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Co-becomingi

Bawaka Countryⁱⁱ including Laklak Burarrwangaⁱⁱⁱ, Ritjilili Ganambarri^{iv}, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs^v, Banbapuy Ganambarr^{vi}, Djawundil Maymuru^{vii}, Sarah Wright^{viii}, Kate Lloyd^{ix} and Sandie Suchet-Pearson^x

Co-becoming understands all humans and non-humans as coming into existence through relationships.



Figure 1. Artist: Gaymala Yunupingu, *Djirikitj* (1998)

Djirikitj, is about renewal and sacred fire. This beautiful artwork is by Gaymala, mother of Laklak, Rijilili, Merrkiyawuy and Banbapuy. These sisters are four of the six baby quails on Gaymala's screenprint with their brother, Djalı and oldest sister, Wulara, who passed away as a little girl. They are elders and caretakers for Bawaka homeland in North East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia.

As the Bawaka Collective, and as part of Bawaka Country, we have worked together for over 13 years to share Yolŋu knowledges. 'We' are the active agencies which through their ongoing relationships make up Bawaka Country, and 'we' include the four sisters, Djawundil their daughter, and three *ŋäpaki*, or non-Indigenous, academics, Sarah, Kate and Sandie from Newcastle and Macquarie universities.

Our collective understands the relationships and connections we have with each other, with Country, with everything, as co-becoming. For Yolŋu people, a foundational relationship of

co-becoming is the *Yothu–Yindi*, child and mother relationship. Everyone sits within a relationship of mother – child no matter of where they are, who they are, or what they are. We come from our place and we make our place and we are our place. It is the way we are connected, as *Yothu-Yindi*, child and mother, to all beings and becomings.¹ Our mother's painting *Djirkitj* is Gumatj artwork. See the diamonds, that is the *Yothu-Yindi* spiral which continues, from mother to daughter to daughter's daughter. The grandchildren, *gutharra*, hold the backbone of their *mari*, our mother.

Through *Yothu-Yindi* and through co-becoming everything is interconnected and interdependent. Everything is related. Fire is Gumatj and Gumatj children are the sparks. As Banbapuy says

When I did my study all the mothers took us to look at the Ganma – the waters meeting – when we were there we looked at the fire. I asked our mothers about the lirrwi, if you are the fire, what does the spark mean (when the fire has gone down - but it's still hot underneath, the sparks come out and the fire is burning) and she turned around and said to me you will have to find the answer on your own. And now I know, we are the sparks – the dots in the painting, the point that starts again. The sparks are the children, we get the sparks and then we carry on - start the new fire - when we see the pattern of the dots in the centre, the sparks are the dots, the point that starts again.



Figure 2. Artist: Gaymala Yunupingu, *Djirkitj* (1998)

The screen print above is of *Djirikitj* at Birany Birany, and these quails are Gaymala and her sisters. Together they are preparing the nest, preparing, they are talking to each other, communicating and that is their role. There are feathers around the nest so the children will know who their mother is by her smell, just like when a baby is born the mother knows their

¹ Gay'wu Group of Women, *Song Spirals*.

baby's cry. The work, teaching and loving care is carried by all mothers until the eggs are hatched but of course all mothers help each other because children are our backbone. When the quail nest burns, the mother leads the way to safety – teaching us how to look after each other, showing us the way, making us understand that the fire can be dangerous. When the fire dies we can see the ashes and they will stay there forever. The *lirrawi* stays there, it is the lineage of the fire, the backbone. It shows who has been there. It will be there forever. So this brings us back to the land. The land is our mother. Our mothers are our knowledge keeps, the keepers of the flame. Everything depends on where it is and it is always happening, always emerging, renewing, and always negotiating, in relation. Yet always underpinned by our foundation, the Law and Country.

