

TOSSSED UP
BY THE BEAK OF
A CORMORANT

POEMS OF MARTUWARRA FITZROY RIVER

NANDI CHINNA AND ANNE POELINA



FREMANTLE PRESS

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Anne Poelina to Nandi Chinna

The River is the first author. The law of the River still stands. The ancestors brought the tree within the limits of the River's country, a bio-indicator of wellbeing. The River is a gift for all humanity to share, a precious and beautiful source of liberation and freedom. You need to form your own relationship with the River as a living system. You need to start talking to the River and then there is waiting time. Wait and it will communicate with you, it will teach you in a dialogic process. Then you can write about the journey of how you engage, how you talk, how you wait, and how you listen.

Blind and Dumb in the Martuwarra – Nandi Chinna

Can I ask you to close your eyes? Better still tie a blindfold over your eyes to block out the light. Then close your mouth and resist the urge to speak. Forget the language you normally resort to. Forget the language you have learned since you were a child. Now that you cannot see, and the language you know has become irrelevant, you may begin to grasp wildly at both of these things, and all that will remain is doubt in its most radical form. You may wonder if you can trust your body, your sensations, your perceptions?

When I moved from the south-west of Western Australia up to Fitzroy Crossing in the remote north-west of the state, my first forays into Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Nyikina, Walmajarri and Wangkatjungka countries felt as bewildering as if I had been gagged and blindfolded. I felt as though I had left Australia, and with it lost all of my familiar languages and strategies as an artist and writer. In reality, the opposite was true. I had arrived in Australia; into some of the ancient, original, and evolving cultures and countries that make up this place now known as Australia. I was born in the colonised south, and despite the courageous efforts of Aboriginal peoples all over the nation, the colonising culture has done its best to cover up the original Aboriginal place of Adelaide. I was born into, and grew up in, an English-style suburb with introduced grasses, plants, and

trees, and into English language and culture, with little idea that I was living on the country of the Kaurna people with its own distinct language and culture, and ways of interpreting the place in which it was situated.

In my first few months in Fitzroy Crossing I think I caught a glimmer of what it might take for the kartiya (newcomers/white people) to just step back, to shut up for a minute and listen, which is something that seems hard for us to do. As westerners in the western system, we seem to predicate our identity upon what we can say, not how well we can listen. It's uncomfortable to remain silent. When I walk out through spinifex and termite mounds into the massive plain, I walk towards mountains that don't seem to get any closer. The distances are so vast I could walk all day and still not reach the foot of the ranges. I am ignorant of the names, the interrelationships, the histories and reciprocities. In my own silence, I feel the country shouting back at me. All of my confusion, my failures, my achievements, decisions I have and have not made, the incomprehensible tangle of language, self-judgement, confusion and uncertainty that I carry rises up and explodes in the silence and loneliness of being a stranger in a country I do not know, and that does not know me.

In the vast spinifex plains and ranges of the central Kimberley, the Linnean *Systema Naturae* (The System of Nature), of classification of living things into Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus and Species, seems to alienate rather than offer clarity. The Latin and common Anglophone names of those living things are an uncomfortable fit when you try to lay it over the multiplicity of countries and languages you have arrived in.

As Kim Mahood so succinctly articulates, the position of ‘kartiya’ in the Kimberley is doubtful, even to ourselves.¹

Walking out in the mornings, the story of the night is carved in red sand: the slash of the snake, the slide of the lizard, and the imprint of its toes laid elegantly either side, plus myriad footprints of beings unknown to me, crisscrossing through the imprints of Toyota tyres and human shoes. This bamboozling riddle of impressions seems to point to my own complicated position as a settler writer and artist living and working in a colonised country. Art making is an ethical act, which requires the artist to rupture and disturb enervated narratives. Walking along this track, I am placing my feet on the path of thousands of generations of Bunuba people’s lives, languages and culture. As a descendant of the invading peoples, I feel blind and dumb, and I’m trying to get used to the giddiness of the space left open when I attempt to remain quiet and listen.

My previous creative work has been place-based – poetry generated by walking and trying to remain open to encounters with air, water, weather, terrain, and the voices and habits of different species. As part of this work, I have often been consulting the colonial archive. As I saw it, the question of my responsibility as an artist working in a colonised country relates to finding a mode of representation that is outside of ideas of ‘belonging’ and its opposite, ‘alienation’, working in the space that poet and curator John Mateer calls the ‘Ontological Predicament of being in Australia.’²

Perhaps one aspect of this responsibility is learning how to sit with the layers and complexity of colonisation and bracket

them off, to then experience the alienation (feeling dumbstruck) and the separation (from the corpus of the rational). This allows an apprehension of the knowledges and phenomena that have sustained this continent for over fifty thousand years to reverberate.

What all this meant for writing, for my own settler poetics, I didn't know. In place of poetry I made lists of things I see and hear, of questions I have about my own voice. I began to comprehend that new forms and structures, cross-cultural collaborations and conversations are needed to address geo/econo poetics in this colonised Australian context.³

After living in Fitzroy Crossing for two years and remaining in a state of uncertainty about whether I should be writing about this place, we attended a concert in the dry riverbed up near the Old Crossing. Elders of all five language groups were invited to speak, and we were also treated to a concert by the legendary Fitzroy Express. We heard from the Elders that the Martuwarra Fitzroy River is under threat from pastoralists wanting to extract water and build dams, which would interrupt the natural flooding and drying habit of this ancient river and damage its unique ecosystems. Fracking exploration is also closing in on the Fitzroy Valley and the trajectory of the sacred Martuwarra Fitzroy River. The ancient spirit of the river, the culture and survival of those living along her is under threat. What struck me most about what all the Elders expressed that night, was that every part of the Martuwarra River is named, and every river place has a story.

