

**who is country?: a
hermeneutic strategy toward
philosophical responsiveness
in australia**

samuel curkpatrick, sarah bacaller
and wanta jampijinpa pawu

INTRODUCTION

‘Wominjeka.’ This greeting is frequently found outside buildings and on road signs across Melbourne, Australia. It means ‘welcome’ in the Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung languages of the Eastern Kulin Nation. When attending Welcome to Country ceremonies held by traditional owners to open formal events on Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung Country, we are told that *wominjeka* means, ‘come with purpose’.¹ How might non-Indigenous Melburnians respond to this invitation? What sort of philosophical activity might this conception of ‘Country’ invite, as it underpins traditions of Indigenous Australian thought, history, and

aspiration?

From school assemblies and sports events to Australia's federal parliament, the term 'Country' is used to recognise the prior and ongoing connections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with the many lands, waters, and skies now called Australia. In contrast to a Welcome to Country by the traditional owners of an area, an Acknowledgement of Country is a formal statement of awareness and respect performed to open many gatherings and events. In both welcome and acknowledgement ceremonies, the term 'Country' is used to affirm autonomous Indigenous identities that extend through the generations as ancestrally bestowed, calling attention to these connections which might otherwise go unnoticed within contemporary life.

While 'Country' as a signifier can encapsulate emplaced relations and the intricate connections of specific families and places, the term can also be deployed in an abstract fashion that threatens to shift attention away from particular and relational interactions of emplaced belonging. Equally displacing, acknowledgment of Country in some contexts might seem overly performative and politicised, falling flat as a perfunctory procedure. Acknowledgment might also elicit or reinforce unctuous receptivity to a perceived immanent *otherness* that bestows a sense of cultural competence.

How then might we hear 'Country' as a movement toward relational growth and responsibility among specific people and places, rather than as a valorisation of otherness or in unreflective abstraction? Can speaking 'Country' do more than mark general awareness of the unique connections to place maintained by many Indigenous Australians? In what follows, we seek to show how attending to particularised nuances of the concept 'Country' can open responsive and generative relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In the ways we seek to understand and grapple with 'Country', we hope to demonstrate a form of philosophical activity layered within, and intentionally engaged with, relations to and within Country.

SPEAKING COUNTRY, HEARING COUNTRY

Etymologies of Country

The Aboriginal English term ‘Country’ has become commonplace within Anglophone discourse. As a concept, *Country* distinguishes forms of being and knowing that are specific to the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups that have populated Australia for over 60,000 years. The term is used as a gloss for interdependencies of people, animals, ecology, and topography, which sustain diverse communities within a complex network of relations, and extends from cultures in which the use of toponyms reveals how ‘the conceptual boundaries between places, people, and things are fluid.’²

Both Pleshet and Goddard have traced adaptations of the term within non-Aboriginal English, from twentieth century Australian anthropology (W.E.H. Stanner) to literature (Xavier Herbert); through usage in native title and land rights claims during the 1970s and 1980s, to land management policy from the 1990s.³ One of the earliest recorded Aboriginal English uses of the term *Country* in published text is from the mid-1840s, when we read in Townsend that Maroot of the Kameygal/Gameygal people (Kamay/Botany Bay) tragically declared, “All black-fellow gone! All this my country!”⁴

While ubiquitous within Aboriginal English, the general term ‘Country’ is not necessarily found in Central Australian languages like Warlpiri or Anangu, nor traditionally used in relation to specific hereditary estates and their management. Anthropologist and Pitjantjatjara translator, Diana James, comments that the Australian Western Desert languages have no general term for Country in the sense of the ‘nation state’. More specifically,

In Pitjantjatjara, the concept of *ngura walytja* is used to refer to kin country, place, or places a person is related to by birth, or through patrilineal or matrilineal lines. Sometimes people refer to large estates of land as *ngura walytja*, but always country of extended kin group. When Anangu refer to

Australia as a country they use the term *manta*—literally, dirt, dry land. Concepts of belonging expand from self as Anangu Pitjantjatjara, to self as part of all people of Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (the regional land title corporation), to self as an Indigenous Australian, to self as part of Indigenous peoples around the world.⁵

For Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu, a senior Warlpiri elder from the Tanami Desert, traditional educative processes of ceremony that are found across the continent can teach us how to ‘read Country’. This is a phrase he often uses in communicating with non-Indigenous Australians the importance of observing interactions of land, ecology, animals, and the movements of the seasons and stars.⁶ To ‘read Country’ is to perceive intricate relations that constitute life as a living text of ancestral creativity or Jukurrpa—the way things are, because of how they came to be.⁷ Knowing how to ‘read Country’ entails responsibility to follow ancestral laws that are inscribed in people and place, and which structure social belonging and purpose.

