free, prior, informed, and continuing consent of Indigenous people (United Nations 2011). Settler colonialism with its power-over decision-making is incompatible with Indigenous lifeways and obligations to care for Country and each other (Martuwarra et al. 2022). For example, people and cultural landscapes in the Kimberley currently face great threat of extractive colonial harm from fracking, agricultural

draining, clearing savannah and multiple types of mining. In this scenario, structural, biophysical, and energetic damage and loss of intangible Kimberley heritage are likely. The very qualities that enable humans to live within cultural landscapes are threatened (Martuwarra et al. 2020).

At the core of continuing colonisation is an onto-epistemic chasm between Western and Indigenous systems of thought (Mathews 2020), and a corresponding belief by governments and corporations that they have the right to rule and desecrate (Campbell 2022; Paradies 2020). We work towards the valuing and re-enlivening of Kimberley knowledge systems and their place-based cultural diversity, for the sake of humans and more-than-human worlds. For this, we look to environmental educators for social action, and innovation in research for transformative practices.

In this paper we present a Feeling and Hearing Country Research Method, within the conceptual framework of a cultural landscape. The line of argument we use is that there is a need to bridge the Indigenous/non-Indigenous binary that causes continued colonisation of people and places and may produce a felt sense of exclusion in people wishing to stand with Indigenous causes. Re-indigenization (Williams 2019) is one way to connect the poles of the binary into a union of common learning. It calls for the deepening of relationships with one's place by attuning to local land and waterscapes, with Indigenous wisdom, language, and mentoring. This learning stance requires a decolonial standpoint, and in turn the process contributes towards decolonisation.

We anticipate re-indigenization can facilitate a continuum of change towards greater respect for Indigenous people, places, and knowledge. There are 'rough times ahead' in terms of intent to further colonise the Kimberley as described above, and Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing adapt with ease. For example, traditional wisdom and practices such as dance, drama and storytelling were used in the Indigenous-led resistance to the proposed James Price Point development<sup>3</sup> in the Kimberley.

We begin the paper with a participatory worldview using living cosmos panpsychism and use the notion of LawLands as a practical example of transformative change. Next, we explain a Feeling and Hearing Country Research Method within a co-operative inquiry framework, explaining a method to deepen one's empathy and relationship with Country. In the final section, which is Nyikina wisdom for Feeling and Hearing Country, we present a place-story passed on by Elder Joe Nangan, followed by an academic First Law reflection. We close by bringing together implications for research, learning and environmental education with the concept of LawLands. Throughout the paper we offer small films or websites to support the reader.

Our rationale in presenting a Feeling and Hearing Country Research Method is the experiential, embodied, and practical nature of the method. There is no mystical, secret or 'owned' knowledge referred to in this paper. The references we use are openly available in the public domain, and the research was approved by the University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (2022-154B) in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 – Updated 2018 and the 2020 AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal<sup>4</sup> and Torres Strait Islander Research. The authors confirm this has been adhered to. We use the notion of Feeling and Hearing Country to support the decolonising purposes of re-indigenization, because it can address the Indigenous/non-Indigenous binary that needs bridging. As we will show, it gives all participants common experience of a living, vibrant, interactive landscape. Australia needs a new Story for modernity, a new dream, a new way of being together, which is the spirit of this research.

## Participatory worldview

In this section, we outline a participatory worldview using Indigenous examples. We begin with a sense of the spirit of life as interconnected wholeness. We then offer an introductory

description of Feeling and Hearing Country, before exploring a panpsychist perspective and the notion of Lawlands.

Stanner (1979) writes that no English words can give a sense of the links between an Indigenous group and their homeland. He says in attempting to do this, English speakers become 'tongueless and earless' (p. 230). He writes,

The Aboriginal would speak of 'earth' and used the word in a richly symbolic way to mean his 'shoulder' or his 'side'... When we took what we call 'land' [from Aboriginal people] we took what to them meant hearth, home, the source and locus of life, and everlastingness of spirit. (Stanner 1979, p. 230)

This is the nature of interconnectedness that Indigenous tradition enfold. There is a deep, unbreakable relational place-bond – such that removal from Country causes conceptual breakdown and a form of vertigo which may last for several generations (Stanner 1979).

