

INTRODUCTION

Performance, Connectivity and Co-Becoming

The spiritual, religious and social order of connectedness to the land gives us meaning and identity through the knowledge of understanding everything that is linked to one another.

—Marika-Mununggiritj, 'How Can Balanda (White Australians) Learn About the Aboriginal World'

Towards the end of my initial period of fieldwork in Milingimbi, Northeast Arnhem Land (1990–92), I was summoned by Charles Manydjari, my 'mother's brother' (*ngapipi*) and Liwagawumirr elder, who had played an active role as my teacher and mentor since my arrival in the community. Like other times, he invited me to sit down next to him to share a cup of tea. However, on this occasion our conversation focused on the letter I had just received, in which my English husband announced the unexpected break-up of our ten-year marriage, and on my impending departure and return to London. As usual, Ngapipi's words of advice and encouragement were wise, and his concern for my distress and emotional turmoil soothing. At the end of our meeting, he produced a piece of string from his pocket and told me that he needed to measure the circumference of my head. While doing so, he jokingly noted that I have a rather large head. I laughed but did not inquire into his unusual request, as I knew that questioning one's mother's brother is not appropriate. Younger people must pay attention to, observe, repeat and remember what the elders do, even if they do not understand the meaning and aims of their actions.

A few days later, as my departure date for London drew nearer, Ngapipi sent for me again, this time to the camp of other relatives. It was late afternoon, at the tail end of the dry season, when the evening's coolness brings relief from the day's stifling heat and stirs people into activity. A small crowd was assembled at a distance from the main day sitting area, under the branches of a monumental tamarind tree that gives its name to the area (*djambangur*, literally 'at the tamarind tree'), and where the women, children and visitors usually sat every afternoon. Ngapipi invited me to sit next to him in front of

an empty stretch of sand. Opposite, facing us just a few metres away, seven young men were seated in a straight line, thus delimiting a small space. None of them had any body paint. They wore their ordinary clothes: shorts and singlets. Despite the relaxed atmosphere, it was clear that something was about to happen: they were waiting for me and inviting me to be not just *a* but *the* spectator of the event that was about to unfold. I was positioned to witness and to receive. After a short while, Ngapipi started singing, and the men – mainly my *waku* (sons) and *dhuway* (husbands) of the Djambarrpuyngu group under the leadership of my *maralkur* (MMBS)¹ – stood up and started dancing Shark, approaching and retreating with every short song unit performed, towards and away from Ngapipi and me, who were seated. Shark is the major ancestral being of the Djambarrpuyngu group, the group of my children and of Manydjari's matrilineal grandchildren (ZDC). The song and dance re-enact in detail Shark's agony and frustration after having been speared by another ancestral being.

I recognized the song from the first beats of the music and from the stance the dancers had assumed before advancing: the rigidified bodies, the flexed knees, the arms slightly straightened behind the torso, palms down, the heads jerking from left to right, the eyes staring out in a fixed and threatening gaze. As they advanced, maintaining this posture, they dragged one foot after the other, their toes deeply sunk into the sand, slightly turning their bodies to both sides. In this fashion they left a track behind them, marking the ground with curvilinear and intermittent lines that reproduce the Shark's characteristic swaying movement. The dancers' tensing of the body, turning of the head and glaring eyes capture the rage and frustration of the Shark ancestor towards his murderer, as he lies motionless before dying. The event was contained by its brevity – probably just over ten minutes – and by the limited number of people involved, yet the dancing was solemn, creating the potent atmosphere and intensity that demand complete attention. As in ritual ceremonies, what is crucial are not the steps, which are often so subtle as to be almost imperceptible, but the tension in the dancers' gestures, the contraction of their muscles, the stillness of their posture and the intensity of their concentration. The efficacy and meaning of this dance were not simply in what was being represented – that is, the ancestral Shark's death and the emotions that the danced enactment of his death evoked in all the participants. Rather, the real meaning of this dance rested in the intensity with which the dance and song was performed, requiring everyone's undivided attention – performers and participants alike. I was shaken, moved and overwhelmed by the performance as I realized that I was an essential part of it and was crying profusely when one of the Shark dancers came over to me holding a bright orange feather crownlet and, on the last beat of the music, placed it firmly on my head. The Shark's affliction and anger expressed in the dance

resonated with my own loss: being abandoned and abandoning many people I had lived with and had become close to over the previous two years. Being in many ways an element of the performance itself, my sobbing needed to be contained; it was cut short by Ngapipi who stopped it with a stern 'enough now' (*bilin*). He then explained to me the significance of the gift. The crownlet is made of a thick cord of matted hair taken from deceased relatives, which is then smeared with beeswax and covered with the bright orange feathers of rainbow lorikeets. *Yalu*, or nest, is the public outside (*warrangul*) name of this sacred object owned by Ngapipi's group: it is one of the many body adornments which covered the bodies of the Djang'kawu Sisters, the ancestral beings who, as they emerged in all their beauty from the sea foam off the eastern seashores near Yirrkala, and travelled to the West across Northeast Arnhem Land, shaped and named the country at the beginning of time and space. Charles concluded his explanation with these words:

This is your mother, it is private, and it is for you to take away. I give it to you to take to London where you should not forget that you can always put your Yolngu cap on. However, you should only wear it [the object itself] on important occasions.

