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The Wind Is Always Blowing: Generative Crosscurrents of Ethnographic Dialogue in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Live conversations and writing play an important role in ethnographic research that seeks to develop understanding across cultural differences. Both forms of communication need not remain distinct: written dialogue can develop critical thought while foregrounding the shared contexts and relational impetuses of communication across cultures. Set against the background of recent styles in ethnographic writing about and with Yolŋu people, this article extends from conversations about wata *(wind), exploring collaborative practices (music performance and teaching) and approaches to writing ethnography that respond to a core quality of wind as a medium that connects.* Wata *is a significant theme within* manikay *(public ceremonial song) that connects Wägilak with their ancestral lands, even as it blows through the country of other groups, allowing new relationships and understandings to be formed. Giving rise to concerns of connection, difference, and movement,* wata *is a significant theme for considering the ways narrative traditions can shape relationality and give impetus to intellectual inquiry.*

Keywords: Yolŋu (Yolngu), manikay, dialogue, writing, ethnography.

'BOOK WORK' THAT SINGS

> *Wata* means the wind, blowing and telling stories. Telling you about your Wägilak story and country. It's telling you a story about smoking ceremony too: smoke your spirit and send the spirit back home, so he can go back to his country. *Wata*, the wind, is always blowing. It's always telling story. If you know the song, if you're singing the right song, the wind song, passing on, keep blowing, the wind never stops today.

> I like you to understand and listen to our story. If you want more to learn about our culture or the law, you need to share this. You can share to anyone where you go. If you go to another country or another place, you can see the wind still there, blowing. But you have to hold the song for the wind: that's *your* story. [DW]

My good friend and colleague in teaching and research, Daniel Wilfred, is fond of introducing me as the one who does the 'book work'. Daniel is a Wägilak ceremonial leader from Ngukurr, in Australia's Northern Territory. He sings *manikay* (public ceremonial song) for funerals, smoking ceremonies, circumcisions, and other celebrations across southeast Arnhem Land.[1] He also performs with some of Australia's leading improvising musicians in concerts and festivals from Melbourne to Hong Kong and Berlin. Through our singing and book work, a primary concern has been the meaningful convergence of different forms of thinking and communicating, in ways that engage new audiences with the narratives of Wägilak song, such as *wata* (wind).

Teaching recent music graduates annually at the Australian Art Orchestra's *Creative Music Intensive*, we are always looking for ways that our different skills might complement one another. Daniel understands academics to deal in words, largely in the form of explanations that introduce students to *manikay* through historical and cultural contextualisation. By contrast, Daniel sings and tells stories, and invites others to learn about Wägilak culture by performing alongside him, improvising around patterns of *manikay* that have been passed through the generations. Through these varied modes of engagement, we encourage students to recognize the importance of *manikay* within Yolŋu *rom* (law), in sustaining identities of people and place through patterns of relating that extend from song (see Curkpatrick *et al*. 2024b; Langton and Corn 2023; Pawu and Curkpatrick 2023a).[2]

Differences between singing and book work might be portrayed as illustrative of oral and text-based cultures. However, this distinction may seem somewhat superficial within an Indigenous Australian context, in which singing begins by attending to the *kuruwarri* (marks, traces, for Warlpiri) or *djalkiri* (footprints, for Yolŋu) of ancestral creativity inscribed in the land, waters, and sky.[3] Performance achieves more than the expression of these marks or footprints in songs, dances, and designs, or the recreation of an ancestral text; performance sustains an original ancestral creativity. Or as Daniel puts it, singing extends the *raki'* (string) which was first formed by the ancestral *mokuy* (ghost) Djuwalpada, and which connects all generations of Wägilak through *rom* (law). So too, our teaching weaves a new generation of Yolŋu and Balanda (non-Indigenous Australians) together into patterns of mutual responsiveness and cooperation that characterize Yolŋu *rom*. On this view, book work is not a separate or derivative activity: written words can also be enfolded into the generative movements of the Wägilak *raki'*, sustaining ancestral identities and giving impetus to new songs and relationships.

Ethnography and the constitutive dimensions of language

The concept of *ethnography* (lit. 'writing the nations') developed within a view of knowledge that was given priority within emerging disciplines of scientific inquiry during the Enlightenment.[4] These disciplines posited the observing subject as one who senses the world and describes it to others, through words that 'stand for' things.[5] The linguistic sign was considered both arbitrary and transparent, a precise tool that allowed for clear and efficient thinking (Taylor 2016:105–109) and knowledge as something that could be recorded, disseminated, developed, and utilized, as a means to come to a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the world.

