Yolngu Country as a Multidimensional Tangle of Relationships
How 'Everything is Linked to One Another'

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Abstract   This paper explores how Australian Indigenous people express their mutual life-giving bonds with other-than-humans such as animals, plants, natural features, and land in terms of kinship relationships. I will describe an 'ontology of connectivity' and a 'mutuality of being' among living beings in terms of reciprocal responsibility, interdependence, cooperation and care. In reference to my ethnographic research in Northeast Arnhem Land, I insist on the priority of relating, and on the affective nature of multispecies relationships, and illustrate how these are celebrated, maintained and reactivated through ceremonial songs, as well as new forms of music.

Keywords   Australian Indigenous country. Totemism. Multispecies kinship. Ontology of connectivity. Yolngu people. Northeast Arnhem Land. North Australia.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 In The Company Of Others. –3 Totemism As An Indigenous System Of Mutual Life-Giving. – 4 Law and Country as an Ontology of Connectivity. – 5 Places Not Only Are, They Happen. – 6 Conclusion: Holding And Feeling The Law.

> Those who are to be in the world are constituted in intra and interactions. The partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject-object-shaping dance of encounters.
>
> (Haraway 2008, 4)

1 Introduction

This paper explores how Australian Indigenous people experience and negotiate their mutual bonds with other-than-humans, such as animals, plants, natural features, the environment and all states of being in terms of kinship relationships. In particular, I will illustrate an "ontology of connectivity" (Rose 2017, 495; 1999) and a "mutuality of being" (Sahlins 2011) by focusing on the dynamics of an extended sociality (Rose 2001, 4) among different living beings in terms of mutual responsibility, reciprocity, interdependence, cooperation and care. As Sahlins (2011, 15) notes "[t]he same mutuality of existence is involved in trans-specific relations of kinship" and he concludes that "this is no metaphor, but a sociology of moral, ritual, and practical conduct".

As I did on the occasion of the conference *Humanities, Ecocriticism and Multispecies Relations*, held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in 2020, when I presented an earlier version of this paper, I will start by telling a few episodes I recorded during my fieldwork in Milingimbi, a Yolngu Indigenous community in Northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia.[1] What these events bring to the fore is not merely what a person is, as either human or other-than-human, nor simply the notion of agency and sentience attributed to things, animal, plants or natural phenomena (see Merlan 2019 for a review in Australian Indigenous Studies). These notions have, indeed, been central in the questioning of the nature-culture divide (Descola 2005; Ingold 2000), debunking the dichotomies between persons and things, humans and other-than humans, minds and bodies, belief and performance from several broadly defined theoretical approaches within what is known as the "ontological turn" (Kohn 2015 for a review), "interspecies ethnographies" (Haraway 2008), "environmental an-

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[1] Established as a Methodist Mission in 1923 and located at around 500 km east of Darwin, Milingimbi is one of the five Yolngu communities in the Northeast Arnhem Land region that extends from Cape Stewart in the West, near Maningrida, and the Koolatong River in the Southeast, near Yirrkala, and includes the settlements of Galuwin'ku (also known as Elcho Island), Gapuwiyak (also known as Lake Evella), Yirrkala, and Ramingining. According to the 2016 census, residents in the Milingimbi community were 1,225, and those in Northeast Arnhem Land region were 14,020 (Australian Bureau of Statistics).

thropology" (Kopnina, Shoreman-Ouimet 2017; Rose 2011) and the renewed interdisciplinary discussion on animism and "new animism" (Harvey 2013). Beyond the notions of personhood and agency, these episodes shift attention to relatedness itself, and further to the nature of relating, in other words, how and when to relate correctly in terms of reciprocal attention, respect and care (Rose 2013a; Bird-David 1999). In Sahlins' (2011) words: "[w]hat is in question is the character of the relationships rather than the nature of the person" (13), or the ways persons "are members of one another" and "participate intrinsically in each other's existence" (2). From this perspective, "kinsmen are persons who belong to one another, who are members of one another, who are co-present in each other, whose lives are joined and interdependent" (11). As Hallowell (cited in Harvey 2013, 15) has noted, what is important is not whether all rocks are considered alive, but how humans relate appropriately with a specific rock at a particular moment (see also Povinelli 1993). As Naveh and Bird-David (2013, 27) elaborate "a full recognition of the working of relationality requires careful attention to diverse, local, specific and *immediate* acts of relating" (italics added). I understand 'immediacy' not only as intimacy or a sociality defined in terms of an organisation of feelings (Myers 1986), but also as affecting and being affected, knowing and being known, in other words, a logic of sensing, a "mutuality of being" (Stasch 2009), or an "interdependent existence" (Sahlins 2011, 12) founded on shared substance, land and cosmogonic events, experiences, food, life conditions, memories, reciprocal care, responsibility acted out in the singularity and depth of each encounter (Tamisari 2006). Exploring the dynamics of relationships with companion species, Haraway (2008, 17) not only insists that "partners do not precede their relating" but she maintains that they are the "fruit of becoming with", "a process of learning to pay attention", to respond and respect (19) in the "dance of relating" when "[a]ll the dancers are redone through the patterns they reenact" (25), an embodied process of acquaintance and becoming along (Ingold 2013, 9 ff.; 2011) with all the contingent challenges and risks, commitment and accountability that it demands.