In the anthropological literature, stories of *exit* are not as popular as those pertaining to *entry* into the field.² The cultural difference and the awkwardness one experiences in arriving and inserting oneself into a new social scene are certainly perceived as more appropriate topics of anthropological inquiry. Often anthropologists tend to neglect the similarities that allow them, at the beginning of the research, to relate with the people they encounter (LiPuma 1998: 55), and which are again taken for granted by the end of the fieldwork.

While the event I recount above from memory may sound unusual and exotic, at the time it seemed natural, although unexpected: a way of acknowledging my stay in the community by marking my departure; perhaps also an appreciation of my interest and assiduous participation in ceremonies as a dancer and seated participant, a way of stressing our mutual responsibilities as close kin, a way of saying goodbye, of consolidating the passion of our relationship (Sansom 1995: 308) – a way of loving.

Today there is no doubt in my mind that this moment marked a beginning and not an end; it was a welcome and not a farewell, an act of appropriation and integration. As John von Sturmer later commented on this event: 'If they can attach you to the dead, you can never leave. The dead never leave' (personal communication, July 2004). At that moment, I was not merely the departing *balanda* (white) anthropologist but a person in my totality, the person I had become through my engagement in everyday relationships as a sister's daughter to Manydjari, as a mother, wife, sister, mother-in-law and through all the other kinship relationships I had negotiated with many members of

my close extended family in Milingimbi. The moral dimensions of the gift, the compulsion of giving, receiving and reciprocating (Mauss 1966) engaged us in a promise and a commitment to each other: an 'obligation to return, to hold and to care' (Michaels 1994: 140). Only now, however, many years later and after many returns, can I begin to appreciate the meaning of the gift delivered through that dance given in my honour. The meaning and value of such a gift did not only reside in placing me in the thick network of ancestral relations that, through performance, articulate the complex Yolngu political system, but more significantly to enter into a mutual relationship of respect and care with Ngapipi, and with other members of my adoptive family in Northeast Arnhem Land.

As Ngapipi instructed me, I took the feather circlet back with me to London where I returned to write up my Ph.D. thesis. But rather than keeping it wrapped in a soft cloth, as sacred objects are usually safeguarded, I placed it in a glass box that since then has been in my bedroom. As Charles had taught me, it is a sacred object that can only be shown on special occasions. The first opportunity to wear it presented itself at my Ph.D. viva, which took place at the London School of Economics in 1994. At the end of my discussion, I pulled the circlet out of my bag and placed it firmly on my head, donning it tall and proud to pose for the photograph, standing between my two examiners, Howard Morphy and Bruce Kapferer. My supervisor, Alfred Gell, snapped the picture. The second opportunity was in 1999 when I received my Australian citizenship at the Leichhardt Town Hall in Sydney. Wearing a black dress to make the orange feathers stand out in all their brightness, I donned the circlet at home and kept it in place throughout the entire ceremony and for the official photograph that is taken with the Mayor as one holds up the citizenship certificate. In retrospect, the most amazing aspect of this event was not the fact that I felt honoured and privileged to show that I had already been granted what could be understood as the symbol of Yolngu Aboriginal citizenship, but that nobody in the room either commented or even looked at this very unusual and beautiful object. Like one of my Euro-Australian friends, who sneered at it, no doubt others must have found my wearing it rather eccentric. The third and last time I donned the crownlet was on the occasion of my wedding, in February 2014, at the Municipality of Venice, soon before I was due to return to Australia for a visit.

In displaying this object on important occasions, as instructed by Ngapipi, I continued to learn about the significance of the performance from a Yolngu perspective. At the time I thought that such occasions warranted the display of this object because the circlet could be seen as the Yolngu equivalent of a Ph.D. award and a citizenship certificate. I now understand that the significance of this gift does not only reside in the object as a token of

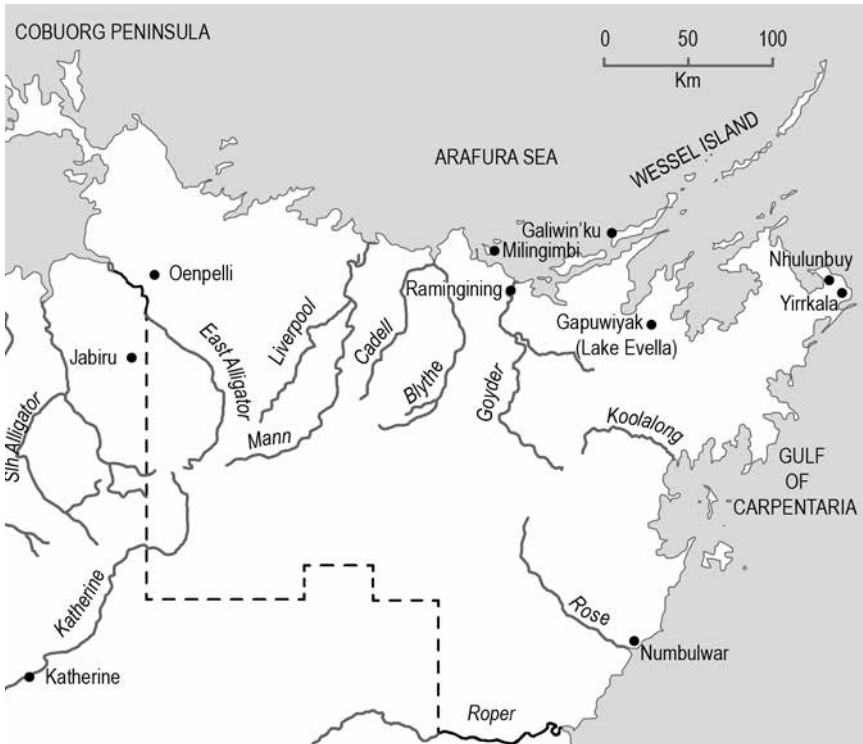
my membership of Yolngu society, nor is it merely the equivalent of a degree in Yolngu knowledge: its significance resides in the responsibility of performance, in the possibility I was given to display it, and in the rights and duties I was granted in handling Yolngu knowledge with all its risks and potentialities. I had not only become a member of Yolngu society, but one of its emissaries.

