

TYSON YUNKAPORTA
sand talk

How Indigenous
Thinking Can
Save the World

Tyson Yunkaporta belongs to the Apalech Clan from Western Cape York and is a senior lecturer in Indigenous Knowledges at Deakin University. He has worked extensively with Aboriginal languages and in Indigenous education, and his research activities include oral histories of natural disasters, language, health and cognition. He is a published poet and exhibited artist who practises traditional wood carving.



TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

textpublishing.com.au
textpublishing.co.uk

The Text Publishing Company
Swann House, 22 William Street, Melbourne Victoria 3000, Australia

The Text Publishing Company (UK) Ltd
130 Wood Street, London EC2V 6DL, United Kingdom

Copyright © Tyson Yunkaporta, 2019

The moral right of Tyson Yunkaporta to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright above, no part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

Published by The Text Publishing Company, 2019
Reprinted 2019 (three times)

Cover design and photograph by Text
Boomerang carved by Tyson Yunkaporta
Page design by Jessica Horrocks
Typeset in Granjon 13/18 by J&M Typesetting

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press, part of Ovato, an accredited ISO/
NZS 14001:2004 Environmental Management System printer

ISBN: 9781925773996 (paperback)
ISBN: 9781925774764 (ebook)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia



This bound proof is printed on paper certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. Griffin Press holds FSC chain-of-custody certification SGS-COC-005088. FSC promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

SAND TALK

only his words forever. This is what you find with these narcissist flash mobs—one loud person will start shouting silly things and attract followers who repeat those things without thought. Not all strange attractors are benevolent.

Narcissism isn't incurable though. Survivors of this plague emerge without any memory of who they really are, needing support to begin again and relearn the nature of their existence, their purpose for being here. They are like children and leaving them to their own devices at this stage is not advisable. Entire cultures and populations recovering from this plague have been left like orphan children with no memories of who they are, longing for a pattern they know is there but can't see. They grow up eventually, but it takes a long time if they have no assistance. There are so many adolescent cultures in the world right now, reaching for the stars without really knowing what they are.

Adolescent cultures always ask the same three questions. *Why are we here? How should we live? What will happen when we die?* The first one I've covered already with the role of humans as a custodial species. The second one I've covered above, with the four protocols for agents in a complex dynamic system. The third one, us-two will look at next.

Of Spirit and Spirits

That word just doesn't look right in print. It looks alien, weirdly Egyptian or something. I have to keep checking the spelling to make sure I've got it right. S-P-I-R-I-T. And it's just one word to describe so many things that I need to write about—*ngeen wiy, maany, oony way, ngangk pi'an* and so forth—things we have so many words for that have no translation in English. There are English words like ghost, revenant, haunt, force, soul and essence that don't quite capture what I am talking about. Us-two will have to find metaphors, stories and analogies to make this yarn work.

I made a pointed parrying shield out of *thaanchal* wood while thinking about all this, to represent the protection needed while navigating the spaces between the tangible and intangible worlds that custodial species must engage with. And now I need to add some new layers to the story, because of where I am choosing to write it. I did not bring the shield with me and there are ghosts in this place.

Well, there are ghosts all over this massacre-soaked continent but they generally don't do much harm unless you fall asleep right on top of them or mess with their places and things. More specifically, there are settler ghosts here where I am writing and they're angry as hell.

I won a fellowship to do a writing retreat for a week at Varuna, the heritage-listed home of one of Australian literature's seminal authors, Eleanor Dark. Seminal doesn't sound like the right word to describe a female's work. Ovarian? Ovarian writer in the Australian canon? No, stuff it, women have always kept the seeds, chosen the seeds, sown the seeds. Seminal: her work is seminal.

My yarns for this chapter are with dead people like her, and with a random group of writers also staying at Varuna, who are experiencing some ghostly happenings. Let me make it clear, I'm not actually communing with the dead here, beyond yelling at them to go away when they get too close at night. (OK, maybe squealing like a tiny child is more accurate.) Normally I'd just smoke the place out with smouldering leaves to get rid of the ghosts,

but I can't really do that in this protected heritage site.

So I'm in the Blue Mountains where they build dams and go-kart tracks over our Aboriginal heritage places, desecrating a songline for Rainbow-Serpent-Eel, but I'm being careful to respect the heritage status of this famous desk and study I'm sitting in. I won't write her name again because I feel her around here, and I worry if she sees me typing it she'll attach herself to me and make me sick. I swear she's reading over my shoulder right now.

She had a hard life, the old *wadjin*—the other settlers didn't really play fair with her. She was a Marxist at a time when that wasn't very popular, in an era when people didn't just tweet nasty things about you but refused to sell you bread and lamb's fry and suet or whatever they used to eat. She did it tough all right—eventually she had to move to another one of her properties in another state, it got so bad (poor thing only had a few properties). She seems nice enough, and I don't think it's her tormenting us.