Similarly, the Indigenous notion of 'Dreaming' is difficult to describe in English, because Western binary language-embedded logics do not apply. For example, a man's name, spirit, and shadow are 'him' (Stanner 1979, p. 29). We continue with the use of Stanner's (1979) work, to give a sense of the complex of meanings arising from a sacred, heroic time that remains part of the present; where time is non-existent in abstract terms, and history is an alien concept. First Law (the Law of the Land) arises causally in the Dreaming, a time of creativity, storying, and productivity. Some refer to this period as a 'long now' (Poelina et al. 2020). Indigenous stories, mythology, ritual, ceremony and art express an intuitive, creative, poetic and visionary understanding of philosophy, reality, and virtues (Stanner 1979).

To give a sense of the difficulty of describing the Dreaming, an Elder explained to Stanner:

White man got no dreaming,

Him go 'nother way.

White man, him go different.

Him got road belong himself. (Muta, a Murinbata, in Stanner 1979, pp. 24, frontpiece)

This is the depth of the Indigenous/non-Indigenous binary we begin to bridge in this paper. In summary, when we refer to Dreaming<sup>5</sup>, we use a sense of the long now with creativity, imagery, and intuition to reflect on experience. As lifeway, it is generative and visual, rich in relational bonds and story of many kinds, and underpinned by seamless holistic embodiment.

## Living cosmos panpsychism

Philosopher Freya Mathews, Farris, and Göcke (2021) developed living cosmos panpsychism, which explains people, creatures, and things as part of an evolving, intelligent cosmos. As a philosophy, it facilitates a responsive, communicative engagement with the living world. In this perspective, a type of innerness such as mind, sentience, or subjectivity, permeates all. The cosmos can be seen as a profoundly interrelated oneness, with a concern for its own continuity. In its creativity, the oneness splits into many self-realising, reciprocally responsive beings. This is the deserts, mountains, rivers, trees, and fungi, and you and me, all magnificent but non-permanent centres of meaning and action, each of whom eventually return to the one continuous mind-matter field they arose from. In this way, mind is a basic quality of matter, and matter is a basic quality of mind. Living cosmos panpsychism explains how the world is innately relational.

In this version of panpsychism, as a community of sentient beings there is a continual reaching out in reciprocal communication, producing a 'poetic ecology': the fundamental attraction of feeling the world and being felt by it in response. The world has capacity and actively seeks participation with humans and other beings, allowing a communicative meeting of mutual

presence, one that responds when our requests send out ‘tentacles of attention in search of it.’ (Mathews 2017, p. 223). To be acknowledged by the world, and to find ourselves in continuing communicative exchange with it, lifts our lives to a new level of meaning, one undreamt of by those oblivious of this possibility.

Hence all things, including the Earth, are significant to the world, made of the same responsive cloth. This mutually enhancing way of communicating with the world, may require considerable *unlearning* and new learning for those of us who see the world as separate from ourselves. Living cosmos panpsychism is conducive of an experiential encounter with the world, one that is reflective in imaginal, creative, and conceptual ways. Living cosmos panpsychism explains some aspects of a participative worldview, which may have similarities with Indigenous perspectives (Williams 2019).

## LawLands and stable, flourishing ecosystems

Using panpsychism, Mathews (2020) shows how environmental conservation requires the Indigenous notion of LawLands. Her logic is that a rear-guard approach to extinction prevention using notions of wilderness and more recently, biodiversity, have evidently failed. On the other hand, LawLands – those being cared for by Indigenous people according to First Law – sustain the ecological agency of Country, while protecting Indigenous Local Knowledge systems for healthy futures for all. First Law supports the idea of LawLands, by which we mean those principles of mutual accommodation, adaptation and synergy that underpin stable, flourishing ecosystems. Therefore, conservation management ought to seek more than to preserve biodiversity, since that is a minimalist goal, but to rediscover First Law – the Law that is already in Land – and then to realign with that Law (Mathews 2020).

In her more recent paper, Mathews (2022) shows how knowledge and feeling are not separate in Australian Indigenous epistemologies. She explains that like all familiar relationships, empathy is the ground of knowing. For example, in the Indigenous tradition of calling to River or Country, one is seeking collaboration and intimate partnership. In this familiarity, there is a very high degree of caring attention to ecological occurrences and patterns as well as to the intricacies of one’s specific surroundings, together with a profoundly embodied responsiveness to the ecological happenings in one’s place. An example of responsiveness she uses, is the Nyikina word: *liyan*<sup>6</sup>, which refers to the seat of wellbeing or the human moral compass, an intuition that connects people with the *liyan* of Mother Earth<sup>7</sup>. Perdrisat and Corpus (2022) provide an understanding of how ‘*liyan*’<sup>8</sup> connects one’s lifeforce through and to everything.