Waiting for the next important occasion to don the crownlet to affirm with a simple gesture all the principles and values of ‘Yolngu Law’ – as a way of thinking and feeling, a mode of knowing and behaving – I was taught and asked to employ it whenever I dealt with and presented Yolngu knowledge in my performances as a writer and a teacher.

As Fabian (1990: 6) notes, the notion of performance does not only refer to what presents itself only ‘through action and enactment’, beyond the discourse in which the ethnographer is engaged, but it also involves ‘the communication of the results of our research especially through writing’. It is from the immediacy and intimacy experienced in the participation in the dance event performed in my honour that I continue to understand the meaning and role of Yolngu performance in educating the young, and non-indigenous people, as well as my responsibilities in handling the knowledge that I have had the privilege to receive.

This monograph is the product of what I have been learning from the Yolngu people of Northeast Arnhem Land, who welcomed and looked after me over many years, from my first visit in 1990 to my latest visit in 2018. While I travelled extensively throughout the region, I spent most of my time in the community of Milingimbi, where, as I recall in Chapter 2, I was adopted by a Yolngu family who has always been, and continues to be, close to me. In addition to formal acknowledgements, I would like to begin this work by thanking my Yolngu adoptive and extended family, the Milingimbi community, and all Yolngu relatives across the region who invited and welcomed me into their world. Established as a Methodist Mission in 1923 and located 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 (see map 0.1).³ As in other parts of this region, in 1974, the Methodist Missionaries ceased to manage the Milingimbi community, as well as the running of the local school, while the Northern Territory Government established an elected local Council with all administrative and economic responsibilities. Since 2008, the Milingimbi community has been part of the East Arnhem Regional Council that provides local government services to the nine main communities, smaller outstations and homelands, and commercial enterprises in the East Arnhem Regional Council area.⁴

Map 0.1. Map of Northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia, from Tamisari (2018: 39).



While keeping in touch through Facebook and phone calls is certainly limited, it allows us to continue to renew relationships of reciprocal affect, care and accountability, a bond that has endured more than thirty years and the distance between Australia and Italy.

I wish to acknowledge my close late adoptive family members, who helped me in the past and whom I still remember fondly. With them my sisters (*yapa*), Joy Rr. and Rita Gukulurruy., my brother's children (*gathu*), B. and L., my father sister daughter daughter child (*dhumungur*) Rosalind D. and Bobby Wunyimarra, and all my *dhumungur* at the 'Djambang tree camp' (*djambanggur*), my mother's brother (*ngapipi*), Charles Manyjarri, my daughter's children (*gutharra*), M., Charles W., Ganydjulpa Dhurrkay, my brothers (*wa:wa*) Tup., Larry, all my late daughter's husbands (*gurrung*) in the Army Camp and Garden Camp, my daughters and sons (*waku*) Wulurrk, Gur*, Yapupu, Florence G., and Paul B. Special thanks go to my son Keith Lapulung, his late wife, Brenda Yarrakayngu, and all their family, and to Elizabeth Milmilany, her daughter Fiona Dhawunymurruwuy and all their family, all my *gaminyarr* and *gutharra*, *mori*, *ngama' nymukuniny*, *dhuway* and *galay*.

In a book dedicated to the creative modalities and complex social, political and aesthetic nature of encounters and relating with humans and other-than-human beings (De La Cadena 2010, 2014), it is necessary to start by thanking the unstinting generosity, patience and trust I was afforded by my mentors and friends. Without the many relationships I established and which deepened over the years, I would not have been able to understand, and thus present, what is contained in this monograph.

While in Chapter 2 I explore how the nature of relationships I established and engaged in the field prompted me to enter into the sphere of Yolngu social and moral values, practices and concepts – and thus constituted the basis of the knowledge I have acquired – I also learnt that the nature of attention, affect, mutuality, and care also characterizes relationships with, and among, all forms of life and things. From my first days in Milingimbi, I was taught to pay attention to all other beings, or as the Yolngu would say, ‘to feel the Law’: listen to and copy the elders, and pay attention to animals’ movements and intentions, introduce myself to a new place who might not recognize me, listen to what the land might want to say through a light breeze or a sudden gust of wind, recognize the mark of shellfish on the sand at low tide and the size of yam leaves, read the shape of clouds or a bird’s call announcing events elsewhere, understand the meaning and significance of dancing for and with others, sit, share and just simply be there with others around the hearth, witnessing events and visiting places. I also learnt to feel the presence of beings that cannot be seen with one’s eyes, and to communicate with presences that took me ‘out of my mind’, what Fabian (2000: 8) refers to as ‘ecstasis’: a dimension of all interactions, an epistemological concept, ‘a prerequisite for, rather than an impediment to, the production of ethnographic knowledge’.