As Pawu explains, while the meaning of Country is always and already “written in creation,” we recognise the generative potential of Country as we seek to live within established relational patterns that constitute experience.⁸ Considering the key principles of an Aboriginal philosophy, Mary Graham writes of ‘reciprocity’ between diverse peoples and places as a “vital, creative element” which “creates a moral environment in which to live”; obligations “develop with particularised responsibilities according to locality.”⁹ These responsibilities are sustained “through the continual enactment of protocols, ritual, and ceremony.”¹⁰

Country is recognised through these living connections and responsibilities, which are embedded in traditional songs, dances, and narratives. By participating in ceremonial performances, a new generation is formed in partners of trade, kinship, land management, and processes of political negotiation and conflict resolution that sustain healthy communities.¹¹ For example, in being taught to paint the ancestral *kuruwarri* (ancestral pattern, mark) for the budgerigar,

Warlpiri learn about their flight paths and the location of remote waterholes; these in turn represent connections between different families who gather there. The budgerigar represents Pawu's mother and her homeland, and entails responsibility to care for this place and the people connected through it.

Use of 'Country' in mainstream cultural discourse may carry forward aspects of meaning and practice found in Indigenous Australian thought traditions, but it also fulfills a distinctly contemporary purpose: to speak 'Country' in public contexts is to sustain a political assertion of unceded Indigenous autonomy and agential occupation—a midden-like strata of history and relations buried underneath contemporary institutions. The term is therefore a modern one, in the sense that Stephen Muecke understands *indigeneity* as a response to colonisation, potentially creative in establishing a 'mode of relating' that clarifies difference *and* allows growth in-between distinct histories and identities.¹²

Within contemporary usage and primed with multiple registers of meaning, 'Country' is an expansive notion. As Pleshet argues—in the context of Aangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara culture and linguistic agency—it is precisely the 'semantic flexibility' and non-specificity of Country as idiom that is "key to understanding [the term's] meaning and efficacy."¹³

Speaking 'Country' with a capital-C

The complexities of concept and communication described above are signalled in the capitalisation of 'Country', whether written or spoken as such—a practice common across academic writing, journalism, policy, and education in Australia. Capitalisation marks 'Country' as a meta-concept that encapsulates and distinguishes diverse experiences and meanings. For Graham, this is "a redefining of the term to give back spiritual meaning to the Land"—where 'Land' with a capital 'l' likewise indicates "someone's responsibility and obligation."¹⁴ Speaking Country with a capital-C intentionally disrupts non-Indigenous Australian ways of talking about land and is politically and ethically loaded, a situation reflected

by the many style guides that instruct capitalisation of the term as a mark of respect.¹⁵ For many, this symbolic alteration is a small but significant way of redressing misrepresentation and the perceived invisibility of Indigenous ways of being to the colonial imagination.

Australians Together, an organisation that produces educative resources for schools, inform us that:

The term ‘Country’ is often used to describe a culturally defined area of land associated with a particular, culturally distinct group of people, clan or nation. Country can also refer to more than a physical place – it indicates cultural relationships and responsibilities associated with caring for land.

GUIDELINE:

- Use ‘Country’ to refer to a particular, culturally defined area of land.
- Always capitalise Country.¹⁶

Such recommendations seek not only to redress cultural ambivalences toward Indigenous experience, but also the historical and present shortcomings of legal frameworks in articulating, recognising, and verifying the substantive relationships of Aboriginal people to Country. For instance, land claim processes in Australia have looked to evidence of occupation and custodianship through physical modifications or improvements to the land.¹⁷ “Despite the recognition of native title,” writes Marcia Langton, the ‘absurd’ notion that “property has prescribed characteristics and that any property system not having these would therefore not constitute a property system [...] remains a powerful influence.”¹⁸ These characteristics are purportedly found on Country through *capitalisation* in another sense: as utilising, improving, and developing land—economically, agriculturally, residentially. Yet such approaches can miss the phenomenological and relational moorings of Country inherent in Indigenous Australian cultures. As Langton observes in the context of Aboriginal groups from Cape York, it is rather connections of kin and story that “inscribe the self in place and place in the

self,” that mark Indigenous Australian relations to land as distinct and ongoing.¹⁹

An important question arises here: How might we *hear* ‘Country’, not as a conceptual abstraction—that is, as a generalisation of ontological distinction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians—but precisely through the nourishing and vitalising interactions of people and place from which the term emerges? If the capitalisation of Country can foster awareness of significant differences of thought and tradition, it also reveals an inherent conceptual limitation: ‘Country’ valorises otherness by marking separation, rather than relational engagement. Further, the profile of alterity which ‘Country’ invokes might be experienced as insurmountable and beyond the reach of non-Indigenous people and culture, perhaps out of fear of assuming knowledge without invitation.