A range of relational forms of research are relevant to this study. For example post-humanist (Cutter-Mackenzie and Siegel 2019; Taylor, Blaise, and Giugni 2013), feminist (Brown, Siegel, and Blom 2020; Taylor 2020), and post-qualitative (Clarke and McPhie 2020; Hart and White 2022) research methods demonstrate relational design and implementation. Within conservation policy and practice, relational concepts lead to local discourses of loving and caring for Country. There are many Australian examples (such as O’Leary and Walter 2018) and significant Kimberley research (Milgin et al. 2020; Pyke et al. 2021) which demonstrate that Indigenous Local Knowledge is regenerative of the health and wellbeing of people and place. A sample of Indigenous-led relational research is presented below.

## Indigenous research methodologies

There is a substantial body of work describing methods and approaches to Indigenous research, most of which is participative, cooperative, and involves learning with or from Country or Land. We give a few examples. In 2020, Woollorton et al. reported a cooperative inquiry with each cycle comprising a sub-project (or cycle) for deepening place-relationship and transformative

practices for decolonising modernity (Wooltorton et al. 2020). Conducted in both Nyikina and Noongar Countries in Australia, it was underpinned by Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, being and doing. Researchers noted that an Indigenous concept of love of place is incompatible with a colonial worldview; and concluded the process functioned as Indigenous-led cultural resurgence, of value to all participants.

Twance (2019) writes on Anishinaabe Lands in Ontario, of the centrality of Land and Water to Indigenous lifeways. She worked with six Anishinaabe Elders at Agawa about *mazinaabikiganan*, a form of traditional rock art, and learned that understandings of meanings are modified over time by dialoguing with Land, place, and art, *via* experiences, stories, and ceremonies. There is no separation of spirituality and science in Anishinaabe thinking. Twance (2019) reminds readers that Land education can decolonize and enable re-inhabiting of Land to re-affirm knowledge, identities, and beliefs. She shows how Indigenous knowledge and Land relationship is a key to deeper understandings and life practices.

Heckenberg (2015) uses another relational method to research the deep interconnections among the Murray River (Millawa Billa), the Wiradjuri people, Indigenous culture and gendered cultural practices. These are continuous with Indigenous philosophy, identity, and the project of making the Wagirra cultural trail that is rich with environmental lessons and story. The methodology brings about the unification of ideas pertaining to theory and relational philosophy with the guidance of traditional women's perspectives. In brief, the river means everything to people of this place. Like Twance's (2019) study, Heckenberg's research is decolonial and affirmative of knowledge, identities, and cultural beliefs.

Tuhiwai Smith, Tuck, and Yang (2019) introduce their edited book, *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View* with the idea that 'water is life, Land is our first teacher'. Whilst straightforward in essence, the colonial complexity is that continuous Indigenous relational presence with Land and water demands decolonisation to have meaning. The collection of chapters offers accounts of water, Land, and the more-than-human world. It understands relations as accountability, with a past-present-future having its own space/time. They note that each of the chapters recognises the twenty first century as regenerative and decolonizing, recognising that the terrors of settler colonialism and capitalism will not end the human story.

Hughes and Barlo (2021) describe a method they call *Yarning with Country*, which they used in Bundjalung Country in Australia. They ask: How do we work within a relational methodology with Country as a primary participant? Their work was also supported by Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, being and doing. They note that repeated experiences of yarning with Country makes the process real and believable, rather than being only theoretical. Barlo says that as his personal knowing strengthens, the place-relationship changes. So, yarning with Country is relationship building; and they conclude that Country has much to teach everyone. These relational approaches give context to our study, and we now build upon the conceptual foundation of a living, responsive Country.

## Feeling and Hearing Country as research method

Co-operative inquiry offers a way of exploring a communicative engagement with the world, and we use it as a foundation for a Feeling and Hearing Country Research Method. Co-operative inquiry utilises an iterative process in which co-researchers engage in cycles of action and reflection through epistemology that is extended from the rational-empirical categories of traditional research. The epistemology of co-operative inquiry incorporates these forms of knowing:

- an *experience* of meeting and encounter, for **experiential knowing**,
- the use of *expressive and creative reflection* upon the experience as **presentational forms of knowing**,

- *words, concepts, and critique* as reflection upon the prior forms as **propositional knowing**; and finally,
- the subsequent *practice of acquired skills*, which may be interpersonal, physical, attentional, and/or political, for **practical knowing**. (Wicks, Reason, and Bradbury 2008).