This monograph continues to explore some of the issues that I have been dealing with in my research, but it shifts attention to the performative aspects of relating or, vice-versa, the relational dimension of performance. I insist on the centrality of the body in Yolngu cosmology and epistemology (Tamisari 1998; Chapter 3), which is intrinsically linked to names, naming and language (Tamisari 2002; Chapter 4), as well as song and dance performance (Tamisari 2000, 2005b, 2010, 2014a, 2016, and 2021; Chapters 5 and 6), in the affirmation and negotiation of group and individual rights and duties in land ownership and competition for power. Yolngu teaching guides me to shift attention to the performative dimensions of relating that link all these elements. Following Barad (2003: 815), I redefine the performative as ‘intra-action’ rather than ‘interaction’ – ‘reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world’ (Barad 2007: 141) – among all beings and things, including song and dances, in order to understand the significance of Yolngu relational agency, the co-production of meaning emerging from

these intra-actions, and the inseparability of ontological and epistemological dimensions of Yolngu knowledge.

In reference to the diagram with which Marika-Mununggiritj (1991: 19) explains Yolngu Law to non-indigenous, *balanda* people in the context of bi-cultural education (see Figure 1.1, Chapter 1), it is crucial neither to prioritize nor to consider in isolation any of these elements and practices such as the body, language and stories, land, kinship, paintings, songs and dancing. Despite their centrality in Yolngu ontology and epistemology, it is crucial to start from and focus on what unites them and the way each element implies and participates in all others. To this end, I intend the term performance as a 'being alongside with' (von Sturmer 2001: 104), a mode of participation (Lévy-Bruhl 2002; Pina-Cabral 2018), an 'ontology of connectivity' (Rose 2017: 495; 1999), a 'secret commerce' (Dufrenne 1973: 56) and a 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins 2011) realized in a becoming constituted in relating (Haraway 2008: 136; Ingold 2011, 2013: 9ff), or emergent co-becomings (Bawaka Country et al. 2016) of matter, humans and more-than-humans in terms of affirmation of singularity, autonomy, mutual responsibility, reciprocity, interdependence in cooperation or in competition. Indeed, relating is not only limited to collaborative and harmonious relations, but also to competing and conflictual negotiations of authority, as in the case of the ongoing and complex history of power and race relations between and with Indigenous and non-indigenous people, and institutions within and outside the community.

As I try to show in the following chapters, I redefine the notion of performance and performativity – in reference both to everyday life and ritual contexts – in order to explore the cultural density of Yolngu's sophisticated ways of conceptualizing, experiencing, re-enacting, and reimagining all intra-actions with human and more-than-human beings, constituting what is known as 'country', as well as with non-indigenous people and institutions. This notion – one's own land of origin and final destination – needs to be understood as a multidimensional and everchanging tangle of relations animated by others' physical bodies, names, stories and histories, marks and images, personalities and intentions, desires and concerns, which are often acted out and negotiated through music, song and dance. It will be the notion of performance, albeit with alternative connotations and implications, that shifts attention from discourse to doing, actions and practices, as well as to 'things as they are' (Jackson 1996) in order to focus on experience, agency, intercorporeality, materiality and the interweaving of social, political, and aesthetic aspects of relating, as well as their risky nature and uncertain outcomes. In particular, it allows me to shift attention towards ways in which *how* we know, inevitably with other human and other-than-human beings, deeply affects not only what we know but also the knowers themselves. Beyond the 'frivolous défilé of fashionable cultural models proposed on the catwalk of 'science'

by a frigid ... anthropologist' (De Martino 2002: 103), or the fragmentation of theoretical paradigms, beyond the sustained self-critique of the reproduction of power relationships in the politics of representation, there is a personal reality entangled in emerging co-becomings, which is irreducible to any other category or notion and can only be approached, not in the terms of, but with another person and other-than-person, through affecting and being affected, taking and being taken, changing and being changed (see Chapter 2).

'Performance' includes the most varied modes of connectivity and participation in all contexts, from the simplest gestures of Yolngu daily conviviality to political competition in the most sophisticated ritual events and dealings with outsiders. In other words, with the term performance, I want to stress not only the linkage, but also to explore the nature of all social, emotional and material bonds with, and commitment to, all human and more-than-human beings, such as animals, plants, natural phenomena and supernatural entities. It is important to note that in this 'more-than-human sociality' (Tsing 2013: 33), Yolngu people participate in social relations without imposing their terms and rules on other beings.