I'm sleeping in the maid's room (poor thing had only one maid) and all the trouble seems to start there. I don't think the entity is female. It is something in the house that is not happy to be creeping down the stairs (in the middle of the night to gramophone music) and then tiptoeing into the maid's room to find a hairy blackfella lying on the bed.

On the second night here I went for a shower to escape the disturbance, only to be somehow knocked out cold and wake up on the bathroom floor with blood everywhere.

Six stitches and a concussion vigil later, the other authors upstairs, all female, are experiencing things. One keeps getting her hair stroked by some invisible hand, and at those moments the nearest wall becomes spongy and elastic if she tries to touch it. Another spent two nights with something sitting on her chest so that she couldn't move.

They've all stayed here before, but never experienced these problems in the past, although they've heard stories. Toilets flushing on their own. A ghostly moustached lip nuzzling the necks of female residents. I think the spike in paranormal activity during this residency is my fault. The ghost expected a maid in the maid's room, but the maid had a thick black beard in this case and made him feel confused about his ecto-sexuality. Now he's all unbusted ghost nuts and acting out.

I'm going to stop typing for a bit and try find a place to make a sneaky fire and smoke myself. Maybe I'll ask some of the ladies if they want to get smoked too, so we have an easier night tonight. It's hard making an unsanctioned fire for cultural purposes on Country, though—you may get arrested or fined for it. Still, even a night in the lock-up would be better than another night here without the protection that smoke offers.

That's done now, just smoked myself and one of the other writers, the one who has been crushed and held down

during the night by that restless spirit. She's still leaving today though—she needs to get some sleep. I feel cleaner, as if all those sticky bits of settler ectoplasm have been dissolved off the edges of my spirit.

Here's how the smoke works. It is made by the leaves: light from sky camp and nutrients from under the ground, connecting the two worlds and moving between them, visible but intangible. You have to feel it going through you, through your body and particularly through the big spirit at the centre of your belly. The smoke is liminal—neither earth nor air but part of both—so it moves across the same spaces in-between as shadow spirits do, sending them on their way.

The shadow spirit is that part of a person that collects attachments to things, sensations, places and people. Some First Peoples in New South Wales call it *yaawi*, which early settlers adopted as a name for their bogeyman—yowie. It is all longing and illusion, the part of your spirit that carries the I-am-greater-than delusion. *I am special*, it screams and is drawn to its own name and image. This is why in Aboriginal cultures we often won't say the names of the deceased, or any words that sound like their names, and will cover or hide any photos or images of that person. Our word for this spirit is often the same as the word for image. It thinks it will live forever, that its temporary persona represents full consciousness and being. It is pure narcissism.

All around the world in the original cultures of humanity there are similar rites to assist this spirit to dissipate and fade. There are death-wails as part of the grieving process, songs to sing, smoke to spread and a sequence of mourning that should take place in stages over a year. But most people don't have these things anymore, with new and vague stages of grieving laid out for us that contain unhelpful steps like Denial and Bargaining. There may be memorial shrines or web pages with photos of the deceased and much calling of their names. As a result, these shadow spirits linger years longer than they are supposed to, tormenting our nights with their whispered claims to exceptionalism.

There are at least four parts to your spirit from an Aboriginal point of view, and this shadow is only one of them. Your higher self (maybe what they call the superego in psychology) is your big spirit, and it goes back to sky camp when you die. But Sky Country always reflects Earth Country, so there is another spirit, your ancestral spirit, which goes back to a place in the land. It is born again eternally from that place. There is at least one other part, your living spirit, which animates your body in life, flowing through you from the land around you like water fills a string bag in a running creek—never the same water in the bag from moment to moment. That water is only as good as what is in the creek. Therefore if the land is sick, your living spirit is sick as well.

Your shadow spirit is that part of you that wants things you don't need, makes you think you're better than other people and above the land, and it takes all the other parts of your spirit to hold it in check. If the rest of your spirit is not clear and in balance, it gets away from you, causes conflict and destruction. You gossip behind people's backs, spread uncertainty, deliver judgments, upset people, take more than you need and accumulate goods without sharing. It makes you a competitor instead of a human being. But only when it is out of balance. If it is checked by the other parts of you, it becomes a stable ego that drives you to act upon the world in perfect ways.

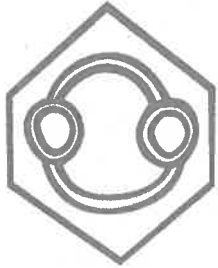
You don't need to believe in ghosts to balance spirit and live the right way in this world. You can use any metaphor you like—for example ego, id, superego and persona. Frontal lobe, monkey brain, neo-cortex and lizard brain. Athos, Porthos, Aramis and d'Artagnan. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Malfoy. Monkey spirit, Pig spirit, Fish spirit and Tripitaka. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Whatever stories your cultural experience offers you, you can still perceive spirit through metaphor and bring it into balance to step into your designated role as a custodian of reality. Some new cultures keep asking, 'Why are we here?' It's easy. This is why we're here. We look after things on the earth and in the sky and the places in between.