Through using inquiry cycles, these forms of knowing interpenetrate each other to enhance their mutual congruence, both within the inquiry group as a whole and each inquirer. As a framework for Feeling and Hearing Country as a Research Method, it is basic and its experiential and creative innovations offer a useful framework to begin a new relationship with Country.

In co-operative inquiry, researcher and participant roles are reciprocal relationships, so that all involved collaborate as co-researchers and co-subjects. Everyone<sup>9</sup> - all research participants - help design and manage the inquiry; everyone shares in creating the experience and action being explored; everyone helps to make sense and draw conclusions; and everyone participates in planning further cycles of action and reflection. One of the innovations of co-operative inquiry is the focus on forms of knowing that other research methods may be less interested in, like experiential, visual/creative and practical forms of knowing (Wicks, Reason, and Bradbury 2008).

Each sub-section below is labelled according to a form of knowing. In the first sentences of each section, we overview the form of knowing, then suggest learning/research tasks to illustrate the phase/s. Two of the sections offer examples of data. An author commentary concludes each section. In a full co-operative inquiry with a group of colleagues as co-inquirers, there are four phases. *Phase one* is to meet to agree on the questions to be answered and the tasks each will undertake. During this phase the discussion tends to use already-existing naïve concepts and propositions, by which we mean understandings that are not necessarily founded on one's own embodied experiences and practices.

## **Experience, knowing through experience: reciprocity of Country**

### ***Embodiment – learning to communicate through the body: feeling, hearing, sensing, engaging***

To experience the reciprocity of Country needs embodied action. In a full co-operative inquiry with co-researchers, this is *phase two*, where everyone engages in the actions agreed. We suggest taking a walk along a river, or through a bushland trail or beach. Feel with the senses to become familiar with place and species; attend to the more-than-human world and contemplate its messages. A regular experience along the same route, and/or the same sitting places, may generate increasing familiarity. The essence is to pay close attention. It may be helpful for learning and research purposes to record experiences along the way, such as taking photographs, filming with a phone-camera or a voice recording device. This is at first a tentative forming of practical knowing, a knowing-how (and how not) to take the action, perhaps beginning the bracketing off (*unlearning*) of some original ideas.

The task of the first sessions is to look and look again, while feeling and listening carefully to every breeze, swish, rustle of leaves, and subtle movements. It is to become deeply aware of surroundings and smells, using senses and sharpening intuition. Perhaps try out what it is like to follow the custom of calling out to announce your presence and formally greet the place energies. It is not helpful to expect a response, but one day, a synchronicity might reveal a possible response, and potential connection.

As evidence, here is Edwin Lee Mulligan, a young Walmajarri and Nyikina man, speaking in his film about 'talking and walking with Country'<sup>10</sup>.

It's good to talk to Country...not for Country. It's good for your mental state, where you meditate on your thoughts of mind.... another way of saying it; are your mind and heart, spirit and soul aligned with the earth that which you walk on? Knowing that when we walk on this earth, the earth can actually feel our presence. It's a different mindset. And with that vibration I feel that there is a transmission that is bouncing off this earth, wanting me to understand that they can feel my presence. That's how we speak. English speaks different way. (Mulligan 2021)

#### Author Commentary:

From Edwin, we learn that walking and talking *to and with* the land is a very powerful act. Every person is response-able, able to respond to Country. For instance, to recognise self in relation, 'We' as a more-than-human collective, we may need to look again through our response-abilities, and deepen into relational praxis, to learn to sense with body as mind. This practice is articulated with beauty in Country et al. (2019), who see this process as situated co-becoming, to become responsive-with storied, living places. This is a relational ontology – a way of being that experiences relationality.

## Creativity, knowing through aesthetic imagery: presentation of and for Country

### *Presentation – learning to use creative methods to deepen experience*

To engage in creativity with Country and persons of all species as kin, as relation, needs embodied reflection within and following experience. Some people may follow new experiences of co-becoming with Country using artwork, sculpture, music-making such as song, or perhaps poetry. Others may feel more comfortable reflecting upon the evidence collected in the form of photographs, film, or recorded story as the starting place for embodied action. Others still may feel 'beckoned' by a being such as a tree and begin to sketch it immediately (for example, Reason and Gillespie 2023). In a full co-operative inquiry, this is *phase three*, building upon experience using mainly experiential (tacit, embodied) knowledge. The task of the first sessions is to use creative forms to deepen and re-enliven the experience to understand it in a relational, embodied, and reflective way. Sometimes, actual observations or synchronicities do not become clear until later – even much later. Some art follows experiences of deep communication with Country as a living being.