Co-becoming is between humans and humans, and also more-than-humans. It is about your actual mother and relatives, but it also puts you in relationship with all things. The *Yothu-Yindi* relationship includes men too, and land and waters and not just people who are alive but ancestors and spiritual beings too. This infinite spiral links places with other places, the laws to the land, people with other people, and humans and non-humans in relationships of co-becoming. It means we become together. We are part of each other, but not the same. So it is about co-becoming *as* place and *as* time.

Co-becoming is not about the mish mash, an annihilation of difference – it's about holding and respecting difference. Everyone sits within a relationship of mother – child no matter where they are, who they are. Relationships give everything (human and non-human) meaning, order, balance. For us co-becoming involves more than the sum of beings. There is something bigger at stake; an enchanted, mysterious, beautiful lightness of becoming, which is often within grasp, yet always alludes.²



² Bawaka Country et al., “Caring as Country.”

Shadows are important in co-becoming; we need a respite from the sun, a place to yarn. But they are shadows of our choice, we are related to them, we nurture and celebrate them. We need both lightness and shadow to make it whole because lightness cannot work on its own and neither can the shadows. Co-becoming requires us to pay close attention to our emergence, to the relationships which enable us, and it requires that we do so with an ethics of care as we co-become together.

This piece builds on other discussions by the collective on co-becoming, please see Bawaka Country et al., 2018, 2016a, 2016b, 2013.

Gaymala Yunupijū's artwork has been included with permission of Gaymala's daughters and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

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ⁱ Bawaka Country including Laklak Burarrwanga, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs, Banbapuy Ganambarr, Djawundil Maymuru, Sarah Wright, Kate Lloyd and Sandie Suchet-Pearson. “Co-becoming.” *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020).

<https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

ⁱⁱ Bawaka Country is an active partner of our research collaboration. Located in North East Arnhem Land, Bawaka Country incorporates people, animals, plants, water and land. For Laklak and her family it is what connects them to each other and to multiple spiritual and symbolic realms. It relates to Laws, custom, movement, song, knowledge, relationships, histories, presents, futures and spirit beings. Country can be talked to, it can be known, it can itself communicate, feel and take action.

ⁱⁱⁱ Laklak Burarrwanga is a Datiwuy Elder, Caretaker for Gumatj, and eldest sister. As such she has both the right and the cultural obligation to share certain aspects of her knowledge and experiences with others. She established her family-owned tourism business Bawaka Cultural Experiences (BCE) and through this business she has taken advantage of being able to share her knowledge.

^{iv} Ritjilili Ganambarr is an author and illustrator as well as community health worker. Ritjilili works with her family’s highly successful Yolŋu owned-and-run Indigenous tourism business (Bawaka Cultural Experiences). She regularly travels to present workshops to non-Indigenous participants on Yolŋu culture and land.

^v Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs is a proud Yolŋu woman and leader from North East Arnhem Land. She has written 6 books and plays an important role in the bilingual education movement in Arnhem Land working with Yolŋu Elders to develop both-ways learning. She is currently principal of Yirrkala School.

^{vi} Banbapuy Ganambarr is from the clan Gapiny and her moiety is Dhuwa. She has a background in education and now teaches at Yirrkala school. Her work as an author, artist, weaver, and teacher has allowed her to influence curriculum and teaching methods, and to stand up and explain community needs and goals to Government Departments and Officers.

^{vii} Djawundil Maymuru is an author and works with Bawaka Cultural Experiences. As a key member of the business, she works with visitors to Bawaka to share life at Bawaka with them, helping them understand and respect Yolŋu culture and land. She has been on the board of Laynhapuy Homeland Association and has been invited to share Yolŋu knowledge at conferences and seminars in New Zealand, Canberra, Sydney and Newcastle.

^{viii} Sarah Wright is a Professor and Future Fellow in the discipline of geography and environmental studies at the University of Newcastle, Australia <sarah.wright@newcastle.edu.au>

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For more information about the Bawaka Collective see: <https://bawakacollective.com/>