This Enlightenment epistemology is evident in the classical sequence of anthropological 'research and write-up,' which demarcates experience (as immediate, authentic) and words (as derived, analytical), a sequence which Johannes Fabian (1990b:758) supposes 'had its apotheosis when professionalization of anthropology reached its peak (probably in the 1950s)'. In later decades of the twentieth century, ethnographic approaches have developed around an increasing sensitivity to the positionality and agenda of the researcher, following on from the work of Foucault (Kazubowski-Houston and Magnat 2018:365), and a

critical focus that redoubles the gaze of the observer back on itself: 'In using portraits of other cultural patterns to reflect self-critically on our own ways, anthropology disrupts common sense and makes us reexamine our taken-for-granted assumptions' (Marcus and Fischer 1986:4). Nevertheless, a basic Enlightenment view of language continues to animate even the most apologetic ethnography. That is, this reflexive turn and approach to anthropology as a form of cultural critique only redoubles an apparent gap between singing and writing, or performance and representation – a differential that remains a fruitful source of methodological insight as well as perpetual malaise.

Another area of methodological development can be discerned in approaches to 'performing ethnography' (Fabian 1990a) and participant-observation, in which insight is gained through involvement in expressive forms such as theatre, leading to a more nuanced appreciation of the embodied, eventful, and transformational dimensions of culture. Although even here, ethnography's task is 'the making of knowledge out of experience' (Fabian 1990b:756). Anthropologists have likewise experimented with literary approaches to writing (Wiles 2020), sought to expand their insights by engaging with a wider range of disciplines, media, and audiences (Benson 1993; Boyer and Marcus 2021; Kazubowski-Houston and Magnat 2018), and explored collaborative methods that prioritize applied outcomes for the people and communities that researchers work with. Such approaches have been prominent within Australian ethnomusicology in recent decades (see Barney 2022; Curkpatrick 2023b; Treloyn 2016; Treloyn and Charles 2022).

Of course, this drive to continually revise the basic assumptions of ethnography is certainly warranted. This has been neatly summed up by Clint Bracknell (2020b) who, from an insider's perspective as Noongar ethnomusicologist, readily perceives the many flaws and falsehoods of ethnographic records: too easily, the words of outsiders produce 'bad representations' of the people and places they write about. Similarly, Michael Dodson (cited in Bracknell 2020b:145) writes about ethnographic descriptions that are largely dependent 'on what the colonising culture wanted to say or think about itself'. The consequence of 'bad representation' extends beyond academic contexts. Distinguished Professor of Australian Indigenous Studies, Marcia Langton (2008:155), writes of representations in the media, popular culture, and politics, that compound pernicious fantasizes about Aboriginal people – 'a belief in the inevitability of our incapability' – trapping them in a 'reality show' that distracts from addressing real problems of education, economy, and health.

While these methodological insights form an important background to the present article, our primary concern is somewhat different. Daniel and I have set out to explore book work as a valid expression within the ongoing iteration of narratives like *wata* through the generations. In other words, book work that extends the Wägilak *raki'*, directly shaping the writer and reader within the formative connections of Wägilak *rom* – book work that sings.

Indeed, the challenge of articulating this approach is itself a formative process, generated in response to the exigencies of textual form, academic expectations, and audience. It has led us to consider what qualities of language, other than the designative, might enhance a meaningful convergence of book work and singing, bringing those who read our words into closer proximity within Wägilak ways of being and knowing.

While the rhetoric of decolonization calls for a return to indigenous epistemologies set over and against Enlightenment thought, impetus to move beyond the designative approaches of ethnography might also be found in western tradition. While the reductive processes of the early Enlightenment set up enduring patterns of engagement within western culture, these have been challenged frequently and even adequately. Invoking the creativity of Romanticism, philosopher Charles Taylor argues that words do not simply designate meaning but *constitute* it, shaping rather than describing the world. In Taylor's (2016:30)

words, language 'brings about the stance whereby we relate to things in the linguistic dimension,' allowing reflection on a situation as well as response to it.

This constitutive dimension can be seen in the way language: articulates and brings things to awareness; foregrounds something within shared experience and holds together an interpretive community; and shapes and give expression to foundational human concerns (Taylor 2016:263–265). Importantly, this occurs in joint space. Language is dialogical and opens new kinds of relations. Taylor (1985:277, 2016:93) is concerned with the way language constitutes and shapes concerns for things like friendship, equality, or freedom, rather than just describing these as features of life.

Written words, far from indicating an epistemological gap between oral and written traditions, can generate connection across cultures, giving definition to common experiences and productive ways of working together. Daniel Wilfred explains how he has learnt more about his own ancestral traditions by sharing with others through a variety of contexts and media: 'If you want more to learn about our culture or the law, you need to share this. You can share to anyone where you go'. By attending to challenges of interpretation and communication in writing, qualities such as humility and respect are also developed – qualities that are of central concern to Yolŋu educative processes through ceremony (see Curkpatrick and Wilfred 2023b; Curkpatrick *et al.* 2024a).