This challenge can be heard in Pawu’s words which express the relational ethos of Warlpiri thought and performance, and illustrate his approach to collaborative research. Pawu’s words reflect a classical view of identity shared by Aboriginal groups across the continent, in understanding everyone within a region as intimately connected, while also marking complimentary distinctions between kin groups and their estates. These distinctions are essential to hospitality and welcome.

You know, Captain Cook came—we recognise foreigners. But I can’t even use that word, ‘foreigners’. I don’t want to. Because no one is a real foreigner. They are *ngajjarri*, which means ‘guest’. Everyone is a guest. And those guests can easily become family. We recognise your *ngurra* (home) is somewhere across the big water. But to bring you in here [to this place], with your *ngurra*, means accepting each other, adopting each other. So when you acknowledge those who are here, when you acknowledge Country, it’s more like Country is welcoming you—to claim you really, to give you a sense of belonging. (Pawu)²⁰

Who is country? A hermeneutic strategy

Having sketched a potted history of the term ‘Country’, we hope to leave off from any attempts at declarative definition. Attempting to spell out the numerous interactions enfolded into ‘Country’ as a meta-concept would only further abstract that concept from the nourishing and vitalising interactions of people and place which constitute its very meaning.²¹

How might we short-circuit such abstracting tendencies in speaking and hearing ‘Country’? Can this term be spoken in a way that equips others to engage with and learn from those relationships which are embedded in countless generations of Indigenous Australian history and culture? In what follows, we propose a hermeneutic strategy for thinking and speaking *country*, encapsulated in the question, ‘who is country?’. This question might be creatively deployed within our academic writing, education, and approach to hearing ‘Country’ within our gatherings.

We also deploy a linguistic short-circuit: where editorial guidelines request the capitalisation of ‘Country’, we refer in the following sections to lower-case ‘country’ in specific instances, to distinguish from more abstract or conjectural renderings. This is a reminder that (1) the term is in a sense a *stand in* or proxy for constellations of meaning which cannot sufficiently be encapsulated by the profile an uppercase ‘C’ lends; and (2) in the context of philosophical enquiry, this is an invitation to engage with meaning through a horizontal economy of symbolic interactions—the *rough ground* of material relations through which the meaning of country emerges. This pivot, from the conceptual to the lateral dimensions of meaning, is an attempt to dispel a misty unreflected abstraction without genuine philosophical impetus that more facile utterances of ‘Country’ can conjure, and generates space for ‘kin and story’ constellations of meaning to unfurl. Or, borrowing a metaphor from Peter Danaja, who likens toponyms in the Burarra language to ‘hyperlinks on a computer’, we might better understand Country by ‘clicking’ on the various names of Country to open a story.²²

Who?

Reflecting on his childhood in the late 1960s–70s, Pawu recalls how many in the Warlpiri community would greet each other with the phrase, “Good morning, Country!” or “Hello, Country!” However, rather than using the term ‘Country’ as he translates, the names of specific, ancestrally bestowed homelands were used, places from which different families trace their lineage and identity. In addressing people through the names of specific places, as in the ‘surname’, Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu—also known as Mt. Barkley—what was otherwise heard as a remote place becomes intimately configured within a network of living relations.²³ Writing from an anthropological perspective in relation to Pama society and property relations in Cape York Peninsula, Langton explains,

It is apparent that men and women speak about their hereditary estates in the context of immediate social relations that arise not only from their relations with other people, but also from the way they are embedded in places in consequence of their reverential regard for the sacred and historical resonances of those places.²⁴

This form of address engenders respect, not only in acknowledging the deeper connections that shape identity but in locating relationality within a constellation of narrative connections, as between people, place, history, performance, ecology, and cosmology. It also highlights our material responsibility to the land and environment, an accountability that is inseparable from ‘being-in-relation’, rather than accountability gauged through ethical precepts.²⁵

To greet someone metonymically *as* country is also an exchange through which people are ‘seen as their homeland’, recognising identities that precede us—Jukurrpa, or ancestral creativity that substantiates present experience. Pawu explains how the Warlpiri term for ‘ancestors’, *walya-jarra*, conveys a sense of complementary difference:

Walya-jarra is our word for ancestors. *Walya* means land, ground, or country; *jarra* means two, or a pair, like the day and night, or the ground

and sky. Even if you don't know those who have come before, they are still a part of you—still present. So, two homelands must become one homeland, *palka*, a 'body' made of different parts. That's the idea. *Walya-jarra* means two groundings become one grounding. That's what recognition and acknowledgement of country is doing. (Pawu)

Far from introducing a conceptual term that pulls away from relational specificity, to speak 'country' is to recognise a mutuality of people and place, past and present, mother and child, through which experience is constituted.²⁶ These interactions interweave through the generations and extend outwards, connecting different groups and places.

Pawu views any designation of singular identities—as in a chauvinistic Australian nationalism branded with the southern cross—as conceptually flawed: *no kuruwarrri* (design, mark) or linguistic term ('Country') can encapsulate the dynamic reciprocity of difference. A term like 'Australia' only becomes meaningful through our relations, as we '*become Australia*'—discovering what it means to belong to this land through our relations with others who inhabit it.²⁷ In his teaching, Pawu therefore speaks to the curiosity of non-Indigenous people who seek to learn more about Warlpiri culture, not by playing along with an interrogative quest for determination: *what is that?* Rather, if, as Pawu teaches, 'you are your country', the relational dimensions of country are better expressed by the pronoun *who* and so, a relational ontology.

The question, *who is country?* is therefore a useful one to ask in our teaching, and which might also shape the directedness of our enquiries into purpose and belonging in Australia. This question not only underscores the personal and relational dimensions of Warlpiri knowledge, but extends an integral heuristic quality within Pawu's thinking, teaching, and cultural leadership—a quality that is *read* from the dynamic confluence of *pulyaranyi* (winds of change; explored further below). Asking 'who is country?' generates movement, sparking interest through dissonance, not to undercut or deconstruct inherited meanings but

rather to highlight the need to reconceptualise present forms of understanding through lateral interactivity. Rather than conceptualising difference by valorising otherness or through performative assertions of ‘Country’ as cultural separation, this approach is essential to figuring shared identities within relational difference.

Performing ceremony, cultivated by country

Within traditional forms of Warlpiri ceremony, the importance of attentiveness to relations as the basic orientation of Indigenous Australian epistemology becomes evident. The ceremonial ground, a ground of gathering that draws together people from many different families and homelands, is a place of individual and community formation: songs and narratives shape society by provoking the exploration of responsiveness and responsibility among those who are different. Indeed, the name Warlpiri, after *warlpa-wiri*, refers to the ‘big wind’ that was formed when different Warlpiri groups, represented by the four winds, came together.²⁸ Within Warlpiri society, a sense of responsibility begins through respectful attention to elders and the generations who have gone before, in learning hereditary rights and histories of custodianship of places, animals, stories, and songs. These responsibilities also entail obligations to live within law and right conduct among the other groups that make up society.

Themes of social responsiveness and responsibility have pervaded Pawu’s teaching, especially his utilisation of *ngurra-kurlu*, a philosophic principle that concerns the wellbeing of society through five interrelated elements: *walya* ‘land’, *kuruwarru* ‘law’, *manyuwana* ‘ceremony’, *jaru* ‘language’, and *warlalja* ‘kin.’²⁹ Healthy community depends on active engagement with and contribution to the vitalisation of these elements and, through the configuration of *ngurra-kurlu*, one comes to recognise ‘home’—a cultural identity and place distinct from but related to all others.³⁰

Through large ceremonial gatherings organised for important events throughout the year, Warlpiri learn about the distinct places, songs, stories, and names that

help them ‘navigate’ contemporary life: Pawu speaks of ‘tracking’ our connections through ceremonial narratives, which are like a ‘compass’ that helps us locate ourselves among the many responsibilities of society: “It’s not enough to know *about* your country; you have to understand how it fits in—how it’s located—as a place in the dreaming and in the songline.”³¹ Detailing various responsibilities of land management and the way these are expressed in ancestral narratives, Pawu and Holmes have articulated what they feel to be a more ‘acceptable’ translation of *country* as ‘a common sense of belonging’ that encompasses “the physical environment but also the various social, spiritual, and cultural relationships that transform an ecological landscape into a socio-cultural one.”³²