As I explore in this work, this notion of performance as 'intra-action' or 'enacted relating' permeates all contexts of Yolngu life and is expressed in metaphors, names, stories and ways of behaving, as well as, in particular, natural features, plants, images of strings, flows, traces and tracks in everyday and ritual life. I am thus interested in exploring the nature of intra-action in all relations, be they with humans or 'other-than-humans' and extending it to the diplomatic confrontations with the representatives of Australian institutions and visitors, including the anthropologist. Central to performance is the intensity of its corporeal and affective dimensions, which allows knowledge to be guarded and taught by the elders who, by re-enacting it, keep on renewing in order to project it towards the future. 'Memory' as Barad (2007: ix) notes 'is an enlivening and reconfiguring of the past and future that is larger than any individual'. The transmission of knowledge to the next generations, as well as the sharing of knowledge with outsiders, serves to affirm Yolngu political autonomy and to educate non-indigenous people about the key concerns and objectives of the Yolngu people (Berndt 2004; Morphy 1983, 2006). As I illustrate in the following chapters, the transmission of knowledge is carried out in the context of everyday life, ceremony, Christian devotion, pop and hip-hop forms of music, and bicultural education.

In reference to the notion of Yolngu Law (*Yolngu Rom*) and the image of the footprint (*djalkiri*; discussed below), I attempt to understand how, as Marika-Mununggiritj (1991: 22) affirms, 'everything is linked to one another': in other words, how any landscape feature, person, name, animal, plant or natural phenomenon participates in each other. It is, however, by acting in the world that each of these manifestations becomes visible and powerful

by entrapping multiple, ramified, and interconnected agencies, which are thus distributed in beings, objects and events in the past and across the present. This unfixed, ‘distributed agency’ (Gell 1998), a ‘nonlinear enfolding of spacetime mattering’ (Barad 2010: 244) is conveyed in the Yolngu image of the footprint (*djalkiri*) as it expresses at once many aspects of connectivity, such as consubstantiality, identification, sequence and trajectory in space and time, similarity and difference, inside and outside, following elders’ teaching, and the process of unconcealment or manifestation: knowing the world through sense perception, mainly seeing, hearing and smelling. It also refers to the correct manner of behaving towards other beings by ‘holding the Law’ (*Rom nygatham*). The visible mark or trace, footprint, imprint and foundation of Yolngu Law (*djalkiri*), as people say, is a culturally dense and powerful emic image that fuses place, body and language, dance and music, reveals connections between places and links between beings, visualizes movement, unravels narratives, embodies names and reveals itineraries to be retraced in songs and the actions to be performed in the dances (Tamisari 1998, 2014a, 2018).

These dimensions of performance as enacted relations, which I have briefly raised above and will discuss in this chapter, first emerged from my early exploration of Yolngu ritual and, in particular, Yolngu ceremonial dance. As I insisted in my research (Tamisari 2000, 2005b, 2018; also Chapter 6), in order to understand Yolngu dance, it is necessary to go over and above the structure and symbolism of ritual, the social roles of participants, and the referential meanings of movements in order to focus equally on its experiential and relational dimensions. As I understand what Yolngu people taught me, acting in the world, not only in ceremonial performance, but also what and how people do and behave in all circumstances, is prior to and more effective than any commentary or explanation, as its meaning emerges in participation as a modality of co-becoming with others interweaving social, political and aesthetic aspects. As in the everyday co-becoming with others, the force and meaning of Yolngu ceremonial dance performance does not reside in what it represents, neither in its objectives but in the performance itself, an ‘intra-action’ (Barad 2003), where the structure of aesthetic experience and feelings between performer and viewer enables knowledge to become transmissible and renders feeling intelligent (Dufrenne 1973: 471; Chapter 6).

The farewell dance organized at the end of my first fieldwork described above illustrates how the meaning of performance needs to be sought beyond the referential meanings of dance movement, structure and symbolism, and into the intersubjective and intercorporeal dimensions of relating. It was through this dance event and the gift I received that my relatives celebrated the nature of our relationship, my entitlement to learn, and my responsibility to handle Yolngu knowledge together with the consequent duty of

reciprocating. Relating through kinship, in this case the relationship between mother's brother and sister's daughter, implies understanding the meaning of and, more importantly, feeling part of the same nest (*ya:lu*), accepting and respecting the knowledge necessary to occupy one's own position, paying attention to other beings and signs around us, and being ready to be challenged and behave in the correct manner in all situations. Most importantly, as perhaps my *ngapipi* implied when he said to me not to forget 'to put my Yolngu cap on', he was teaching me that rights and responsibilities over the acquisition and transmission of knowledge, teaching and learning, giving and receiving, affect and attention, meaning and feelings are all dimensions of co-becoming in a rhizomatic meshwork of relations tying every being together in complex, everchanging formations. In the words of Paul Gurrumurruwuy (in Miyarrka Media 2019: 20), 'the law of feelings' (*dha:kay-gna:nhawuy rom*, literally taste, having/from, law) 'means when that feeling goes in and comes out it shows in your reaction. Something happens inside and other people can see. Other people can feel it as well. Your body opens up; that's the connection. That feeling, it sits on you *ngayangu*, *doturrk* [heart] and your *dja:l* [desire].'