As I was taught and I learnt on being adopted soon after my arrival in Milingimbi, a person is not a relative only in terms of biological descent or the position (s)he occupies in the local kinship system but is involved in a process of becoming a relative. As Yolngu often say, at birth children follow the father (*ba:paw malthun*) and they belong to his patrimoiety and patrilineal group, yet one's membership is fully accomplished through a life-long process of socialisation which maintains and completely realises, rather than effacing, the uniqueness of each individual (Tamisari 2006, 20).

A Yolngu image that conveys this process of becoming intimately related is the 'fire ashes' or 'charcoal embers' (*ganu'* or *lirrwi'*), as

Yolngu people call the 'campfire' or the 'hearth'. Located in the immediate vicinity of every residential group's house in the community, the campfire is where food is cooked and eaten, announcements are made, everyday events are discussed, meetings are held, stories and memories are told, baskets are woven and visitors are received.[2] Given that the hearth is never moved, it also connects the present with the past as the members of an extended family keep on sharing their lives around the same place where their deceased relatives once gathered. However, just as the fire ashes are not simply a metaphor for relatedness characterising the intimacy of the domestic sphere (Carsten 2000), neither does socialisation alone shape the individual's personality by introducing her to the values shared by a group. The image of the fire ashes conveys the Yolngu principle of becoming-with others, the manner in which one's individual sensitivity – namely the way in which one opens oneself and pays attention to the other – is called on to verify, define and redefine the fundamental socio-cultural values of the group one inhabits (cf. De Monticelli 2003, 166). A person becomes a relative if, for instance, she spends a long time with others around the hearth, cares for others, shares one's possessions, participates in a "single sense of feeling" (*ngayangu wangany*) that "is ultimately the value of social equilibrium and social order more broadly" (Blakeman 2015, 399). I propose that this notion of Yolngu sociality based on co-presence and participation is not limited to human beings but characterises the relationships with all other-than-humans, as a process of becoming-with in which all beings are affected by and affect others.

Relating with others is accomplished through a series of encounters before, during and after one's life, by means of enduring and changing relationships with other beings, including one's country and everything shaping and dwelling in it at particular times and places. All encounters with other beings, visible and invisible, in the past and in the present, contribute to shaping people as well as the world they inhabit. Despite the rapid social and economic changes begun with the establishment of the Methodist mission in 1923 in Milingimbi, the introduction of welfare policy in the mid-1960s and the institutionalisation of a local government in the early 1970s, Yolngu peo-

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2 Several anthropologists have noted and explained the basis and logic of relatedness in Australian Indigenous communities as stemming from co-residence, everyday cooperation and ritual association. Sansom (1980, 12) describes how mobs constitute themselves in grounding their "union in histories of shared experience between people 'who have 'run together' for years n years'". Myers (1986, 91) reports that "one countryman [...] used to travel together", even though their homelands were separate; and one's *walytja* ('one family' and 'all related') are not all consanguineous but "include those with whom one grows up, those with whom one is familiar, those who have fed and cared for one, and those with whom one camps frequently" (110).

ple in this region have been able to maintain mutual-life-giving and caring relationships with their countries and everything constituting them through ceremonial songs. In exploring the centrality and priority accorded by Yolngu to how "everything is linked to one another" (Marika-Mununggiritj 1991, 22), I will conclude by focusing on how Yolngu people have found new forms of music that keep on activating an ontology of connectivity or mutual life-giving bonds.

2   In The Company Of Others

After a few months of my stay at Milingimbi, I noticed that the hems of my dresses had been torn just above the bottom stitching line, and I wondered whether they might have been caught in the washing machine I was using. One day, as I walked into my place – indeed, more of a shack than a house – I caught a glimpse of two small shining eyes on top of a colourful heap of material wedged between the corrugated iron wall and one of the shack's wood posts. I looked more carefully, and I saw that the missing fabric from my dresses made up a beautifully-built nest that was the home of a small mouse and its offspring. With some apprehension, as I did not like to share my house with such a companion, I asked one of my adoptive sons to help me get rid of the mouse. He looked at me and with a big smile replied that I could not get rid of it because she was my grandmother! And he concluded: "you must welcome her and share your place with her as she has recognised you and has settled here to protect you". This species of mouse (*nyik nyik*, Northern hopping-mouse, i.e. *Notomys aquilo*) in fact belongs to a group and originates from a territory to which, after my adoption into the Yolngu kinship system, I relate to as, and call, grandmother.

<div align="center">*</div>

At the beginning of my stay in Milingimbi, I was invited to participate in a small hunting and gathering party on a nearby island by a woman who had adopted me as her younger sister. I was strictly instructed to follow her and do whatever I was told while she was looking for yams to gather. It was difficult to keep up with her as she scuttled through the thick bush. After a few hours of no success, I heard my sister introducing me to the environment surrounding us with the following words: "How are you? I'm your relative, your child, please let us find and give us something of your good food. Please, be generous with us. She [referring to me] is a good person, although she comes from far away, she is part of the family now". Back at the camp on the island where we spent the night, my adoptive brother explained to me that one's homeland (*ngarraka*, literally 'bones') must recognise and

welcome you before sharing its resources. He ended up by affirming: "this is not a supermarket where anyone can enter and buy stuff. You must know the land and the land must recognise you".