Here is artist Mulligan and McDuffie (2014) again<sup>11</sup>.

Dreaming Country

Like our Elders said, about Country,

when Country calling to you.

They come through a dream.

And people been dreaming for Country from way back,

It's about the bird's eye view.

In my father's language I call it... (spoken in Walmatjarri language).

[which means] in a dream that already had been seen many times before I perceived that particular dream.

I just had to explain that story through my experience.

So, here's what I wrote down.

Flying through the clear blue sky and feeling free as much as a bird could ever be. I was overwhelmed with relaxation,

Over a familiar dotted landscape, that was before me.

Spotted, with splendid colours.

It was so rich and breathtaking.

I didn't realize that I was a large bird until looking over my shoulders I had dark brown feathers.

I called out through the silent air.

And as I gazed into the distance, noticing the whole scenery that was somehow previously painted by myself.

It was beautiful.

A place that we knew very well.

There, just above the surface of the water. I could see a barramundi [fish] was swimming in motion going westward towards that setting sun, moving gracefully on its own.

And at that point, I knew what it meant to me.

With that knowledge and overflowing of river wisdom that I had, that somehow,

I knew definitely, that there is a connection and a bond between us,

With the earth, water and sky

That they are as much a part of us.

As we are to each other.

#### Author Commentary:

The Country-human bond of transformation is so great in Mulligan's account, through the medium of a dream, that he feels held in relaxation while he looks around to see his feathers. He is clear the dream is communication from Country, as it had been perceived many times before, and he already understood its message of union. He describes an experience of profound reciprocity with Country, a mutual bond of responsivity. Mulligan elucidates ancestral power, as his Elders have revealed in his Walmatjarri and Nyikina languages. His experiential knowledge, perceived through a dream, embodies empathy, or communion with Country.

Those of us who are in the habit of overlooking the communicative order of things, may need substantial *unlearning*, to begin learning anew. Not all presentational knowing is so rich, however. It is important to observe the mundane and everyday rather than seeking the special, as the unique often rises out of the mundane, where most of our learning is situated (Wooltorton & Reason, In-Press).

In Nyikina Country over millennia, people have gathered to retell experiences, perhaps dramatize them and sing, perform and dance with Country and persons of all species. The energies and powers these performances draw up add vibrancy, coexistence, balance and harmony to plants, humans, ground, and all life. Sometimes, these performances might be humorous and entertaining, or important performances that also produce response from living earth systems, perhaps in the arrival of particular creatures, or maybe an intuitive knowing, or even a particular sensation or appearance of significance to the ecological family of participants. These accounts show the interrelation of ways of knowing, and the emphasis on experience as the grounding. They help explain a life-long journey of learning and practice following traditions of intergenerational cultural transfer of Walmatjarri and Nyikina knowledges.

## Propositions and concepts: coming to terms with experience

### *Propositions – drawing on concepts and ideas to frame or reframe knowing into words*

To understand the reciprocity of Country is still primarily experiential, deepened through presentational activities, after which one discusses, describes, and possibly critiques the experience. In a full co-operative inquiry, this is *phase four*, where co-researchers reassemble to consider their original propositions and questions in the light of their experience. During this phase co-inquirers may modify, reframe, or reject these; or perhaps pose new questions for the next cycles of inquiry. In a co-operative inquiry where co-inquirers might be River, or kangaroo, the human participant still needs to reflect on and perhaps critique notes, in writing or perhaps forms of verbal recording, to ascertain such important details as co-occurrences, synchronicities, and the quality of communicative interchange.

Such questions might be, how do I know these coincidences are not my imagination? What evidence do I have that assures me (or us) that these phenomena are real? In what ways are what I know now, based on my experiences, different to my preconceptions? How do I describe my new knowing? Have I incorporated a critique of colonisation? Co-inquirers may choose, for the next cycle of action, to focus on the same or on different aspects of the overall inquiry. The group may also choose to amend or develop its inquiry procedures—forms of action, ways of selecting evidence—based upon their experiences. Presentational, creative knowing forms an important bridge with the experiential and practical phases, although this fourth phase is primarily propositional (abstract) knowing.

So far, we have described only one co-operative inquiry cycle. This method requires several or many integrated cycles of each form of knowing, as Feeling and Hearing Country is a life-long process. It begins with small steps.