Mutuality of Being, and Participation

The broadly termed critical posthumanist framework in philosophy, feminism, queer studies, science and technology studies, environmental and social sciences has not only decentred and dethroned the human from its dominant position but, by shifting attention to affectivity, an 'ethics of intersubjective attention' (Rose 2007: 91, see also Rose 1999) and 'matters of care' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2013), has elaborated relational ontological approaches exploring the 'mind-body continuum – i.e. the embrainment of the body and the embodiment of the mind – and ... the nature-culture continuum – i.e. "naturecultural" and "humananimal transversal bonding' (Braidotti 2019: 31). These are, indeed, the same concerns, values and notions central in many Indigenous philosophies, epistemologies and ontologies around the world, although these are expressed through a variety of media and art practices not limited to academic discourse, and are the same that have attracted the attention of scholars from the very beginning of anthropology under the rubric of totemism and animism. If posthumanist studies, in all its declinations, have taken up the challenge to question 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' (see Kohn 2015 for a review), 'interspecies ethnographies' (Haraway 2008), 'environmental anthropology' (Kopnina and

Shoreman-Ouimet 2017; Rose 2011) and the renewed interdisciplinary discussion on animism and ‘new animism’ (Harvey 2013), then Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies have always been posthumanist. Yet, with some notable exceptions in cultural anthropology (among others: Descola 2005; Hallowell 1960; Ingold 1988, 2000; Vilaça 2002; Viveiros de Castro 1992), they have been marginalized in these debates (Bignall et al., 2016: 456, Bignall and Rigney 2019: 160), if not dismissed as biased and non-objective (Todd 2015: 251). As Indigenous elders, scholars, artists and activists have been saying through art, performance, political action, and a growing number of academic publications, life can be sustained and renewed only through a more-than-human sociality working ‘with or despite of clearly formulated human intentions’ (Tsing 2013: 28).

The term Yolngu people use to refer to one’s own country is *ngaraka*, literally meaning ‘bones’, a term that I translate as ‘boneland’. The cultural density of this term needs to be understood in relation to a cosmogony and cosmology where all life on earth was shaped, animated, named and ordered by ancestral beings who, during their travels, shaped matter into form by transforming their bodies into the world (Chapter 3). Any being, including humans, is not only consubstantial with a particular landscape feature or phenomenon but also with a specific cosmogonic action and a proper name, a place, a story, a pattern, a feeling, a song, and a dance. Not only does a being originate and share ‘bony’ substance with the land of their patrilineal group, but it is also related 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. These journeys thus established what Yolngu people refer to as the Law (*Rom*), namely moral rules, land title statutes and guidelines regulating all social intra-actions and political negotiations. From this perspective, each group is ‘a multispecies kinship group’ based on mutual life-giving bonds (Rose 2017: 496). From this perspective, it is easier to understand how everything is ‘linked to one another’, in a series of enacted relations among humans and more-than-human beings: for instance Yolngu conception and death signs (Chapter 3), the performative power of names and naming (Chapter 4), how song and dance can bring together all cosmogonic intra-acting life-giving forces and, in this way, legitimize a person’s affirmation and claim of ownership and authority over their land (Chapter 6), the power of song as well as new forms of music to reactivate the bonds with land, and the power of dance in developing forms of vernacular Christianity (Chapter 7).

Hand in hand with the decolonizing project of theory and methodology called for by Indigenous scholars (Smith 2012), it is necessary to start from storytelling, metaphors and images, as well as painting, singing and dancing in order to understand the relational dynamic nature of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies in their own terms, as I try to do in the following chapters (Hunt 2014). Indeed, the teaching and learning of Yolngu knowledge privilege the performative because it is passed on and acquired through the body, through imitation, trial and error, visiting and experiencing country, being there, and engaging with people and all other beings. It is from this constitutive dimension of the performative in the learning and transmission of Yolngu knowledge that Yolngu educators had placed visits to country and music and dance as the main activities in the locally developed bicultural curriculum, an initiative that was dismissed by non-indigenous teachers and the Northern Territory Board of Studies as superfluous, superficial and frivolous (Tamisari and Milmilany 2003; see below).

I have chosen the diagram illustrating how to learn Yolngu Law by Marika-Mununggiritj (1991: 19) and the image of the footprint that I turn to in the next chapter in order to illustrate an 'ontology of connectivity' (Rose 1999, 2017: 495) 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 how 'this is no metaphor, but a sociology of moral, ritual, and practical conduct'. The question is not merely what a person is, as either human or more-than-human, nor is it what the notion of agency and sentience has attributed to things, animals, plants or natural phenomena (see Merlan 2019 for a review in Australian Indigenous Studies). Beyond the notions of personhood and agency, I want to shift attention to the nature of 'intra-action' (Barad 2003, 2007; see below); in other words, how and when to relate correctly in terms of reciprocal attention, respect and care (Bird-David 1999; Rose 2013a;). In Sahlins's (2011: 13) words: '[w]hat is in question is the character of the relationships rather than the nature of the person', or the ways persons 'are members of one another' and 'participate intrinsically in each other's existence' (Sahlins 2011: 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' (Sahlins 2001: 11). As Hallowell (cited in Harvey 2013: 15) 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 1995). 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' (my emphasis).