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George was gathering some water chestnuts (*r**, generic name, *Eleocharis Dulcis*) in a lagoon on his country and these particular corms were unusually enormous.[3] George straight away thought that this was a sign that his wife would soon have conceived a child. When his daughter was born, he called her R*, the generic name for this corm, as it was the plant that announced his daughter's conception. Furthermore, he gave her a second proper name which could be translated as 'shining intermittingly'. This name is a proper name of Venus, the Evening Star, as well as the Turrum fish (*Carangoides fulvoguttatus*), one of the ancestral beings who shaped George's land and gave life to everybody and everything animate and inanimate inhabiting it. The connection established by this name between the corm, the fish and the Evening Star is revealed by sharing the knowledge of cosmogonic events characterised by bodily transformations. As they explained to me:

> When the Evening Star rose into the sky, it was attached to a thread with which Moon was dragged along. They started from the east and they travelled towards the west. At a certain point, Moon was the first to fall into the sea and transformed himself into a big Turrum fish and was followed by Venus who transformed himself into a small Turrum fish who now follows the bigger fish at the end of the thread.

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During another hunting and gathering trip on Howard Island, an uninhabited land (*wa:nga*) owned by my adoptive sister's group, we had just settled down on the sandy beach for the night, when my sister, lying next to me, showed me a cloud in the sky in the shape of a shark. Being related to the Shark group through marriage, she was visibly worried and explained that it was a sign announcing the death of the relative belonging to the Shark group. When we got back home in Milingimbi the next day, all our children welcomed us and announced

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3 Given the general secret/sacred nature of the different types of Yolngu names, the association they evoke, the power they summon, the authority they confer and the emotive response they might arouse when they are pronounced, I will omit them by inserting the generic terms, the initials followed by an asterisk (*) or, whenever necessary, by glossing them in English (Tamisari 2002).

that a woman, a patrilineal cross-cousin (FZD) belonging to the Shark group, had passed away during the night.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

My adoptive son, Keith Lapulung, once told me after he had visited his own country:

> The boat's engine stopped, and I walked onto a sand bank. From there I could see my land. I was standing on my mother's land and I felt that my homeland (*ngarraka*) was calling me. Your land can make you cry, you know? These waters were full of stingrays and crocodiles, but I walked in it up to my chest and my son swam in it. Our countries are now empty, but ceremony looks after them.

3 Totemism As An Indigenous System Of Mutual Life-Giving

Australian Indigenous religion and kinship system articulate what has been known as totemism, a notion that has occupied a central role in Western social theory and the discipline of anthropology from its very beginning. The study of totemism, as the relationship between a specific group and a particular non-human being, has misled an understanding of common property regimes by privileging the relationship of each group with its own territory over the regional dimensions of groups' rights and duties as an ecological system "of local responsibilities embedded in mutual interdependencies of management" (Rose 2013b, 10). Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, past studies "have hindered an understanding of the relational and connective aspects of totemism" (Rose 2003, 6).

In contrast to Malinowski (1948, 44), who had interpreted totemic cults as a means to satisfy one's own food needs, Lévi-Strauss (1971, 236) affirmed that the totem is not an emblem of society as proposed by Durkheim. He argues that it is not 'good to eat', as proposed by Malinowski, but, rather, 'good to think': an intellectual moment in a broader classification system. Various post structuralist critiques, mainly based on Australian Indigenous data, have argued that totemism cannot be reduced to an abstract, logical and unconscious way of thinking based on sharp and rigid dichotomies, such as nature/culture, body/mind, structure/history, rule/practice. Stanner (1979a, 25) was the first to demonstrate that totemism includes ontological elements which are inseparable from the social and religious system strictly linked to the land, what he calls a "oneness": at the same time a totem, an ancestral body, a spirit, a place, a person and a non-human being. Further, against "gallic systematics",

Worsley's (1967, 141, 151; 1955) English empiricist approach to totemism brings to the fore the spurious division between natural and cultural categories and, drawing on his Groote Eylandt ethnography, stresses the complexity of facts. By noting the central role of myths and songs as "essential ingredients of the totemic system", Worsley (1967, 149) concludes by replacing the idea of "totemic schema as an ordered reality" with "agglomerative, arbitrary and fortuitus" as well as historical collections of "items unconnected in systematic logic or in nature" (151). In a similar vein, Hiatt (1969, 91) draws attention to Lévi-Strauss' difficulties in accommodating two important elements of totemism, namely demographic and historical changes, as well as affective sentiments. The former are described by Lévi-Strauss as disrupting the conceptual and orderly classifying of the wise, while the irrationality of the latter is integrated into the system without managing to affect it, despite it being "inimical or irrelevant". In analysing the nature and role of Aboriginal sentiments in totemism, Peterson (1972, 29) insightfully emphasises that the "attachment of totem to locality is fundamental to Australian totemism". He thus concludes by characterising totemism as "the main territorial spacing mechanism in Aboriginal society" (28).

Regarding totemism, following Rose (2003), I would like to focus on Strehlow's work (1970, see also 1978) in which he sets out the basis for a radical rereading of this notion.[4] Strehlow shifts his attention to the responsibility that each group has for its own territory in order to maintain the species' fertility, not only for itself, but for all the groups in the region. From a regional perspective, Rose (1997; 2013b) stresses socio-political and economic interdependence among groups, and proposes to understand totemism and the associated rituals as:

> a structure in which a regional ritual community is also a community of social and ecological reproduction. It is a community made up of politically autonomous groups, each of which is responsible for the well-being of several species and of the other groups. The system is one of interdependence – the rain people, for example, make rain for everybody, humans and non-humans, and they depend on others to fulfil their responsibilities. The kangaroo people depend on the rain people for rain, and take responsibilities for kangaroos. Their actions benefit everybody, including kangaroos. (Rose 2003, 7)

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4 Ted Strehlow (1908-1978) conducted fieldwork research among the Arrente people in the Central Desert as of the 1930s. Son of the Luthern missiorary Carl Strehlow, he was born in an Indigenous community, and learnt the local language from birth together with English and German.