The transformation of physical environment into country is brought about through ceremonial education and performance, gatherings within which we ask questions of *who?*—of ancestral identities, purpose, and our place among others. Recognition of country emerges as the vitalising ground on which we gather, which nourishes us in our differences and, as in a phrase of Ngarinyin elder David Mowaljarlai’s, keeps ‘everything standing up alive.’³³ Pawu explains further:

You know the word *culture*, it’s something to do with gardening. We have to be good gardeners of the country. Well, maybe—or maybe it’s country that makes a garden out of us! This country is a real gardener; that’s the system we need to be in. This country is telling people how you must behave to each other. It’s written in the stars, that *kurawarri* [law].³⁴

Pulyaranyi (winds of change): becoming responsive and responsible

Pulyaranyi is a Warlpiri ceremonial narrative of which Pawu is the senior custodian. This is a story from his father’s country, Pawu, and the remote plain known as Kurlpurlurnu (Rain Dreaming). As the *milpirri* (thunder clouds) form when hot air rises and cold air falls, *pulyaranyi* is experienced as a cool change that suddenly ‘hits you in the face’ after the sweltering hot season—a bracing *yinapaka* slap or realisation (see below).³⁵ As an approach to pedagogy, *pulyaranyi* is about stirring

things up, provoking movement and interaction—learning and growing together through the generative interactions of difference.

Pawu's teaching and leadership can often be characterised as *pulyaranyi*. He typically teaches with questions that are provocative and open ended. In this, he seeks to shape self-sufficient learners who are attentive to their environment and can therefore *hunt* for themselves, who can recognise knowledge as that which can nourish and sustain, through the dynamic confluences of people and place. If our ideas and projects are formed only by reference to discrete places, histories, and selves, we are said to be 'windless', without purpose and 'stuck' in our tracks. The meeting of different winds and build-up of *milpirri*, which entails disturbance and even conflict, is necessary to producing lifegiving rains.

To ask *who is country?* is to seek to become *responsive* to others, whose varied perspectives 'stir things up' so that we do not become 'stuck in our differences'. Responsiveness is entwined with *responsibility*—what we do with knowledge, our stewardship of those things that come to us from the past. Responsibility also recognises the mutuality that knowledge entails; the identity of the listener/learner is always formed within community and entails obligations to contribute to the wellbeing of their community. Responsibility is the lifeblood of our connections, the veins that keep us alive, the passing of nutrients from one part of the body to another—the function of ceremony in gathering, sharing, feeding others with knowledge, to become a 'gift to one another.'³⁶

The *who?* of country is therefore never a singular, isolated identity but is always discovered in community. Asking *who is country?* can shift focus from seemingly insurmountable differences to the cultivation of relationships. The meeting of hot air from the earth and cool air from higher in the atmosphere can produce lifegiving rain in the desert. In the dynamic intermingling of old and new, mother and child, neighbour and foreigner, *pulyaranyi* is about potential.

Excursus: What's in a question?

The birds gathered at Yinapaka, which is also known as Lake Surprise, to discuss who was most agile in flight. The emu, the greatest teacher of all, came along but was rejected by the other birds, who laughed at him, a flightless bird. When the emu had left the gathering, the eagle told the other birds where he had learnt his superior hunting skills and ability of flight—from the emu. Only then did they wake up. This is the Yinapaka moment, the slap, the wakeup call. They realise that they have missed the opportunity to learn. That's what Yinapaka means—time to understand this story.³⁷

Who has seen an emu fly? Pawu's teaching often begins with just such a question, drawn from classical Warlpiri narratives. "In Yapa [Aboriginal] way, we teach by giving clues and riddles and all these metaphors: You gotta figure it out."³⁸ Questions which are intentionally open ended can shape, divert, and broaden lines of thought. An answer might seem initially definitive but eventually falls out of sync with the dynamics of time and context; a pertinent question can energise thought in a variety of contexts. Where the pronouncement of settled meaning might seek to circumscribe experience, questions allow experience itself to be recognised in new ways.

Emus don't fly. But might they? Where might we glimpse one airborne? To ask a question with humility and respect is to be open to formation, the possibility of seeing what is hidden in plain sight. Only through the intellectual hunt, might we come to a meaningful re-cognition of our experiences, our own Yinapaka moment. This is significant for the wellbeing of others: "I will not tell you the answer. You'll have to hunt for yourself. Sorry! If I do hunting for you, you're not a reliable person to live in my community. Everyone needs to know how to hunt" (Pawu).