### *Nyikina wisdom for Dreaming Country*

Like 'Feeling and Hearing Country', the shared meaning and relational realities expressed in the generative notion of 'Dreaming Country', is a continuous Story in Australian earth-centric cultures and one that seems to be coming back to life in the West (Ghosh 2021; Harding 2006). In this section, we offer a Nyikina story as propositional place-knowing to illustrate *Dreaming Country*; to help demystify the term and illustrate forever presence. It illuminates the depth of Country's responsiveness, showing the importance of human virtues and obligation as part of a healthy ecosystem. Stories, as place-based propositional knowledge, are enlivened through experiential and visual/creative knowing. These ways of knowing are closely linked, with stories informing context.

We offer the perspective of Joe Nangan, a deceased Elder (Nangan and Edwards 1976). With his friend and author, Hugh Edwards, Nangan left ancestral First Law stories through storytelling, using the arts to understand the deep interconnections available through *Ijyan*. He saw the importance of his stories for young people such as Perdrisat who is honouring his ancient wisdom through her films for the future. Edwards acknowledged, 'Joe's mind still works in a tribal way. While we talked his rays/rais, the spirit children, were always present. ... spirits are everywhere.' (Nangan and Edwards, p. 11). Knowledge holders accept that this quote locates stories with spirit beings in all places, with agency, and in a deep relationship with their human kin. Perdrisat and Poelina have the cultural authority from their Elders and Hugh Edwards to reproduce Nangan's stories, in multiple forms. We have selected this story because it illustrates the people-place relationship with intricate detail.

## Mubara the water snake

*In the days when he was in man-form, Mubara, the water snake, went on a hunting expedition to a far Country. Before he took his spears and his naloo<sup>12</sup>, he left his sons at Wallal rockhole, south of Jerragully<sup>13</sup>, in the care of a group of Garadjeri<sup>14</sup> people who promised to look after them.*

*While he was away, the Garadjeri took the boys into the bush for initiation and they held a big ceremonial feast—a Guramidi<sup>15</sup>. By tradition, the father of the Aboriginal sons being initiated is always an honoured guest at such a ceremony. But no one invited Mubara—a deadly insult and an affront to his honour.*

*When he returned to Wallal and found that the ceremony had been held without him, he became very angry and chewed his beard. The Garadjeri apologised. ‘We are sorry,’ they said. ‘We forgot all about you.’ But to a Maban, a witch doctor, like Mubara and a proud man, such an apology only made things worse. How could they forget him? He kept his anger inside him, burning like a slow scrub fire, and did not show the black thoughts of revenge which were in his heart.*

*Instead, he pretended that the insult did not matter and was of little consequence. Even when his sons, who knew him better, looked at him and wondered, he kept outwardly calm for, as a snake man, he was very clever and liked to plan his revenge very carefully to make it the more complete. Then one day the Garadjeri organised a wanuna, a big hunting party.*

*‘Come,’ they said to Mubara. ‘Come hunting with us.’ ‘Yes, I will come,’ he said, picking up his spears. When they were only a short distance from camp, Mubara noticed that the Garadjeri were going downwind. Now he saw a chance to carry out his plan for revenge, so he pretended to step on a gawar, a poison stick. ‘Oh, my foot!’ he cried, clutching at his ankle with both hands. Pretending to be lame, he hobbled back to camp.*

*But once he had returned to Walal he called his two sons and, seating one on his right knee and the other on his left, he worked the magic fire-saw on his woomera so furiously that sparks flew out and smoke began to rise. Faster and faster he worked his fire-saw, until flames leapt out and all the bush caught alight, and a wall of fire roared down the wind. It caught the hapless Garadjeri people on their hunting party, burning them to death. At the last moment Mubara’s fire-saw broke and a few—but only a few—of the Garadjeri escaped.*

*After Mubara had taken his terrible revenge on the tribes folk, he went to Nargandja water-hole and there resumed his form as a water serpent with his two sons. This is their home today. We know that because it is at Nargandja that the first good rains fall every year. Mubara sends rain all through the North, usually in answer to dreams.*

*The gift is sometimes kind, sometimes cruel, in the way that Mubara dealt with the Garadjeri for their slight on his honour. If a kinsman dreams of rain, Mubara sends a good and steady fall to fill the rock holes and bring up the shoots of green feed for the wallabies and kangaroos. But if a stranger—or someone disrespectful—dreams of the rain, Mubara may send a flood in angry torrents with swollen waters to kill them as he killed the Garadjeris with fire so long ago.*

*In the northern bush you must always speak respectfully of rain, and be careful with your dreams, for fear of angering Mubara, the water serpent and rain-god who rules that Land from his watering hole of Nargandja. He is also a star in the heavens, below the surface of the Milky Way. You can see him in the summer when the Milky Way moves, and his appearance is a sign that the annual rains—‘the Big Wet’—are about to begin. (Nangan and Edwards 1976, p. 31-51).*