SHAPING PERCEPTIONS THROUGH WORDS

Questions about the relationship between researchers and Indigenous Australian communities have been forefront within Australian academia, across a wide range of disciplines, for decades.[6] Jennifer Deger (in Gurrumuruwuy *et al.* 2019) provides a useful overview of the ways anthropologists 'have worked in close, often collaborative, relationships with Yolŋu since the 1920s', and the ways Yolŋu have reshaped 'anthropological practices and theories' through these partnerships (*ibid.*: 'notes'). This history has shaped an array of approaches to writing, some of which will be explored below, that seek to expand beyond the limitations of descriptive ethnography.

Particularly evident in recent writing on song traditions like *manikay*, Yolŋu and Balanda (non-Indigenous) authors have sought to retain poetic and eventful qualities of song narratives, as they seek to communicate the value of those traditions to new audiences. A distinct phenomenological turn within Yolŋu ethnomusicology, from the 1990s onwards, demonstrates an attempt to do more than just describe the Yolŋu world to outsiders. Scholars like Aaron Corn, Neparŋa Gumbula, Brian Gumbula-Garawirrtja, Franca Tamisari (1998), Fiona Magowan (2007), and the Gay'wu Group of Women (2019) have approached *manikay* first and foremost as an event in which singing shapes engagement with ecology and place.[7] Their writing seeks to convey the many entwined connections of people, place, story, and history that animate Yolŋu performance traditions.

In passages like the one the follows, Corn creatively re-voices the imagination of Yolŋu elders who have taught him:

> There is a song in my mind that takes me to a place of great beauty and antiquity. As its melody undulates through my synapses, I can sense this place anew. I can feel the fine white sand squelching between my toes, so soft and light it is like walking on a cloud. The sands whistle with the wind as it ripples across the bay … In the brilliance of the sun silhouetted against an expansive white cloud, a lone gull cries out to her chicks nested on yonder island … The song takes me to that beach as though I were standing there right now with the soft sands between my

> toes and all the other details I described. Yet now we face a dilemma. At this moment of realization, I can offer no evidence whatsoever that any such thing is going on in my head—no proof of a song, or the place I say it describes. (Corn 2013:146–147)

Throughout the anthropological literature on Arnhem Land, *manikay* and other ceremonial practices have frequently been described as rituals that express hereditary title to land, and that sustain social relations and parliamentary processes (*e.g*. Williams 1986). Such descriptions, which equate Yolŋu ceremonial processes with various Western institutions, have been essential to understanding the significance of Yolŋu performance traditions, especially in relation to land claim processes. Yet by emphasizing the perceptions, connections, and images carried in *manikay*, Corn contrasts Yolŋu conceptions of law and corporate identities with the sorts of legal writing found in leather-bound books. While there are similarities, there are also fundamental differences. Yolŋu law is recorded in song, like writing in a book. However, unlike a law book, which records historical precedents that are subsequently applied to present decision-making, Yolŋu read present life as an expression of ancestral activity that generates present relations between people and place, a living text which comes to be recognized through performance.

Another approach to writing that draws on a Yolŋu aesthetic imagination is offered by Jennifer Deger and Paul Gurrumuruwuy in their visually stunning book, *Phone and Spear: A Yuṯa Anthropology* (Gurrumuruwuy *et al*. 2019). This book invites the reader into the complex and dynamic relationships of the Yolŋu world, through text and digital images that juxtapose ancestral narratives with scenes of contemporary life in an Aboriginal community. Far from fragmentary as surface appearances might suggest, this collection of short narratives and images taken on mobile-phones, reveals profound ancestral motifs (colours, designs, stories) through an interactive textual surface that reflects many relations of Yolŋu *gurruṯu* (kinship) and *wäŋa* (country).

Struggling to find a 'textual form adequate to the digital lives and materialities that are the subject of *Phone and Spear*', Deger asks, 'Can a book hum?' (Gurrumuruwuy *et al*. 2019 n.p.). This question encapsulates her desire to see her own relationships with the Gapuwiyak community enlivened through print and online formats: how 'to animate the gaps between words and images, digital and analogue, English language and Yolŋu concepts, between past and present, past and future, us and them, here and there … How to set up a field of resonance between worlds coming ever more into relation, and yet still, distinctly, far apart?' (*ibid*., 'Can a book hum?') Gurrumuruwuy [PG] also recognizes the written form as an important strategy to reach non-Yolŋu audiences, which Degar [JD] seeks to extend through her own responsive interpositions:

> [PG] Yolŋu people don't care about writing. But balanda [non-Indigenous] people, read and read. That's how we'll catch them. Like when that honey is in the tree … that's how we're going to make this book […].
> [JD] Can a book hum? On the phone one day I put my question to Gurrumuruwuy. He got it immediately. And ran with it. Straight to bees and hives.
> [PG] Humming? Yo [yes]. Humming. Like harmony. That sort of thing? Yo, that's what we're doing. Making it one voice, one rirrakay, humming with unity, with waŋgany [one] feeling. That makes me think about someone who hums like guku, like the bush bees, and the honey. When you are searching for honey, you have to put your head close to the tree you can hear that sound, that hum of those

> bees. Rrambaŋi, together, yaka [not] back and forth. But inside. Together. Alive! […].
> [JD] Is my job in this *yuṯa* [new] anthropology to simply put my ear to the tree? To listen (and transcribe) what people say about ancestral bees, honey hunting ancestors, creation and mobile phones? (Gurrumuruwuy *et al*. 2019, 'Can a book hum?')

Like Corn's imaginative prose, the literary and visual style of *Phone and Spear* extends from Deger's extensive research on Yolŋu creativity and performance, in which she has considered the ways ancestral narratives emerge through the thickly textured aesthetic object (painting, photography, film) – akin to the way that the 'livingness', 'brilliance', or 'power' of an ancestral subject emerges through the shimmering surface of painting or song (Deger 2006, 2007, 2016; see also Curkpatrick and Wilfred 2023a; Morphy 1989). As in photography, which has a 'unique capacity to make absence present', the subject of photography comes from elsewhere, in time or place (Deger 2016:125). In a similar way to Corn, as cited above, Deger's writing emphasizes the complex relational connections that emerge between people, places, and things: 'If "old" anthropology understands its task to be revealing one world to another, the challenge of *yuṯa* [new] anthropology is to bring different worlds into relationship' (Deger, in Gurrumuruwuy *et al*. 2019, 'Yuṯa anthropology'). In contrast to words that describe cultural differences (ethnography as a designative enterprise), Deger and Corn write to shape relations and perceptions (ethnography as constitutive of experience), suggesting the potential for ethnography to remain an integral part of collaborative research with Yolŋu.

Also writing from an Australian 'Top End' perspective and a long familiarity with Yolŋu people and culture, Helen Verran (2021:236) provides another alternative to descriptive ethnography, considering what it means to write an 'ethnographic story' that draws meaning out of otherwise 'inchoate experience'. A narrative account of a bus trip in Darwin and some Aboriginal people she encounters along the way, much like a scene from a novel, draws the reader into her experience. Because of the familiarity of this scene – a trip on the bus, watching other passengers board and alight – her account might be considered *parabolic*, with the potential to cast (*bolē*) a new perspective or more nuanced understanding across (*para*) the surface of the everyday.

Verran introduces herself as a situated observer who seeks to make sense of experience. She writes, 'we need to be careful in deploying words as we (re)experience our inchoate experience of experience. Our stories are always re-presenting rather than representing' (*ibid*.:236). Her writing is therefore both reflexive and creative, and she invites the reader to draw out meaning as they too consider how they are constituted 'as reader-in-the-text' (*ibid*.:240).

While Verran's notion of *re-presentation* carries distinctly postmodern overtones, it also resonates with a widely expressed epistemology within Indigenous Australia. It is a notion that might be discerned in a phrase used by Daniel, to explain his (innovative) performances with non-Indigenous jazz musicians: 'What we do today is nothing new, we only do what the elders have done before us' (Daniel Wilfred in Curkpatrick 2020:109).[8] Through the performance (or re-presentation) of ancestral songs, new connections and relationships are drawn out of inherited forms. As in Verran's ethnographic approach, the literary or performative event generates attentiveness to the way things around us are connected, and the ways we make meaning of present experiences through narrative.

These writings by Corn, Deger, and Verran have encouraged me to experiment with different ways of engaging Yolŋu voices within established formats of academic publishing. My articles with Daniel (Curkpatrick and Wilfred 2023a, 2024) and Warlpiri elder Wanta

Jampijinpa Pawu (Curkpatrick *et al.* 2024a; Pawu and Curkpatrick 2023) have been developed from conversations (usually recorded over multiple meetings) that are subsequently worked into written dialogues, prioritizing the original conversational progression through narrative themes, albeit with some clarifying phrases added, and others deleted or spliced together from other recordings.

The process of reflection, transcription, and editing also allows new realizations to emerge, shaping the selection of material. In this, we recognize the potential for narratives like *wata* to give impetus to ways of experiencing the world and relating to one another, a focus of the dialogue that follows. As Daniel explains, our task is more important than simply sharing information about Wägilak culture. By singing and telling stories – listening to one another and to generations past – we learn to work together in our differences. It is through the growth of healthy, interdependent community that we recognize the authority and efficacy of ancestral law. Introducing one such recorded conversation, Daniel began:

> I'm here to make this recording for you people to learn, understand and respect. That's what *manikay* is, to learn, understand and respect – you're working with Yolŋu together. Sharing this story to the university: Yolŋu way, Balanda way – together.
> *Raypirri'* [respect, discipline] means you're listening, understanding. With *raypirri'*, you're happy, you feel good on your body. So you have to respect Yolŋu people and listen to our story and listen to your spirit and listening to our *manikay*, with didjeridu and clapping sticks.
> And listen to where the wind is blowing, telling you were to go to the right place, to good country. This story is for you.