Yitaki mani means 'hunting' or 'tracking', to bring back nourishing food for the community. It is a metaphor Warlpiri use to describe intellectual activity and the way that relational connections are 'tracked' through ancestral narratives. Like the hunter stalking game, knowledge grows through responsiveness, in attending

to the world around us and being ready to move, act, and exert effort. Digested in community, knowledge sustains emplaced being and our connections with one another.

Who is country? Good questions travel better than neat answers. While we seek to disrupt instantiated assumptions and patterns of thinking, this question is an invitation to engage with the people and stories embedded in the places we live. In asking, we invite collaborative effort and mutual formation, through the tangible interactions that country offers.

Theological responsiveness and responsibility on country

The basic challenge articulated in this article has been to make less abstract and more interconnected an understanding of country in contemporary Australia. We have asked ‘who is country?’ as a hermeneutic strategy inspired by Pawu’s own *pulyaranyi* pedagogy. We have approached an understanding of country heuristically, through the diverse relations that constitute purpose and place, rather than through conceptual abstraction or definitional circumscription.

In this final section, we look to the ways this engagement with ‘country’ might also be reflected in the contextual hermeneutics of Indigenous Australian theology, a discipline concerned with questions of belonging and purpose, albeit in forums perhaps beyond the radar of mainstream philosophy. We consider how the philosophical impetuses of localised theology provoke a similar concern with meaning as substantiated *on country*—through the vulnerabilities of human relationality and emplacement. The significance of this extends beyond Christian communities to wider Australian society, in considering pronouncements of recognition and reconciliation as meaningless if not accompanied by tangible change within everyday life.

The voice of theological enquiry within public discourse on issues of culture and identity in Australia, if previously tolerated in various forums, has become more pronounced in recent years, notably through the writings of Wiradjuri journalist

and political commentator, Stan Grant.³⁹ Grant considers questions of identity and belonging through various histories of western thought, as well as his extensive experience as a foreign correspondent reporting from the Middle East and China, with a view to the role of religious and cultural identities within state and society. His work prefaces a philosophical rather than pietistic or confessional intimation of country that considers its intellectual underpinnings.

Grant's writings and media appearances also clarify, on a national stage, a generous and capacious understanding of belonging that can also be found in the writing and advocacy of Aboriginal Christian leaders throughout Australian history, even as these individuals have remained clear eyed as to the fundamental injustices of history and challenges facing Aboriginal people on many fronts (such as in health, education, and aspirations toward cultural and political autonomy). These Christian leaders—through their words and practical ministries within Australian communities—have grappled with surrounding issues of reconciliation and recognition, issuing a call for Christians to understand their faith as emplaced *on country*. This call also offers, tacitly or explicitly, a challenge to abstract metaphysical projections onto country and, indeed, theistic intimations toward 'God' as transcendent abstract totality, through focus on the embodied love among neighbours that nurtures community.

How do Indigenous theologians approach complex questions of identity and belonging within institutions that have both colluded with *and* resisted state incursions on Indigenous sovereignty? What does it mean to hold together Christian belief, seemingly inextricably linked with colonising politics, and Indigenous identity as entwined in the very lifeblood of these lands? Expressing characteristic generosity in his approach to the complexities of faith, identity, and community, Rev. Graham Paulson, the first ordained Indigenous Baptist minister in Australia, sees beyond an either/or approach when he asks, "What kind of theology can hold together, with integrity, both Indigenous and Christian identity?"⁴⁰ Paulson recognises the fundamental role of cultural situatedness in Christian hermeneutics, challenging the notion that a purist or immediate grasp

of Christian scripture is possible:

People sometimes suggest that the Bible contains cultural husks and a theological kernel. The Christian's job is then to peel away what is culturally relative, leaving only what is theologically binding. Thus, one proposal for overcoming the imposition of Western culture in theology is to try and do away with culture altogether.⁴¹

But, in fact, as Paulson argues, no meaning can be conveyed apart from culture. His approach short-circuits the implications of a foundationalist reading whereby the goal is for one's own perspective is to match as closely as possible with the assumed (and abstract) 'true meaning' of the text. Engagement with scripture then, and by extension, with faith, is not about the superiority of particular beliefs but is about working together in collective responsibility for the wellbeing of community; this comes about through integral commitments to the sources of faith, which find expression within living, relational contexts.