Thus totemism, from a regional perspective, can be considered "as a common property institution for long-term ecological management" (Rose 2013a, 127). In other words,

> [the] management for long-term productivity, control of sanctuaries, protection of permanent waters, refugia, breeding sites, and selective burning for the preservation of certain plant communities and other refuge areas. (Rose 1997, 7)

It is from this perspective that Rose refers to Elkin's early felicitous definition of totemism as "bonds of mutual life-giving" (Elkin in Rose 2017, 496).

However, the totemic system assumes broader meanings if, in addition to each group's ecological responsibility, we bring to the fore the central role accorded to experience in Indigenous epistemology and everyday practice, in terms of perception, emotional attachment to one's own country, participation and affectivity. Multispecies relationships established in the environment are not limited to reproducing social organisation, affirming and negotiating political identities, nor do they simply sustain fertility and abundance that guarantee survival. The value, meaning and effectiveness of Yolngu Law (*Yolngu rom*) should be understood in terms of correct behaviour towards others, feeling, communicating with, knowing and being known by others. These are ways of relating that generate belonging through affectivity, desire and memory: "an organization of sentiments" (Myers 1986), a becoming-with, a logic of affect based on reciprocity, responsibility, singularity and depth of feeling in each encounter (Tamisari 2006; 2018).

4 Law and Country as an Ontology of Connectivity

In the episodes I reported above, I used the term 'country' interchangeably with land, place and homeland. From an Indigenous perspective, country is not only a geographical location, nor does it simply refer to landscape features. Country is alive with its own personality and character as it was shaped by ancestral beings who transformed their bodies into all aspects of the environment and, through these manifestations, they keep on relating with people. There is also a sea country and a sky country. Each country has its own people and beings who are linked with all the other people and beings that populate other countries in the region: an intricate multispecies network that is rhizomatically interconnected.

> Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun, but a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way as they

would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit county, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalized or undifferentiated type of place, such as one might indicate with terms like 'spending a day in the country' or 'going up the country'. Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will towards life. (Rose 1996, 7)

Yolngu cosmogony realises and expresses connections between people, land and all animate and inanimate beings in the environment by means of long journeys by ancestral beings who shaped and named the land, bestowed territories on different groups and established a series of laws, social and juridical rules and practices, as well as moral orientations, feelings and desires that are at the basis of, and regulate, correct moral and ethical behaviour among all beings. At each stop along their long journeys across the region from east to west, they left an imprint, a trace, a mark (*djalkirri*, literally 'foot' and by extension 'step' and 'foundation') by transforming parts of their bodies into every being of the environment, spoke a different language, and generated a group of humans on whom they bestowed the land and the responsibility of looking after it. Each country thus shares a consubstantial connection between the ancestral being who transformed its body into the world, the person, and every other being generated, shaped and named there. Humans and other-than-humans are kin as they share the same flesh substance and the same language. The imprint is the foundation of the Law as it enfolds the interdependence, reciprocal participation, the intrinsic substantial and social connectivity among ancestral, human and other-than-human bodies, landscape feature, the name, the action, the animal, and the plant at a specific place.

The term Yolngu people used to refer to one's own country is *ngarraka*, literally meaning 'bones', a term that I translate as 'boneland'. A person's is not only consubstantial with a particular landscape feature, animal, plant or phenomenon, but also with a specific cosmogonic action and a proper name. Not only does a person originate and share substance with the land of his/her patrilineal group, but he/she also relates to other groups' territories in term of kinship: one's mother's country, mother's brother's country, grandfather's or grandmother's country and all beings that inhabit it. People and everything in the Yolngu world belong to a group and they originate from the country owned by that group and are related to everything else in a complex kinship system based on specific rights and duties,

correct behaviour, and moral orientation.[5] These journeys thus established what Yolngu people refer to as the Law (*rom*), namely moral rules, land title statutes and guidelines regulating all social interactions and political negotiations. From this perspective, each clan is "a multispecies kinship group" based on mutual life-giving bonds (Rose 2017, 496).

Perhaps it is now easier to understand how the she-mouse who started sharing my house could be my mother's mother, as it is a species of rodent that not only inhabits the land I relate to as my grandmother's land, but shares her bodily substance, her names, character and ways of being with the very country she shaped and named. Grandmothers (MM, *ma:ri* and FM, *momu*), respectively patrilineal and matrilineal relatives, occupy a central position of the residential group gathering around the same hearth where they look after and care for their daughter and sons' children (respectively DC, *gutharra* and SC, *gaminyarr*), feeding and teaching them how to speak and how to behave correctly. As with human grandmothers, the she-mouse chose to share my house to look after and protect me. Thus, I should not have been afraid, but I should have welcomed and looked after her as she was my relative. Acting as a good grandmother or a good daughter's child does not simply imply respecting kinship rules, but paying attention (*ma:rr*), feeling (*ngayangu*) and 'worry' (*warrguyun*) for a relative, be it a human or a mouse. Behaving correctly towards all beings is 'holding Yolngu Law' (*Yolngu rom ngayatham*), a term comprising different meanings. 'To hold' should, in fact, be understood both in terms of observing the Law, that is respecting the rules, and 'holding dear' and 'worrying', in other words, to experience the Law, participate in it, be next to the other through a logic of feeling (*ma:rr*) founded on the singularity and depth of each encounter (Tamisari 2006; 2014a; 2018, 110).