## Reflection on a First Law story

Dismissed by colonialists for more than 150 years as ‘dreamtime’ (implying irrelevance, triviality, or fable), beings such as Mubara the ancestral serpent is recognised by knowledge holders as maintaining presence and significance in the Kimberley. Nagandja, the waterhole, is to the west of Martuwarra Fitzroy River Country where Nyikina and Karajarri landscapes meet, linking these tribal groups (Elkin 1933). The story is one of a living, emotional, communicative Country – with feelings – where the past is present in Mubara’s continuous ancestral power, and where the power of fire and water link smoothly to demonstrate First Law, the Law of the Land. Evidence

accepted by knowledge holders of Mubara's existence in the waterhole is in Nagandja receiving the first rains each year. Further evidence accepted by knowledge holders is that he is also a star in the night sky, visible in summer as a sign the wet season is about to begin. Country – as an integrated kincentric ecosystem – radiates that which locals understand to be ancestral power, which always ensures correct protocols are followed in the spirit world and in the physical world.

Stories like this one teach about knowledge of consequences for not following correct protocols. In the story, the necessity for respect is foremost. For instance, everyone must always address Elders correctly, due to their wisdom and potential for enforcing and regulating the law. Knowledge holders accept that Country can feel, hear, and see phenomena evidenced by dreams of rain by kin, invocations to which Mubara responds. However, in the story, if someone disrespectful dreams of rain, Mubara might send dangerous floods. In this way, an individual knowledge holder can impact the weather or beyond by their undisciplined communicative power. Martuwarra River Country is fluid and dynamic, in that as waterhole serpent and rain-god, knowledge holders recognise that Mubara animates ecosystems. Water connects everything, and deep respect for water is the foundation. Kin people need to always demonstrate right thoughts and dreams, as the wet season can be affected by one's actions<sup>16</sup>.

The Mubara Story teaches us why virtues, values and ethics are important to self-regulate personal behaviours and to consider the greater good of all, including our more-than-human kin. It shows why we have Laws. The laws become the rules for our codes of conduct, for social cohesion and relationship, to grow and nurture the whole of life, learning and co-existence. Through our moral obligation we agree that if we have laws then we must all be equal under the law and in doing so, recognise the importance of 'we not me' (Cameron & Poelina, 2021). 'We' is our community of more-than-human beings. We strive for peace, harmony, and balance; and to co-exist with more-than-human beings. This is our proper human place because we as humans are integral to our world. We must not dominate or take charge: instead, we live in humble reciprocity. We learn trust, respect, integrity, and honesty, a relational ontology that enables the intergenerational cultural transfer of Indigenous knowledges to maintain the Kimberley as a cultural landscape.

We refer to the work of Williams (2019) who shows that Land has language and agency through First Law and Indigenous lifeways. The relearning of Indigenous kinship and place connection is a significant element in re-indigenization, an Indigenous gift offering a way of right-sizing the planet for sustainable, caring futures. In the Kimberley, sacred truth or First Law, is still alive, and people carry an intergenerational obligation to maintain Country and sacred truth together, replenishing Country, people, and the law (Perdrisat 2020a). These themes are explained in two videos<sup>17</sup> by Perdrisat (2020a, 2020b), called *Bookarrarra* and *Warloongarriy*.

## Story for the world. Feeling and Hearing Country

*Feeling and Hearing Country as Research Method* is an Indigenous way to engage with the communicative order of a living place such as a River. It begins with respect for the power of Country and uses an ethic of care. This is an experiential, embodied form of knowing, that builds conceptual knowledge through creativity and visualisation, and cycles of practice. The practice is primary, and this Nyikina story reinforces the integral bonds of place characteristic of kincentric ecologies – where place is kin, extended family. Knowledge and feeling are not separate, as empathy forms the core of knowing. A deep familiarity with one's place requires a very high degree of caring attention to ecological happenings and to the intricacies of one's specific surroundings, together with a profoundly embodied responsiveness.

Feeling and Hearing Country is practised in the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Valley. As an experiential research method, it is offered for people of all ancestries to deepen their identity as

Australians in an Indigenous cultural landscape. 'Dreaming Country' has adapted and continues to adapt to modernity, and Edwin's ability to maintain this cultural practice is critical in the transfer of Indigenous knowledges between the generations as a method to speak back to continuing colonisation. Through our shared practice, we have confidence that this research method allows researchers and participants to engage with Country using Indigenous wisdom, and to gain new knowledge, deepen understandings, experiences, and practices of place as family. It is well proven, having sustained intergenerational cultural transfer for aeons.