Developing this ethos, community leader Mark-Yettica Paulson (Graham Paulson's son), imagines the process of working cross-culturally as an activity that takes place in the riverbed, the shared space in which we meet. The riverbed is positioned between two riverbanks, "where we perform activities that strengthen our sense of belonging and deepen our identity".⁴² The riverbank is a place of gathering, celebration, and forming new relationships, "where pragmatic and innovative collaboration happens."⁴³ Similarly, for Pawu, the riverbank is akin to the Warlpiri notion of *kirri* or 'encampment in the middle': "That's where we come together, makes up who we are. We are this community."⁴⁴ *Kirri* is "a permanent camp, country that is full of water, where people can come and live with confidence."⁴⁵

Through the Four Stones Leadership program of Australians Together, Pawu encourages Aboriginal Christian leaders from across the country to interpret ancestral narratives and law, as these help us understand Christian faith, and vice versa. "That's the fun side of learning—both sides, thinking about how it fits

together. To understand *kardiya* teaching through my *yapa* [Aboriginal] teaching; you have to learn to become this country [...] That's what the emu, the great teacher, is encouraging us to do, he's saying, "Come and eat and drink." There is another great teacher who says something similar." (Pawu)

To truly belong as a people in this land—to "locate yourself in others, in creation as a gift"—non-Indigenous Christians must learn to 'read country' and the ancestrally given *text* which sustains our communities of difference. In other words,

The church needs to learn about this country; it needs to learn to sing and dance this country. Songlines are saying that if you follow these sacred stories, you become home. You feed [on] all the knowledge. To feed on Australia, you become Australia.

Unless you start singing and dancing this country, you can't be Australia. Come to a ceremony, try singing a song. That makes me feel like I am feeding together with you.

If you don't, the worst thing is living in your home and not knowing anything about it. You will lose your identity. Whoever wants to become this country needs to become my brother or sister. (Pawu)

Of course, for many Aboriginal people across the continent, engaging with country through traditional culture and language is difficult, especially where these have been decimated by colonisation. "With the depopulation that resulted from the frontier violence and colonial and post-Federation removals of sometimes entire populations administered and segregated settlements"⁶; descent-based systems of land ownership and management have also been irreparably disrupted. However, Pawu maintains that these ways of life might be rediscovered: country is always there, waiting to be read and patiently awaiting our response: "Speak to the land and the land will speak back" (Pawu).

This resonates with the theological attentiveness to *anaditj* or ‘the way things are’ of Denise Champion, Theologian in Residence at the Adelaide College of Divinity.⁴⁷ Emphasising the complex relations that shape her identity, Champion introduces herself as “an Adnyamathanha daughter, mother, sister, aunty and grandmother from the Flinders Ranges in South Australia.”⁴⁸ Her theological writing seeks to problematise language that codifies an inside/outsider framework regarding cultural and institutional identities—a significant task when the experience of Aboriginal people has often been one of exclusion or separation within the church and its theological traditions.⁵² Articulating why ancestral beliefs and law are not otherwise to Christian identity, she writes, “Christ was creator present in our stories”; she associates the “Word” of John’s Prologue (Jn 1:1), translated as ‘*Ngalakhana Mada* (the Word) made flesh’, with wisdom (Prov. 8: 22–31) which was always there—*anaditj*—and which guides our living towards a fuller realisation of being.⁴⁹

Similarly, Trawlolway theologian Garry Deverell, Lecturer and Research Fellow in the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Divinity, asserts that there are already key points of theological connection between the Christian gospel and Australian Indigenous cultures, precisely because the gospel is already present in the land and its people:

If we cannot see or hear or smell the gospel, it is not because the gospel is not being faithfully enculturated, but because we have simply deactivated both our senses and our imaginations in order to protect ourselves from its prophetic call [...] [for Indigenous Christians] the gospel therefore cries aloud in the rituals of the dreaming as much as in the rituals of Europe.⁵⁰

This, in a context where too often, Indigenous people have been invited into church so long as they “leave culture [and language] at the door.”⁵¹ More than translating one culture into another—or adjudicating what aspects of Aboriginal culture might legitimately be brought *into* Christian faith—the question for Deverell is how we recognise the role of the other in who we are and who we are becoming.

Within differing contexts, these theological perspectives not only seek to challenge non-Indigenous Christians to a renewed form of listening to Indigenous people, history, and experience, but give impetus to relational growth in priority to configurations of religious or institutional identity.⁵² It is precisely in country as a *who*—permeable, iterative, relatable rather than definitive—that we might be nourished through our interactions with others, a notion which has traditionally been known as Christian community. These relational qualities further resonate with the imperative of the Christian story of incarnation in the radical ‘lowercasing’ of God, whose death on the cross is the ultimate *kuruwarri* (mark, symbol) of God’s identity as a *relational movement* which overcomes transcendence—a challenge that might be levelled not only to theistic intimations of divinity found in many religious sensibilities, but to the ways we conceptualise meaning and truth.⁵³ The constant challenge of theology is therefore that any talk or enquiry of God must, for that word to be meaningful, generate a specificity which leads to responsiveness and responsibility within the materiality of time and place.