STORIED CONNECTIONS

Before turning to our written dialogue on *wata*, it seems necessary to introduce the events that led to our discussion and shaped the selection of material that follows.

The initial conversation was recorded at the roadside in Alice Springs, in Central Australia, and was an attempt to book-end our travel with a semi-formal activity, a research outcome that might be turned into a publication at a later date (understanding that our publications have largely formed the basis of our teaching, generating material that can help other musicians engage with *manikay*).

Daniel had never been to Alice Springs. COVID restrictions in the Northern Territory prevented us meeting in his home community of Ngukurr. We planned to meet instead with another ceremonial leader, Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu from Lajamanu, to see what connections might emerge.[9]

Daniel and I arrived first. Cruising around town with the car windows down, Daniel called out in surprise, 'Hey, there's my cousin from Ngukurr'. We followed him for a short distance but soon lost him as he ducked into a shopping mall. 'No worries, we'll find him again'. Daniel enjoyed seeing the town. Although Alice Springs is 1200 kilometres by road from Ngukurr, it felt familiar: 'These are my people,' he said.

And yet, this was not his place. Nor was it Wanta's really, although he had attended school here. Many families from desert communities like Lajamanu also live around town. Wanta was going to introduce us to some of them, and to the places he had grown up in.

But he did not make it. As I opened door in the caravan park cabin, my phone started ringing. Wanta told me he had contracted COVID and was just starting a period of isolation. He would not make his flight.

Daniel and I set off with tourist map in hand to chat with any locals we could find. We tried the art centres first but could only find two demure middle-aged women from Papunya. We tried the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, but that was closed.

We headed out of town to find a relative staying at Amoonguna, a small community to the south. For half an hour, we drove slowly around the many speedbumps and potholes that littered the community but could not find the right house. We were outsiders without any meaningful connections.

The following morning was spent at Alherrkentye (Trephina Gorge), our first proper look at this beautiful country. We took lunch and sat down in the wide, sandy gorge to chat. The previous night, I had spoken with Daniel about ceremony as a gathering of many different language groups and songlines – everyone 'different together on the sand' (see Curkpatrick and Wilfred 2024).

I wanted to film a short video of Daniel explaining this concept of the *bambula* (ceremonial ground), which has also informed his collaborations with the Australian Art Orchestra. Unsure that filming the gorge itself was culturally appropriate, I thought setting up a camera angle that only showed Daniel sitting on some nondescript sand might be ok. But Daniel avoided talking about filming. Thinking back, he avoided talking about it in the car too.

Taking a short work, Daniel raised his concerns with me. 'Let's do the filming tonight, at the caravan park'. He explained that he felt a presence watching him. 'This is not my country; it doesn't know me; it doesn't know my smell'.

A breeze was blowing, channelled through the gorge. It blew across the sand and rocks, from where we knew not. This was not the *wata* of Wägilak *manikay*. We had not met the owners of this place, had not been welcomed by smoke.

After a few days working at the caravan park, we were due to fly to Darwin in the evening. Checking out from our accommodation, an entire day lay before us. Again, we felt a sense of dislocation and weariness: nothing was open on Sunday, no café at which to sit, no gallery to browse.

With a box of fried chicken and service station pie, we headed towards the airport three hours early. Spotting a small, nondescript information bay at the side of the road, I pulled over and took a picnic mat out of the boot. We sat down and started talking, the importance of wind – of welcome, connection and purpose – at the forefront of our minds.

Alice Springs, 3 April 2022—The Wägilak *Wata*

Samuel: Your ancestral estate or *wäŋa-ŋaraka* ('bone country') is Ɗilipidji, a rocky place about 30 kilometres inland from Blue Mud Bay, isn't it? What sort of wind do you get there?

Daniel: Little one, it comes up – spinning.

S: A willy-willy or whirlwind?

D: Yeah.

S: That's for stone country, hey? I know you have spoken about the cyclone too, which tracks around Blue Mud Bay and around the Gulf of Carpentaria?

D: Yeah. But that cyclone, it's separate. It's coming from boomerang country – different ceremony. The Wägilak wind, it comes from up top, from Gove peninsula and then it goes down, around Numbulwar, to Ngukurr, where it hears the singing with boomerangs. It stands there: 'This is not my place!' Then it comes back, to Ɗilipidji.