5 Places Not Only Are, They Happen

If each clan is a multispecies kinship group, similarly, "country is multidimensional" because it is made up of people, animals, plants, rock and soil, waters and natural phenomena, such as wind, rain, clouds, ancestral beings, and presences of deceased persons who have merged again into their boneland (Rose 2000, 177). A person shares her/his substance with a place, the cosmogonic action that shaped it and the proper names embodying that action, as well as the song, dance and design bringing all these manifestations to pres-

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5 Yolngu society is composed of two patrimoieties and a series of patrilineal groups related by recurring cross-cousin marriages (Keen 1994).

ence during a ritual. If we want to understand the complexity of the notion of connectivity in Yolngu lifeworld, it is not only necessary "without intellectual struggle [to] enfold into some kind of oneness the notions of body, spirit, ghost, shadow, name, spirit-site and totem" (Stanner 1979a, 25). This 'oneness' also includes the relations with all other-than human beings inhabiting the environment as well as the songs, dances and paintings activating these relations in ritual. From this perspective, any landscape feature, a person, a name, an animal, a plant and a natural phenomenon implies each other. It is however by becoming visible and powerful through performance that each of these manifestations entraps multiple, ramified and interconnected agencies which thus are distributed in beings, objects and events through time and space. This 'distributed agency' is conveyed in the Yolngu image of the footprint (*djalkirri*) as it expresses at once many aspects of connectedness, such as consubstantiality, identification, sequence and trajectory in space and time, similarity and difference, following elders' teaching, and the process of unconcealment or manifestation: knowing the world through sense perception, mainly seeing, hearing and smelling.[6]

In addition, the term *djalkiri* also refers to the correct manner of behaving towards other beings. *Djalkiri* thus not only fuses place and body, but it also marks connections between places and relationships between beings, visualises movement, unravels narratives, embodies names, and reveals the itineraries to be retraced in songs and the actions to be performed in the dances (Tamisari 1998; 2014b; 2018). As Marika-Mununggiritj (1991, 22) says, "the spiritual, religious and social order of connectedness to the land" can be achieved "through the knowledge of understanding everything that is linked to one another". In other words, we could say that all these dimensions of country are interrelated in an intricate meshwork of relationships which change according to the context and the season. Country should not be considered as the sum of relationships *between* all beings as nodes "in a static network of connectors" (Ingold 2007, 75), but rather as a way all beings relate "*along* their several enmeshed ways of life" (Ingold 2007, 103; italics in the original).

All beings in the country are connected in the way they can communicate their ethnobiological and ethnozoological calendars among themselves: where and when resources are plentiful, reading and interpreting the signs that characterise particular seasons. The presence of certain animals and plants announce what will shortly be happening in the environment:

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[6] I draw the notions of "entrapment of agencies" and "distributed agency" from Alfred Gell's (1998) posthumous work on *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*.

[w]hen the march flies bite, the crocodiles are laying their eggs; when the jangarla tree (*Sesbania Formosa*) flowers, the barramundi are biting; when the cicadas sing, the figs are ripe and the turtles are fat. (Rose 2013a, 103)

Yolngu continuously taught me to observe and know the world around me: when the wind makes the casuarina tree whistle in a certain place, turtle eggs are plentiful. When the sand is burning underneath one's feet, the hot season has started and people find specific species of fish and tubers at particular places. When long black clouds appear at the horizon, it is the beginning of the monsoon, a season of plenty, with its abundant rains fertilising the land and making everything grow.[7] As Rose (2013, 103) concludes "[t]his communicative system depends on knowledge" and "active attention". To learn, all beings must pay active attention in seeing the signs and understanding the language.

If every natural pattern, shape, colour and structure constitutes "a world of signs" to Indigenous people (Stanner 1979b, 117), the episodes I described above also clearly show that all beings and the land act intentionally on the shared background knowledge of the social and kinship ties that bind them to one another (Povinelli 1994, 155). Indeed, the first fundamental teachings I was given after I was adopted and thus placed in a specific position in the complex kinship system linking me to people and to everything else in the environment, was to pay attention, read, understand and respond to all signs around me, in order to behave in a correct and respectful manner towards human and non-human others.

This knowledge, taught by previous generations and acquired over many years, is necessary to be a successful hunter and gatherer, to affirm one's own rights and claim one's own authority over country, and eventually become an elder who bears the responsibility of passing on this cultural, political and economic heritage to the next generation.

Yolngu song texts describe that all beings have the ability to connect and communicate in different ways, and, in some cases, they use verbal language (*dharuk*) as well as produce meaning (*mayali*). Among many, the following two examples are illustrative. In the first one,

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7 Yolngu people recognise six seasons: 1. the season before the rains when the black clouds gather in the sky (*dhulurdurr'*, October-November); 2. the season of the west wind which brings the rains and makes the bush food grow (*ba:rra'mirri*, December-January); 3. the season when new shoots appear (*bayaltha*, February-March); 4. the season when bush foods are ripe and plentiful and the wind blows from the east (*midawarr*, March-April); 5. the cold season when the rains stop, bush food is still collected and turtle hunting begins (*dharratharra*, May-July); 6. the hot season when everything is dry (*rarrandharr*, August-September).

a unit of a Djambarrpuyngu song series along the coast of Flinders Peninsula describes – with powerful images, sounds and lyrics – a heavy black cloud (*bulunu'*) full of rain rising from the east and looming on the horizon over Inglis Island. As it advances it obscures the sky and darkens the colour of the sea. Its stripe underneath (*rraw*) is black with rain which will soon transform itself into Polynesian arrowroot and *amorphophelius* (*luwiya*). Rain changes direction and, turning around, approaches the coast and finally pours down on the mainland (*makarrlaṯjbarkthun*) at a specific place bringing a chilly breeze that makes one cold (*yapum dharyun*).