We conclude with the words of Ray Minniecon, an Aboriginal Pastor at Scarred Tree Indigenous Ministries with roots in the Kabikabi and Gurang-Gurang nations, who reminds us that the *who* of country is also the heart of theology and the source of hope within human history. For Minniecon, abstraction readily diffuses into meaningless; what makes a difference—whether it pertains to theological belief or to the recognition of Indigenous legacies and presence—is the cultivation of relationships that hear, share, and respond to the everyday struggles, sufferings, and joys of those we encounter. This is often hard and costly work, and success is neither instant nor guaranteed. Likewise, being cultivated by country, whether we are Indigenous or non-Indigenous, is an ongoing process of becoming responsive to relations which shape belonging and purpose.

What are we listening to, in terms of our theology? Are we listening to the ones who are filling our jails? Are we listening to all the deaths in custody? What about that? And what of all those young children that make me weep everyday, who are being forcibly removed from their families as we speak

and taken into foster homes? Are we listening to their mothers who are just crying for and yearning to touch their children again? To hold them in their arms, and they can't get access to that? To me, that's God speaking to me. That's Jesus weeping at the graveside. And I need to hear him weeping otherwise he's useless to me. God is of no use to me if he's not weeping with me and crying with me, and to give some kind of definition to what hope might look like [...] That's where your *proof* of theology needs to be exhibited, in ways that it can help our people get over that loss and through their trauma.⁵⁴

SAMUEL CURKPATRICK is a researcher specialising in Indigenous Australian music and philosophical issues of language, epistemology, and theology. He completed a doctorate in ethnomusicology at the National Centre for Indigenous Studies (ANU, Canberra) and postdoctoral research at the University of Divinity. Sam is a Research Associate at the Indigenous Knowledge Institute and Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, The University of Melbourne.

SARAH BACALLER is a writer and researcher from Melbourne, Australia. Her doctoral work explores the philosophy of Hegel (specifically concepts of God and the self), and her academic writing includes forays into culture and contemporary media studies, Australian Indigenous studies, literature, philosophy of religion and theology. Sarah also co-directs the Australian audiobook production company, Voices of Today, and has produced and narrated many commercial audiobooks.

WANTA JAMPIJINPA PAWU is a Warlpiri elder, Professorial Fellow at the Indigenous Knowledge Institute, The University of Melbourne, and Artistic Director of the Milpirri Festival, Lajamanu. He has led and collaborated

on numerous research projects through the Australian Research Council, which give focus to Warlpiri song, epistemology, education, the repatriation of archival records, and youth engagement. Pawu has provided policy advice on Indigenous law, education and youth matters to multiple government and industry bodies.

NOTES

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 23. On the use of a place names as a substitute to avoid speaking the personal name of someone who has recently died in Northwest Arnhem Land, see Garde, “Doing Things with Toponyms”, 110–11.
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32. Miles C. C. Holmes and Wanta (Stephen Patrick) Jampijinpa, “Law for Country: The Structure of Warlpiri Ecological Knowledge and Its Application to Natural Resource Management and Ecosystem Stewardship.” *Ecology and Society* 18:3 (2013, 19), <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-05537-180319>.
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34. Pawu and Curkpatrick, “Gift to One Another”, 7.
35. Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, “The Yinapaka Story (Milpirri Festival, 2021)”, Tracks Dance Milpirri, 6 November 2020, <https://tracksdance.com.au/2021-milpirri-yinapaka>. See also Corn and Patrick, “Pulyaranyi”. An aesthetic representation of *pulyaranyi* can be seen in Ryan, who writes about paintings by Freddy Patrick Jangala (fig. 4) and Fred Jigili Jampijinpa (fig. 12) that show the dynamism of Warlpiri narratives related to wind, clouds, lightning and the renewing rains. Judith Ryan, “A Bold Aesthetic: The Lajamanu Panels.” *Art Journal, National Gallery of Victoria* 30 (18 June 2014), <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/a-bold-aesthetic-the-lajamanu-panels/>.
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37. Retold by Pawu and Curkpatrick. The story is also related in Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, “The Yinapaka Story (Milpirri Festival, 2021)”; Corn and Patrick, “Pulyaranyi”.
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