S: So when you feel that wind, you know it's always coming from somewhere, from different country. In stone country you get the willy-willy that blows around the low-lying hills. But you feel a different wind blowing from Numbulwar, on the coast, or from other parts of the country?

D: Yeah. Different winds. And if you go to Numbulwar, the wind feels different; you go to Roper [River] – different. That's all song – wind songs. Our wind songs, we call *wata*.

S: So the different winds also relate to the law and ceremony of different Aboriginal groups and their ancestral homelands?

D: Yes. Maybe you're travelling or you go out bush, you feel the wind blow to you. A different wind from different country. Many different ways, where that wind comes from. It comes here, it changes. It goes there, it changes.

S: The complex connections of ceremony. On the ceremonial ground, many different families and country come together.

D: In *buŋgul* (dance and ceremony), we just sing those songs, we sing about the different winds. When you sing the *wata* songs, you can feel where the wind is coming from, which country. And it blows the spirit too: it blows the spirit home, it blows away – goes home.

S: Your *wata* songs are used for smoking ceremonies, aren't they? For cleaning the place where the person died. You sing the wind that picks up and carries the *birrimbirr* (soul) home to its *wäŋa-ŋaraka* (bone country).

D: Yeah, its cleaning the place and cleaning your spirit. And when you go bush, you listen to the wind: it can make you feel at home in the bush too – you can feel comfortable when you feel that wind.

S: It makes you feel alive? Like a cool wind?

D: Makes your body cool and makes you feel good there in the bush, on your land. Because the wind is blowing and birds are talking, leaves are talking.

You can listen to the water moving, you can listen to the wind calling. Sometimes it's calling, that wind. If you burn the grass and that wind, it pushes the fire. Push the fire all the way to burn the country. You burn it here, one grass, and the wind moves the fire, moves the smoke, moves the spirit where you are going.

S: So the wind, with the fire and smoke, cleans the country? And if the country's clean, you're clean?

D: Now you're clean and your body is clean.

If you go to the community or outstation, you have to burn it before you touch that land. So you can feel good, with that wind and smoke. Burn the land. Make you feel good. Wind can welcome you to your country; it can smoke the spirit, so you feel comfortable on the land. If you burn smoke and leaves, well you feel good and you feel happy, before you touch that land.

It's got stories, that wind. You have to stop and listen. Through *manikay*, through that songline, this wind was travelling with people, with our ancestors, where they used to walk.

S: Blowing through your country and songs.

D: It's always blowing, it never stops. It never stops. Cyclone can just come and go. Willy-willy, that's another one: it's not like a cyclone – we call it *bidjuḏu*. It picks up and disappears. But *wata*, it doesn't disappear, it's always blowing. Always. I tell you, in our way and in our song, to Wägilak, *wata* means blowing the spirit back home. The spirit, flying back home with wind and with smoke. Sending back the spirit. To us, the Wägilak *wata*, well it was standing: that wind was standing, looking where to go and where to blow. When you sing those songs, you look west, north, east, south – asking which way? What tracks am I going to follow? We sing those different tracks.

S: Different paths that the wind takes?

D: We sing that: which way are we going to go. Are we going to sing the track to Dhumundurr? Or Luṯunba? Or Ɗilipidji? [ancestral estates of different Wägilak families] Or to my *gagu* [mother's mother's] county, Wuḻku? Or Maŋgurra country? That's what wind means, when we sing those songs.

S: It's all those connections, isn't it, with different *gurruṯu* (kin)? You sing the right song depending on the ceremony and who is present, to strengthen those connections? You name those places in song and the wind blows everyone together.

D: It's blowing all the different country together, from many different places it blows. And we come together and form together on the ceremony ground. It's blowing the spirit, from their homeland and where they are buried. You can feel that wind coming. You're asking about the *wata* songs for Djuwalpaḏa [Wägilak ancestor]. He travelled with the wind, from our country, from Ɗilipidji. That wind travelled with that Ɗirriŋirri [another name for Djuwalpaḏa], all the way, through all the places he travelled.

S: Through the country he created as he walked through the land.

D: When you do a smoking ceremony, when someone passes away, you smoke that shop or house. Well, you are sending that spirit back to the country. When you sing your songs, you just follow where Djuwalpaḏa travelled with that wind.

And if you are visiting that country, you can feel the spirit – it's there. You can feel the wind blow with you, as you move in that country. You gotta know what that wind is blowing because it's telling you, this is my *wäŋa* (country), this is my *wäŋa*. You're here now and you feel happy; you can feel that connection there, with the story there. And that wind is all the time there. When you do that smoking, it's true. It's really true – I'm not telling you liar.

Yo! That's the *wata* now. *Likuda ŋapana gurrugumurr wakura gurrumirri dapunbarma wurrpanbuma.* 'Know the spirit of the places that are named in the wind story'. To make you understand and to listen: I'm telling the story about country and land and blowing the spirit away.