The second example refers to how a bird's words become contained in the clouds, a recurrent event described in the songs of many Yolngu groups. Sooty Oyster Catcher (*gadaka*) is flying over the sea crying in a loud and piercing call. His voice is so loud that it is carried for a long way (*warryun*, literally 'dragged'). The Oyster Catcher disappears but, through his sobbing, his call continues by itself (*lalayarrkyarrkthun*). His 'language' (*nandarṯ dharuk*) is speaking whilst crying (*napurrapurra*) and is sent up (*ngal'maram*) to the clouds. The bird's language becomes contained in the clouds (*dharuk wukungur ga gorrum*).[8] Words inside the clouds separate, thus reaching the countries owned by two Djambarrpuyngu subgroups. The bird's voice turns into words and into clouds, speaks different languages and has different 'meanings'. The bird's voice/language/meaning/cloud originating from each Djambarrpuyngu subgroup's country gather in turn over each subgroups' land and, finally, separate in order to return to hang over the country they originated from (Tamisari 2018, 250; 2014a).

5.1 Safe and Dangerous Places

In the song episodes I recall above, country, as composed by many interdependent beings, is welcoming to its own descendants and hostile to strangers (Biernoff 1977), while natural phenomena and animals can announce a birth or a death, or choose to cohabit with relatives in order to protect them.

Places and countries recognise their own descendants mainly through language and smell, as they share the same substance, and are safe and generous with them. When a person dies, her/his country suffers and becomes barren and silent; when country is harmed and damaged the person and her descendants fall sick.

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8   The song text suggests that Oyster Catcher's voice transformed itself into the clouds in what I term a process of "morphopoiesis, that is speaking forms into place, the making of place through names" (Tamisari 2002, 99; see also Tamisari 2018, ch. 4.2).

As in the episode I recall above, and on other occasions, the country owner had to intercede. As soon as I arrived on the island where we were to stay for a couple of days collecting yams and turtle eggs, my sister passed her hands underneath her armpits and put her own sweat on my shoulders so that the country could recognise me. However, after an unsuccessful gathering afternoon, she had to speak her own language, reminding her boneland that she was kin and, as such, should have given her some food. As I recalled above, she literally introduced me to the country as a stranger who, in any case, had been welcomed and thus had become part of the family. This episode was the main conversation around the campfire that evening when our brother explained to me that country is not like a supermarket, an impersonal place where anyone can enter and take food in exchange for money. Country is a relative, it is the place where he and his patrilineal relatives originated from and will return to after death. Country is kin, and as with all kin people establish and cultivate a respectful and caring relationship with it based on mutual respect, care and responsibility. A person or a group have the duty to look after country in order to be looked after by it. Looking after country means maintaining and renewing a relationship by visiting and camping regularly on the country, talking to it, and burning it when necessary to facilitate regrowth (Povinelli 1994, 152-60; Rose 1994). Being and working on country makes it happy and ready to reciprocate. Country gives up its riches in reciprocity for being looked after. Being on one's own country, not only for hunting and gathering, but also simply sitting and being there, is an act of caring for and looking after the land that in turns nourishes its people (Povinelli 1994; Rose 1996).

5.2 Conception and Death Signs

Country communicates to a man when his wife is going to conceive. The child to be born shows its 'shadow' of 'appearance' (*mali'* or *wulguli'*) to the father-to-be in a place on his country or a patrilineally related country.[9] The signs announcing a conception are easily recognised as they are events in which animals, plants or natural phenomena interact with humans in unusual ways. For instance, a crocodile that outlives a shooting, a big snake that survived after being run over by a car, an unusually large shark coming close and rest-

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9 It is interesting to note that the terms for 'shadow' and 'appearance' are used interchangeably to refer to reflexes in the water, a photographic reproduction, a shadow cast by light or a recorded voice. See Deger 2006, 119-20 and 126-7 for a discussion on the Yolngu use and meaning of photography in ritual and everyday contexts.

ing next to a boat, or an extremely large frog that would croak as if it were talking. These manifestations are then verified and confirmed through body marks which are visible on the newborn's body: the greyness of the baby's complexion recalling the shark's skin colour, the tire marks on the baby's leg proving that the run-over snake was the 'shadow' or manifestation of the baby to be born, and so on.

These events, which usually take place while people are visiting or hunting on country, demonstrate how economic practices are cultural, religious and political moments in the development of intricate relationships between humans and other-than-humans in the environment. While people are busy looking after country by visiting, hunting and talking to it, country may reciprocate by showing/manifesting itself in a person who will soon be conceived, thus contributing to the biological reproduction of the patrilineal country-owning group (Povinelli 1994, 133 ff).

Furthermore, as in George's tale reported above, the conception sign clearly demonstrates the way in which, in Marika-Mununggiritj's (1991, 22) words, everything is linked to one another.

While the connection between the plant and the Evening Star dragging the Moon along is made based on a morphological similarity, the connection between the star and the fish is established through their common property of shining intermittently, the star in the sky and the fish's silvery flickering as it swims in the water. According to context, the proper name R*, also a generic name for the corm (water chestnut), can also refer to the Evening star and the Turrum Fish. It will only be through an understanding of how these beings are linked to one another that the generic name for the corm can be turned into a proper name and, as such, refers to the interaction between Evening Star and the Turrum Fish. If the common term refers to a corm on a gathering expedition, it acquires different meanings when it is used as a proper name and linked to the story of Moon and the Evening Star, which transform themselves into the large and small Turrum fish (Tamisari, Bradley 2005).