I understand ‘immediacy’ not only as intimacy or a sociality defined in terms of an organization 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 relation (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 (ibid.: 19) in the ‘dance of relating’ when ‘[a]ll the dancers are redone through the patterns they re-enact’ (ibid.: 25), an embodied process of acquaintance and becoming (Ingold 2011, 2013: 9ff) along with all the contingent challenges and risks, commitment and accountability that it demands.

Another productive way of expressing the nature of relating that I am going to explore is through the notion of ‘participation’, proposed by Lévy-Bruhl (2002) in his posthumously published ‘Carnets’, which has been recently re-evaluated by many anthropologists, especially in what has been defined as the ‘dividual tradition’, in terms of an ‘intrinsic plurality of what is identified as single’ (Pina-Cabral 2018: 438). I use this notion of participation as it offers two main insights: first, relating comes before *relata*, and second, it brings to the fore how affects and emotions dominate cognition. Lévy-Bruhl insists that beings and things are not given beforehand and then participate in other beings, things or supernatural forces, but that every being can be at once themselves and others, unity and plurality.

For them [the beings] to be given, to exist, it is necessary to already have participation. Participation is not just a fusion, mysterious and inexplicable, of beings that lose and at the same time maintain their identities. It enters into the very constitution of these same beings. Without participation, they would not be *given* in their experience: they would not exist. (Lévy-Bruhl 2002: 151, original emphasis, my translation)

‘If participation is immanent in all beings, and if it is the condition of their existence, he concludes that ‘[b]eing, existing is participating’ (ibid.: 18).

Furthermore, Lévy-Bruhl insists that participation is not in opposition to logical principles, nor does it have a cognitive character. Participation is not only more ‘akin to perception than thought’ (Pina-Cabral 2018: 445), but it is characterized and arouses a complex of emotions (Lévy-Bruhl 2002: 19), whereby affective elements dominate ‘representative elements’ (ibid.: 8, 46). Participation is, in the first instance, lived-in, felt, experienced rather than

understood, performed rather than explained, and expressed through a wide range of feelings, language, images and metaphors of intra-action such as strings and traces, solidarity, the idiom of kinship, consubstantiality, belonging, similarities and differences, among others.

In order to explore how such different elements participate in each other, I refer to the notion of '*agencement*' in French rather than its better known English translation 'assemblage' (Nail 2017: 22). In contrast to 'assemblage', which implies a gathering, assembling, joining and bringing together of different essences, elements or things into a unity, the term *agencement* is an arrangement, a shifting layout, a dynamic piecing together and an ever-developing construction of heterogeneous elements. It implies 'the rejection of unity in favour of multiplicity, and the rejection of essences in favour of events' (ibid.: 22).

Each new mixture produces a new kind of assemblage, always free to recombine again and change its nature ... in a multiplicity, what counts are not the terms of the elements, but what is 'between them, the in-between, a set of relations that are inseparable from each other'. The assemblage constructs or lays out a set of relations between self-subsisting fragments – what Deleuze calls 'singularities'. (Deleuze and Parnet in Nail 2017: 23)

In conversation with Glowczewski (2011: 108; see also Glowczewski 2020), who at the time was explaining the immanence and unchanging energy of connection in Walbiri ontology and epistemology, Guattari defines the notion of 'singularity' or the 'a-signifying' with 'the transversality of assemblages' defined in terms of 'what will traverse heterogeneous modes of expression from the point of view of their means of expression, or from the point of view of their content, mythical content, for example'.

In what follows, I describe how Yolngu legal order is not a codified collection of statutes, rules or regulations, but rather tales of everyday correct behaviour, moral orientations, feelings, desires derived from the cosmogonic events and actions of ancestral beings who enacted the Law, or as Yolngu would say, 'set down the Law' (*Rom nhirrpan*) along their journeys, literally 'planted', 'pierced' and 'made it to stand' into the land (see Chapter 4). As Yolngu ceremonial song texts reveal (Chapter 5), I propose that Yolngu Law needs to be felt in order to be applied and observed through a wide range of feelings such as worrying (*warku'yun*), being compassionate (*gurrupurungumirr*), feeling emotional closeness (*ma:rrngur*), expressing solidarity (*nayanguwangany*), caring (*dja:ga*), helping and supporting (*gungayunamirr*), feeling as one, close and together (*wangany manapanmirri*, *galki* and *rrambanggi* respectively), without however losing one's singularity and autonomy, being generous (*dhapinya*), sharing (*dha:manar*).⁵

Co-Becomings: Performance as Intra-Action

The term performance has been used in many different and often contradictory ways in anthropology. Here, I would like to conflate the two main usages of this term. On the one hand, mainly inspired by folklorists from the 1950s (Hymes 1975), performance refers to an empirical behaviour, a well-defined event, a text realizing itself in its enactment such as a story, a conversation, a narrative, or more broadly a way of doing, ‘bounded intentionally produced enactments’ and ‘a kind of performative event treated as an aesthetic whole’ (Schieffelin 1998: 200) such as a ceremony, a song or a dance. The other usage refers to performativity itself, which is interwoven with the logic of practice (Bourdieu 1972) and includes bodily dispositions or embodied practices that shape and are shaped by social shared rules and values. The notions of performance and performativity allow me to shift attention from knowledge that cannot, or can only partially, be expressed through discursive statements but rather ‘through embodied action and enactment, images’, ‘embodied metaphors’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), names, landscape features, animals, plants, natural phenomena, paintings, movement and dance. As Fabian (1990: 6–7) insists, ‘[c]ultural knowledge is always mediated by “acting”’. Furthermore, being cautious of these terms’ limits and biases as far as they are both borrowed from Western theatre traditions (Schieffelin 1998: 206), performance and performativity has been particularly useful in anthropology as they have focused on the experiential nature and efficacy of enactment, thus shifting attention from representation and symbolism to aesthetic experience among all participants, as well as the efficacy or failure of a given event (see Schieffelin 2016). As Kapferer (1986) notes for rituals, but I would extend to everyday enacted doings, performance reconfigures meaning and directs experience.