The Martuwarra Fitzroy River is widely believed to be a living, sentient being, and through profound reciprocity, the Indigenous community is integral to its health and wellbeing through being part of a cultural landscape. The system is bound together by Stories, language and through active 'Dreaming Country' practices for regeneration of knowledge of living places and more than human worlds. The last cultural landscapes of biodiversity and relationality held by the world's Indigenous peoples need protection and value as they are the lifelines – to enable all humans to come to understand their role in caring for Country, and thus right-sizing the planet aligning with First Law makes clear how we should act since our overriding purpose – according to knowledge holders – is to contribute to the ongoing creativity and flourishing of Country. Love and care for Country and it cares for and loves you. Within the framework of Kimberley cultural landscapes, we visualise the concept of LawLands underpinning all conservation policy; re-indigenization strategies and the Feeling and Hearing Country Research Method being practised: and we send this dream out.

## Notes

1. This paper forms the first phase of a research project entitled: *Intergenerational Cultural Transfer of Indigenous Knowledges*.
2. In this paper capitalization of Country, Elders, River and Land accords respect, recognizing broader meanings than normal English language uses. For example, Country includes social, spiritual, and relational systems.
3. Woodside withdrew from the proposal due to changed economic circumstances.
4. For consistency in this paper, we use 'Indigenous', but Aboriginal is used where a quote requires this.
5. Feeling and Hearing Country has commonalities with the Indigenous Australian concept of Dreaming Country. Dreaming is expansive and inclusive in the sense of forever presence, overarching stories and explanations, ontological meanings, intra-relationality, and place-energies in sentient Country, whereas Feeling and Hearing Country are skills and communicative abilities within the same participative reality. For further information on Feeling and Hearing Country, see Poelina, A., Wooltorton, S., Harben, S., Collard, L., Horwitz, P., & Palmer, D. (2020). Feeling and hearing Country. *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature*(15), 6-15. <http://panjournal.net/issues/15>
6. The concept of *liyan* is spoken in many Kimberley languages and understood by a good number of English speakers.
7. We use the term 'Mother Earth' as this term is widely recognized within Indigenous communities in Australia and elsewhere, giving recognition to the fertility and life of places. This is not a romantic idea; rather, it acknowledges Country's agency, nurturing, sentience, and provision; in return requiring attentive response in multiple forms. For example, see Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass : indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants* (First edition. ed.). Milkweed Editions.
8. Cultural warning. Perdrisat has authority from the family of Micklo Corpus since deceased, to continue to show this film. See <https://vimeo.com/451696034>.
9. 'Everyone' is inclusive of the more-than-human, whom sensitive observers may notice can play an unseen or unpredictable role in planning and practice.
10. This is available as a video, here: <https://vimeo.com/751080212/2b0e730bee>.
11. This is available as a video, here: <https://vimeo.com/638357785/be0fd7a5b5>
12. Naloo is a hitting or digging stick.
13. Contemporary spelling is Geegully.
14. Contemporary spelling is Karajarri.
15. Guramdidi is a special ceremony.
16. We recommend the film Putuparri and the Rainmakers (Lawford & Ma, 2015) for a visible, actual demonstration of how ceremony can produce weather.
17. See <https://vimeo.com/451420394> and <https://vimeo.com/459588320>

## Geolocation information

This research was conducted in the Kimberley region of the north of Western Australia. The cultural Landscape and valleys of the lowest part of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River, from Noonkanbah, through Jarlmadangah (Mt Anderson), Balginjirr, Pandanus Park (Yurmulun) and Derby to the river mouth and into King George Sound, form the Country where the Nyikina peoples have lived since the dawn of time. To the West and to the ocean, are the Lands of the Karajarri, who are neighbours. Nyikina and Karajarri care for many shared stories, each told within the contours and knowledges of their own Country, languages, cultural perspectives, and particular locations.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This research is part of a consortium of the University of Notre Dame Australia, Edith Cowan University, Millennium Kids, Pandanus Park Community, the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, Madjulla Inc, the Western Australian Museum and the Water Corporation of Western Australia. It is financially supported (partially) by the following organisations: the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council's *Linkage Projects* funding scheme [project LP210301390]; the Water Corporation's Research and Development Program; Millennium Kids Enviro Fund; and the WA Museum.

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## Data availability statement

All data used in this paper is within the paper.

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