Yolŋu, from bottom, top, everyone, all the different clans. The wind is blowing everyone back home – all the different county. But it is the same wind. It sends everybody home. Yo! *Butunbala waŋalil lärralil* 'The wind going back to Lärra, stone spear country'.

Who I am, who my family is, how we are connected with that wind, because that wind going to move me – send me back home.

It brings story, that wind. It brings your story, through that wind, giving you life.

MOVING ON, BLOWN BY THE WIND

Giving rise to concerns of difference, connection, and movement, *wata* is a significant theme for considering approaches to dialogue and writing with Yolŋu. The Wägilak *wata* blows through many different ancestral homelands, connecting people and place through the observations of the ancestral *mokuy* (ghost) Djuwalpaḏa, who travelled through the land singing and dancing. The natural and social connections Djuwalpaḏa first observed through song are sustained by performances that draw together different families, generations, and country in ceremony – 'different together on the sand' – giving impetus to patterns of welcome, nurture, and the restoration of relationships.

Wata is an inherently complex narrative, its meaning not communicated by any singular definition or context. Like the many different voices and languages that weave

together in *manikay* performances, dialogue emphasizes meaning-making as connectivity that generates healthy communities and good feelings.[10] While dialogue can provide an 'alternative to isolating or domineering monologue' (Fabian 1990b:763) by foregrounding multiple perspectives, it also reveals the importance of our behaviour in effecting understanding: *raypirri'* (respect, discipline) is necessary to listening with openness and being carried along by conversations that have a momentum of their own. In a similar way, sitting together with humility and patience underwrites responsive and responsible communities of difference.

Through *raypirri'*, we also develop *gakal* (skill), a term that literally means 'calves', suggesting the skill of dancing developed over many years of participation in ceremony. While *gakal* refers to a quality of leadership or specialization within ceremonial performance, it is also the capacity to interpret experience through ancestral identities and narratives (Curkpatrick 2023b). *Gakal* develops by attending to old in the new – by diligently following *djalkiri* (footprints) of ancestral creativity that continue to sustain healthy people and places.

Through our teaching and writing, Daniel and I have asked what it means first to hear, and then to share narratives like *wata* with others. More than describing *wata*, this means writing, speaking, and singing in a way that extends qualities of *wata* – such as connection, movement, welcome, and renewal – through our present activities and interpretations. Written dialogue offers an epistemological hinge that can help non-Indigenous academics in Australia pivot from the designative functions of language towards the constitutive eventfulness of language – from ethnographic representations of people and place, towards book work that sings. Written dialogue shifts focus towards the relational dynamics of *graphos* (writing, image) that substantiate understanding across *ethnos* (nations, peoples) and allow new understandings to emerge across cultural difference.

Such are the epistemological dynamics that have underpinned Daniel's collaborative work with musicians across Australia for the past decade.[11] The narrative of *wata* has been used to welcome others into performance with and alongside Yolŋu traditions, and to encourage them to explore their relational connections with one another through song. Through his singing and teaching, Daniel asks how the convergence of different winds – crosscurrents from other times and places – might combine with the Wägilak *wata*, drawing us into a dynamic and mutually formative community.

Recently, *wata* was the theme of a large collaborative work composed by Paul Grabowsky, in collaboration with Daniel and his uncle David Wilfred, and performed by the Australian Art Orchestra and Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (2021): 'Wata: a gathering for songmen, improvising soloists and orchestra' (see Curkpatrick and Wilfred 2024). Having flown to Darwin following our conversation on the roadside in Alice Springs, we considered how *wata* has shaped Daniel's collaborations, gathering us in our differences and moving us forward together with purpose.

Darwin, 4 April 2022—'It never stops, the wind'[12]

S: Collaboration is like *wata*, a gathering of different people and country – to learn from one another and feel good together. That's what you are doing with the orchestra, with Paul Grabowsky, the Australian Art Orchestra and everyone else, aren't you?

D: That's what I'm doing with everyone, with the *wata*. Gathering up, and we are sharing; we are sharing that story; we're sharing our knowledge, our story, our life. What

does collaboration mean? Many different tribes coming together and collaborate this music or collaborate this song and share this song to the open place for people to se. So people can understand. We're sharing things – that's collaboration.

If you go to Yolŋu people, you see one person there waiting for ceremony – one there waiting, or maybe five or six people. When you come up to the ceremonial ground, on the sand and sharing your culture, your knowledge, what your story is. [In the same way], you come up to stage playing with the symphony orchestra. You see people there – they're sharing their story too, what they learn. And if you look the Yolŋu man, Djuwalpada, standing there with clapping sticks. We're all sharing, with different instruments. I say to the orchestra: 'Come on, come on together. We gotta share this thing, share our life – what we learn'.