Furthermore, the notion of performance allows me to explore its improvisational creativity in terms of experiential, relational, temporal and indeterminate nature – emerging from the incessant and unforeseeable becoming with other human or more-than-human beings (Hallam and Ingold 2007).

As Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1 illustrates, any being, thing, phenomenon and action in the Yolngu world exists only in relation with others in continuously ever-changing patterns or formations, as in a kaleidoscope. In other words, a ‘meshwork of entangled lines of life, growth and movement ... what is commonly known as the “web of life” is precisely that: not a network of connected points, but a meshwork of interwoven lines’ (Ingold 2007: 63). The notion of performativity I propose in order to explore Yolngu ways of co-becoming, intersubjective belonging and participating with others, is inspired by Barad (2003), who describes relational ontology articulated by a post-humanist notion of performativity as a critique of representational and constructivist approaches that grant priority to language, discourse and thought

in representing and explaining reality. Starting from a rethinking of the relationship between ‘discursive practices and material phenomena’, Barad (2003: 215) describes agency as constantly emerging from the ‘intra-activity’ among all beings in their co-becoming. In contrast with ‘inter-action’, which implies the prior existence of independent entities, Barad proposes that relational ontology is constituted by ‘agential intra-actions’ defined as a dynamic process of causal material enactments that may or may not involve humans (*ibid.*: 817). As she explains, agency is not an attribute of things but a phenomenon, a doing, living and becoming with others and, I would add, a perceiving – in phenomenological terms it is an embodying and embodied knowledge of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962):

A crucial part of the performative account that I propose is a rethinking of the notions of discursive practices and material phenomena and the relationship between them. On an agential realist account, discursive practices are not human-based activities but rather specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties and meanings are differentially enacted. And matter is not a fixed essence; rather, matter is a substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing, a concealing of agency. And performativity is not understood as interactive citationality (Butler) but rather interactive intra-activity. (Barad 2003: 828)

Furthermore, as I discuss in Chapters 6 and 7, performance is also central to the way in which Yolngu elders have kept renewing past knowledge and teaching it to the next generation; youths have used it to express their passions and frustrations, but also to imagine and construct new experiences. It has also been a privileged means to carve out diplomatic arenas in which to debate, start an exchange with (Berndt 2004), and persuade (Morphy 2006) non-indigenous people and institutions by affirming their own presence, objectives, ways of knowing and being on their own terms (Magowan 2000).

In the continuing confrontation with the postcolonial realities, I understand performance as a tactic that uses creativity and all opportunities to take advantage vis-a-vis the established order (de Certeau 1988), a way of survival (Fabian 1990: 15) or, in other words: ‘a great deal of courage required to go on living in the present’ (Gilroy 1990: 100) in a settler society, such as Australia, where Indigenous people are still kept at the margin of economic and political life. In Chapter 7, I propose that, although in different ways, both pop and hip-hop music-making by local bands, the organization of the Milingimbi Cultural Festival from the early 1980s to today, and comic dancing are tactics to renew and transmit knowledge, thus educating younger generations, as well as a means of experiencing and enacting ideas and expectations rather

than simply representing them. In the same chapter, I describe how a devotional Yolngu dance is a form of vernacular Christianity deployed to attune the worshipper's body to experience the Christian God creatively, thus renewing past Yolngu key notions, values and practices that place the body at the centre of the processes of learning, expression, transmission of knowledge and negotiation of power relations.

Notes

1. Abbreviations: M mother, F father, D daughter, S son, Z sister, B brother, MB mother's brother, FZ father's sister, MM mother's mother, FF father's father, MF mother's father FM father's mother, W wife, H husband. See also Table 3.1.
2. However, for anthropological work in Australia, see Dussart (2000: 1–5); Myers (1986: 244–45); Sansom (1995: 286ff).
3. According to the 2016 census, residents in the Milingimbi community numbered 1,225, and those in Northeast Arnhem Land region 14,020 (Australian Bureau of Statistics).
4. See the East Arnhem Regional Council web site: <https://www.eastarnhem.nt.gov.au/> (last accessed September 2022).
5. Yolngu sociality is also expressed through a myriad of images, metaphors, tales and gestures used in the education and disciplining (*rappirri*) of children in everyday and ceremonial contexts. Blakeman (2015) explores how the value of goods and the dynamic of exchange in Yolngu everyday life is encompassed and dependent on the principle of a diffuse solidarity (*ngayangu wangany*, literally 'together in one state or sense of feeling') and sharing at the basis of Yolngu social order.