Indeed, as for conception signs, a person is told of an impending death by witnessing an unusual event or having a vision in real life or in a dream. It is believed that a person announces her/his own death by taking up the appearance of one of her/his group's ancestral beings and manifesting her/himself to a close relative. In the example above, the cloud in the shape of a shark seen by my adoptive sister was the way in which a dying relative belonging to the Shark group was announcing her own death. In another example, a very well-known Yolngu evangelist announced his own death to a close relative by showing himself as a dog, one of the main ancestral beings of his own group, putting his paws onto the church lectern as if he were preaching.

These episodes not only show that everything in the environment is living and sentient but that all beings are enmeshed in their mutu-

al lives and this becoming-with is what gives meaning to agency and intentionality. From this perspective, a place is not merely an identified physical or geographical space and a specific time. As Casey argues, a place often defies given categories.

> Rather than being one definite sort of thing – for example, physical, spiritual, cultural, social – a given place takes on the qualities of its occupants, reflecting these qualities in its own constitution and description and expressing them in its occurrence as an event: places not only are, they happen. (1996, 27)

In the examples mentioned above, places, as well as other-than-human beings, happen in a relationship, they have an intentionality and agency when they interact with and respond to others. Indeed, Yolngu notion of country is "more an event than a thing" (26), a multidimensional meshwork of relationships that are activated in contingent simultaneous encounters. In other words, country is a process of interanimation among all beings.[10]

Although Indigenous peoples' preoccupation with signs, symbols and evidence of vitality has been noted and studied by many scholars, not everything is considered a manifestation of ancestral intentionality. Many things are, and remain, just things without any cultural value. To be understood, these interpretations must be considered in relation to the specific social and historical contexts in which power relations are negotiated. The point is that not everything in the environment has intentionality, but rather it has the potential of having it. Everything might be interpreted as a sign when needed according to specific social and economic relationships with the land in a society where environmental knowledge is the currency articulating interactions (Povinelli 1993, 684).

6 Conclusion: Holding And Feeling The Law

In concluding, I turn to Lapulung's recollection of visiting his country on Flinders Peninsula. This story is particularly significant in relation to what I have been describing as a mutuality of being (Sahlins 2011) and an ontology of connectivity (2017, 495) among all living beings continuously renewed in mutual responsibility, reciprocity, interdependence, cooperation and care.

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[10] I draw the notion of interanimation from Basso's (1996, 55) research on Western Apache relationship between place, persons, names and feeling: "[a]s places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed".

Contrary to other parts of Australia, Yongu people were not forcibly removed from their countries by colonial legislation but converged in Milingimbi after the establishment of the first Methodist Mission in 1923. This process of urbanisation, mainly from the territories in the east, rendered Yolngu people economically dependent on the Mission and guaranteed a captured audience to be evangelised and culturally assimilated through the discipline of everyday life imposed by the missionaries (Berndt, Berndt 1988). Indeed, most of the Milingimbi residents today do not own the land where the community is located but consider themselves as visitors. Like other Indigenous groups in Australia, Yolngu people say that the country they have left behind feels lonely, sad and empty, abandoned and forgotten as it is not visited, looked after and remembered. As Lapulung recalled, he was travelling close to his own country when the boat engine suddenly stopped, an event that could not be explained by a mechanical malfunction. He realised that from his mother's land, where he was standing, he could clearly see the coast of his own country.[11] He was called by his own country who was responsible for stopping his engine in order to greet him. While his mother's sea country welcomed him and his son felt safe to swim in what they knew to be shark- and stingray-infested waters, the most important detail of the story was that his own country, at a distance, called him and made him cry. With a sorrowful tone of voice, Lapulung explained to me that he was moved to tears by his country's sadness and loneliness because it had been abandoned by its own people. However, he concluded that the country has certainly not been forsaken nor forgotten as ceremonial songs and dances have kept looking after it.

Indeed, many Yolngu song texts have very detailed and moving descriptions of human and other-than-human deep sense of worry and sadness, feeling of longing and homesickness for one's own boneland. As I argued elsewhere, song and dance do not simply represent the cosmogonic actions of ancestral beings who gave life to the land, but they re-enact their creative and fertilising power (Tamisari 2018). A place is thus a living country that continuously talks and tells all details of its story to people by means of its names, paintings, songs and dances. The other way round, the execution of a painting, a song, and a dance talks of and to a place, and 'makes it happen' again and again, activating its relationships by constituting its history.

Many song texts also present very vivid descriptions and emotional and sensorial experiences of the lush fecundity of plants, the cross-fertilisation among different beings, the beauty of one's country, as well as the emotional nature of the relationships engaging all

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11   Adjacent countries are often called 'married man' in English as they belong to intermarrying groups.

beings in reciprocal rights and duties. Song texts thus clearly show that all beings are interdependent not only as they share a common interest in safeguarding and reproducing life, but also in becoming-with-others through a logic of feeling based on reciprocity, responsibility, singularity and depth of feeling in each encounter.