Come up to stage with the orchestra, we sing *wata*, we're doing a smoking ceremony. We're smoking. When we get *wata* we're all smoking the Balanda and Yolŋu to be happy and to perform that music, *wata* music. We form together and we feel happy inside. But we're still feeling the wind blowing; we still can feel it. We can still feel that wind coming, coming towards us. And blowing us away, where we can go, how we can share all the way the story and the song, playing with Balanda, sharing, talking story, telling about Yolŋu people, listening to Balanda. But we have to smoke them with *wata*.

S: How do we travel together with that wind?

D: Because we are singing and we are following that wind. We're not making up stories, we're just following that wind. All the way. All the way. You go clean yourself on the smoke, on the fire, clean your body. Because your spirit is going to go all the way back to its homeland. It's not going to stay there because the *wata*, with smoke and fire – it will go back.

Wata is going to show you how to be *raypirri'* (respectful) and how to understand – how to know the people and take care of all the people. *Wata* is the main one: smoke your body with the smoke, make you free. You're free. Make that wind clean your body so you can go with good spirit – you can be a good person walking. You can have a good life, you can [be a] happy man. You can look after people. That's what. To make you understand, Balanda and Yolŋu ways, to work together and build this thing.

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ENDNOTES

1. Wägilak is a Dhuwa moiety Yolŋu language from Northeast Arnhem Land. Daniel Wilfred's ancestral homeland is Ɗilipidji, also known as Lärr (Stone Spear Country), about 30 kilometres inland from the coast of Blue Mud Bay and on the Walker River. Today, Wägilak people mainly live in the communities of Ngukurr, Numbulwar and Gapuwiyak. For a detailed study of Wägilak history and ancestral narratives, as expressed through *manikay*, see Curkpatrick (2020).

2. There is a rich body of literature in anthropology and ethnomusicology that considers Yolŋu relations with the land, and the sorts of corporate identities sustained or *performed* in song. See especially Corn (2008), Keen (2000), Morphy (1991), Tamisari (1998), Williams (1986).
3. On *kuruwarri*, see Pawu and Curkpatrick (2023).
4. See Fabian (1990b) on the emergence of ethnography as concept and its various etymological nuances.
5. Charles Taylor (2016) bases his definition of these *designative* approaches to language on his interpretation of theories of meaning as developed by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Étienne Condillac.
6. Such as those authors cited above, in relation to collaborative ethnomusicology. For further sources on communicating the significance of song as law to non-Indigenous Australians, see Corn (2005, 2009); Corn and Garawirrtja (2019); Corn and Gumbula (2004). On repatriation and community engagement, see Barwick and Turpin (2016); Bracknell (2020a, 2020b); Brown and Treloyn (2017).
7. A similar study with Yanuwa people and country (to whom Daniel Wilfred also has family connections) is made by Kearney (2022).
8. Compare with the often-cited words of celebrated Yolŋu artist Narritjin Maymuru, 'We can't follow a new way—the new way I cannot do that—I go backwards in order to work. I cannot do any new things because otherwise I might be making up a story—my own thoughts, you see—and people over there, wise people, would look at my work and say, 'Ah! That's only been made up by him' (cited in Morphy 2020:148). Similarly, Judith Ryan (1985:4) cites Warlpiri artist Abe Jangala commenting on 42 paintings made at Lajamanu on uneven, recycled building materials. For Jangala, these affirm that 'Yapakurlangu or Aboriginal law is still our law. It is the law of Walyajarra, the people who lived and died a thousand years ago, and we cannot change that'.
9. As part of the research project, 'Openings for collaborative theology through classical Yolŋu and Warlpiri epistemology' (2021–2022), funded by the University of Divinity, with Samuel Curkpatrick, Aaron Corn, Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu, Daniel Wilfred and Sarah Bacaller.
10. See Blakeman (2015) on Yolŋu emotions and the generation of conviviality as an important purpose of ceremonial performance and measure of its efficacy.
11. Wilfred is an artist with the Australian Art Orchestra, whose most significant collaborations with that ensemble include *Crossing Roper Bar* (2005–2015), *Nyilipidji* (2015–2017), composed by Paul Grabowsky, and *Hand to Earth* (2018–ongoing). See below for Paul Grabowsky's *WATA: A Gathering for Songmen, Improvising Soloists and Orchestra* (2021), composed for the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Grabowsky and Knight have both been artistic directors of the AAO. For a more detailed exploration of this work, see Curkpatrick and Wilfred (2024).
12. A video showing an extended part of this conversation in Darwin is 'Wata—the cleansing wind. Daniel Wilfred', produced by Daniel Wilfred and Samuel Curkpatrick, and can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ychYXlgeoN8.

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