Hearing these powerful Elders speak about the spirit and

depth of connection with their River homeplace as we sat, and later danced in the sandy riverbed under a multitude of stars, was a life-changing experience that convinced me even more that there was nothing I could say about this mighty River.

However, the creative impulse is a strong drive, and I felt that I somehow wanted to contribute to the campaign to protect Martuwarra Fitzroy River. In the spirit of respect for the Traditional Owners and cross-cultural collaboration, I phoned Nyikina Elder and Chair of the Martuwarra Council of Elders, Professor Anne Poelina, for some advice about how to proceed. When I explained my dilemma, Anne could not have been more kind and generous. We talked for a while about the river, its cultural and ecological importance, and the threats to its future survival. Anne suggested that I should listen to the river, talk to the river, and then learn to sit in the waiting time, time when this relationship gestates, time for the river and I to get to know each other, and for poetry to arise.

This is what I have done with this poetry collection. I have attempted to avoid the colonial archive, and simply record embodied encounters with the River and its human and more-than-human beings. I hope that by writing this poetry I can share aspects of the personal impact a river like Martuwarra can have on those who are open to listen, both to Traditional Owners and to the River itself. I hope that I have in some way been able to express the extraordinary beauty and magnificence of Martuwarra Fitzroy River and contribute to the ongoing protection of this heritage-listed watercourse which is critically significant globally as one of the world's last wild Rivers.

This poetry collection is a three-way conversation between the Martuwarra River, Anne and myself. As part of this conversation Anne contributes her important poems which carry an urgent message evoking ancestral law and the rights of nature. Punctuating my conversation with Martuwarra, Wagaba Anne Poelina, traditional custodian and river guardian of Martuwarra, shares her poems on Martuwarra First Law, multi-species justice, and the river's right to remain.

References

1. Mahood, K., (2016), *Position Doubtful: Mapping Landscapes and Memories*, Scribe, 2016, p. 44.
2. Mateer. J., (2012), 'Nativism and the Interlocutor', *Cordite Poetry Review*, 1 November 2012, cordite.org.au/essays/nativism-and-the-interlocutor.
3. Minter. P., (2016), 'Introduction to "Decolonisation and Geopoethics"', *Plumwood Mountain; An Australian Journal of ecopoetry and ecoethics*, Vol. 6, No. 1, plumwoodmountain.com/decolonisation-and-geopoethics.

Martuwarra Time

Martuwarra, the Fitzroy River, tributaries, floodplains, jilas
and soaks,
mark the sites where *Yoongoorrookoo, Galbandu, Kurrapurrngu,*
Mangunampi, Paliyarra
and *Kurungal* give life to the Rainbow Serpent's First Law,
living waters, living free.

The River is watching in the waiting time, waiting to see what
the humans will do

Lots of talk of Water Planning, Water Allocation, Licences too
Somewhere in there is a hook... uncertainty, we will give some water
to Aboriginal people... not sure what the number is... it's likely
to displease

They took it from the Territory, 30% was the failed model
decreed.

What do the people of Martuwarra do?

We know, water markets, water trading, is all about greed.

Greed's got them beat, my Ngoonoo would say,

how could my sister have known what was coming our way

Don't worry about what you can't do!

Get on with what you can!

Her spirit still guides me, and I know she has a Plan.

Living with whiteness, colonialism, divide, conquer,
manipulate and rule

First the Land, then the slaves, now the water

What's going to be left for Blackfella? was the elder's cry for
water justice

8th October the United Nations did declare, it's a human right
to live in a clean environment, free from contamination,
polluted air, misery

Not be poisoned, cheated, defrauded in rules, designed for
the predatory elite.

Don't ask for a statutory process, procedural fairness,
distributive justice too

We are in the waiting time, waiting for government and the
big corporations
who determine the greater good for themselves not
humankind.

Trade off, water interest not water rights, trade off lives,
those of our kin, the birds, fish, trees, air, and sea breeze.

Canning Basin is shaking from earth tremors over past years,
I still can't believe...

STOP!

This would be the biggest man-made destruction in the world,
Maybe somewhere amongst these grid lines there will be
some happy fat cats, fracking up the River Country
No comparison with the Canada Tar Sands... this will be
forever wrong

Shale Gas one billion dollar pipeline... which they want to be
the new song.

Imagine if they invested one billion dollars into our region,
our people, our lifeways, live hoods our economies?
Transitioning coal into renewables, with no new gas
coming online

No one wants stranded assets to meet the transition energy
deadline

Songline, singing we want to see, just energy transition for these
families to be free.

River Country watching and waiting in this modern Dreamtime
Nandi, I know you hear me, you feel me, I feel you too
Write these words down and Dream me to you and we wait for
the wet to come
Tell the city people about me, tell them all to stand and come.

There are secrets here, I am the largest registered Aboriginal
cultural heritage site

We have been promised never again, I am fearful ecocide
and genocide we will become

They don't seem to be listening despite decent human beings
writing submissions

asking government's meaning of the 2011 song.

Protect Martuwarra Fitzroy River Protect me now and forever,
Mantuwarra Fitzroy River... Always Was... Will it Always Be.

They came from the east came with the Songline story in 2011
I belong to the Nation, National Heritage a treasure, diverse
cultures, and environment
living waters and their guardians all together.

Serpents... swim together waiting for the Waramba and
the Kajan waters to rise
We wait, we twist up into the sky and down into underground
We hold the Songlines, the stories and the forever memories.

First Law, Warloongarriy Law we all dance, moving and
rotating the circle
and the men sing the song. Daisy Bates claims Warloongarriy
people danced together to hold the Martuwarra Laws of Song.
When we stand united, we hold the Dreaming time, from past,
present, and future,
and we sing together a new Martuwarra River Time Song.

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