As I argued elsewhere (Tamisari 2014a), songs express moral values and feelings that constitute the affective encounters among all beings, demonstrating that Yolngu Law – the correct way of behaving – must be experienced and felt in order to be applied and observed. Everything must be performed according to the Law and all beings have their own Law. Yolngu people thus talk of 'the law of kinship' (*gurrutu rom*), 'the law of the songs' (*manikay rom*), 'the law of dance/ceremony' (*bunggul rom*), 'the law of the dead' (*mokuy rom*), 'the law of circumcision' or the "law of discipline" (respectively, *dhapi rom* and *raypirri rom*). They also talk of 'the law of the seagull' (*djarrak rom*), indicating all details of its aetiological behaviour and habitat, its feeding, reproductive habits, but also when, where, and how it flies, deposits its eggs, feeds the young and how it interacts with other beings such as the dugong, the seawaters, the winds, and the clouds. The law of each being also includes their character, intentionality, determination and cleverness (*djambatj*), and especially emotional states that often motivate their actions (Tamisari, Bradley 2005; Bradley 2010).

Songs and dances that express ancestral beings' compassion, distress, fatigue, or joy are often contrasted to feelings of energy, strength, rage, or courage. In these songs, for instance, the joy of Diamond Fish, who light-heartedly darts in and out of the waves, is counterpoised to Long Tom's aggressive nature with whom it will eventually have a fight. The violence and roar of the waves in the storm are placed against the firmness, fearlessness, and obstinacy of Stone, who resists them. The disorientation and listlessness of Driftwood adrift in the sea are opposed to the energy and determination of Seagull's flight, who challenges the storm to take some grass to his/her offspring waiting in the nest. The stillness of the calm sea water is shattered by the Oyster Catcher's loud call who, deeply moved, cries for Driftwood's endless and aimless wandering. The mourning sadness of Turtle and the homesickness of Porpoise are played out against the thinking, talking clouds-turned-into-words on their way to the territory of each Djambarrpuyngu subgroup where they belong. The rage, the courage, but also the impotence and pain of Shark who, fatally wounded, wants revenge. Cunning Mouse who tells lies and brings Barramundi and Dog to fight each other in a deadly struggle. Many songs also elaborate on the malice of seduction, and the eagerness and lust of sexual desire (Berndt 1952). In addition, the song texts describe in detail how the environment is perceived through all the senses: the rain that makes one cold and its

sound on Turtle's shell; the seawater lapping over Porpoise's shiny black skin; the first monsoon rain that obscures the sky and changes the colour of the sea; the shimmering of Diamond Fish through the transparent water; the changing colours of Stone being covered by molluscs; Seagull's nourishing beak; the roar of the waves and their bright white foam. Other recurrent senses through which the world is perceived in song include the whistling of the wind through the casuarina trees, the taste of turtle blood, the enfolding reddish light of the sunset, the lightness of a butterfly's wings, the flash of lightning, the rumble of thunder, but also the smell of decomposition and the appearance of festering boils. Songs describe a world that is known through sensory experience and feelings, a way of knowing that changes the observer and the observed, the subject and the object, the sentient and the sensible, the performers and the spectator. It implies an epistemology that does not separate humans and other-than-humans, person and things, cognition and affect, language and body, content and performance, representation and expression (Tamisari 2005, 177). Song and dance do not simply represent the cosmogonic actions of ancestral beings who gave life to the land, but they activate links among all beings in a "tangle of relationships" (Ingold 2007, 4). A place is thus a living, multidimensional and multivocal country who continuously talks and tells all details of its story to people by means of its name, paintings, songs and dances (cf. Rose 1996; Bradley 2010). The other way round, the execution of a painting, a song and a dance refer to a place, or rather it makes place 'happen', it activates relationships constituting country. Understood as a "tangle of relationships" or "meshwork of trails along which life is lived" (Ingold 2007, 3 and 81) and shared among all beings, country, as Lapulung explains, keeps on recognising and protecting him and his descendants, like ceremony has kept on looking after it, nourishing it in order to be nourished by it.

Despite the relocation of many groups away from their countries, the interdependent links among all species are continuously celebrated and kept alive not only through ceremony but also by new forms of rock-pop music by groups such as Milingimbi-based Wirrinyga Band (Tamisari 2021). The lyrics of one of their songs entitled *Great Turtle Hunter* (Caama 1995) transcribed below, describe the turtle hunters' canoe floating on the coral reefs, through a sunset stretched over the deep blue sea, where rain clouds are suspended on the horizon, and the call of the seagull is carried on by the wind blowing softly from the east. The song looks after country by 'singing it up', as Yolngu people would say in English. It celebrates but, most importantly, the song re-enacts the connectivity, the mutuality of being which constitute, as the lyrics point out, the "wisdom and the knowledge of my people". This is a knowledge that, as I tried to explain, is achieved through understanding that everything is linked to one an-

other (Marika-Mununggiritj 1991, 22), "always a becoming, always constituted in relating" (Haraway 2008, 136).

Great Turtle Hunter by Keith Lapulung, from the album: *Dreamtime Wisdom, Moderntime Vision*, Wirrinyga Band, CAAMA 1995.

I
I see the sunset on the open seas
I see the vision of great turtle hunters
Chorus
Take me away across the deep blue seas
Show me around all the coral reefs
Together will hunt amongst the coral reefs

II
I see the canoe amongst the coral reefs
I feel the wind and it's blowing from the east
Chorus

III
I see the rain clouds and it's forming from the east
I hear the sound of the seagull singing
Chorus

IV
I see the figure of an old man standing
He shows the wisdom and the knowledge of my people
Chorus
Take me away across the deep blue seas
Show me around all the coral reefs
Together will hunt amongst the coral reefs

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