The circle on the left represents the abstract world of mind and spirit, and the circle on the right represents the concrete world of land, relationships

and activity. The lines above and below show the lines of communication between these worlds, which occur through metaphors. These metaphors include images, dance, song, language, culture, objects, ritual, gestures and more. Even written words are metaphors

that help carry communication between the abstract and practical realms (although that communication usually only goes one way and does not complete the loop shown in this image). Metaphors are the language of spirit—they go around, top and bottom, because you need to close the feedback loop—you can't just sit in the abstract space, because you need to take the knowledge back to apply in the real world, and vice versa. This can be seen in a secular view of reality as a relationship between theory and practice.

The sand-talk symbol shows a basic model of the Turnaround event of creation, the enormous revolving force that produced the separation of earth and sky worlds. Turnaround is an Aboriginal English word that was used to describe creation events and times before the term 'Dreamtime' was invented by settlers. Creation is not an event in the distant past, but something that is continually unfolding and needs custodians to keep co-creating



it by linking the two worlds together via metaphors in cultural practice. Story places or sacred sites are places of overlap between the two worlds, which is why people need protection when entering these places—calling out for the old people and putting armpit sweat or smoke or water on those entering. Ceremony creates a similarly powerful overlap between the worlds. Ceremonies and interactions with sites on Country in this way keep creation in motion, causing increase in natural and social systems that are necessary for good health.

A smaller but similar Turnaround event happens at the neurological level when an individual learns something new. There is a spark of creation like lightning when true learning takes place, with a genetic reward of chemical pleasure released in the brain. This is the moment that teachers love—described by educators universally as 'the light coming on in their eyes'. You can see the same light when you gut a fish—for a few minutes there is a shine like rainbows in its intestines, but as the life and spirit leave those organs the light dies. This living spirit of creation, sparked by opposite fields colliding and separating, is what brings fire and light into the universe. This is the sacred nature of knowledge. A knowledge-keeper must share knowledge because she or he is a custodian of miniature creation events that must continually take place in the minds of people coming into knowledge.

The chemical burst of pleasure we feel when genuine knowledge transmission takes place occurs from the creation of new neural pathways. These are connections between two points that were previously unconnected. Jokes are one of the most pure examples of this neural creation event; most humour is based on two ideas coming together in a new way—puns, rhymes, double meanings, unusual circumstances, accidents, exposed delusions and contextually inappropriate content are examples of this. The chemical rush we get from sudden neural connections in jokes is so intense and pleasurable that we laugh out loud. This kind of humour and joy in learning is a huge part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. If people are laughing, they are learning. True learning is a joy because it is an act of creation.

But there are two kinds of joy. One is characterised by light-heartedness and the other is marked by fierce engagement and deep concentration. Both give pleasure by increasing connectedness and complexity in the neural systems of learners. There needs to be an interaction between abstract (spirit) and concrete (physical) worlds of knowledge for this kind of complexity to develop fully. Without closing the loop between abstract knowledge and reality, and without making connections between different ideas and areas of knowledge, true learning cannot occur.

A focus on linear, abstract, declarative knowledge alone not only fails to create complex connectivity but

damages the mind. We are biologically punished for this destructive behaviour with a neurochemical rush of lethargy and discomfort that most people call boredom. Extended periods of this affects a person's mental health, resulting in bouts of rage, depression and worse. In centralised knowledge institutions today, this illness is called misbehaviour or misconduct. Without the spark of creation in your neural system, the mind-body system stagnates and falls apart, affecting not only your ability to learn but your health and relationships as well, leading to increasingly destructive behaviours. If you are an Aboriginal person living in Australia, this will almost certainly lead to incarceration and/or a decreased lifespan.

The creative spark is a process that allows us to solve seemingly impossible problems. It involves representing real-life elements with metaphors, which transform tangible things into spirit, images in an abstract space. That is the action of the line at the top of the symbol. In that Dreaming space the abstract entities can be manipulated and reorganised to find solutions to real-life problems. This is how the thought experiments in this book have been conducted. For a simple example of this Turnaround process, consider the way four apples and two hungry people can be translated into the abstract symbols of $4/2$. The solution ($=2$) may then be found in the abstract space, transferred back to the reality and applied to share the apples equally. If one person has more nutritional requirements than the other,

then the abstract of 3:1 might be applied.

Mathematics is widely dreaded by most people the world over because of the recent tradition of confining its operations to the abstract/theoretical world. Without connecting maths to real-life contexts, people feel damage being done to their neural systems and naturally resist. There needs to be meaningful schematic links made between the symbols and what they may represent in our lived reality.

I have observed maths classes conducted by my colleague Dr Chris Matthews (an Aboriginal mathematician) in which corroboree dances have been expressed as mathematical equations, and then new equations have been formed and new dances created to express them. What made these rituals effective was not simply the cultural content of the dances—it was the Dreaming action of translating a real-life event into metaphor, then manipulating the metaphors to gain understanding, followed by innovation transferred back to the real world. Traditional culture is important but it is not just a performance or display—the Dreaming process is the key. The same process applied to a spreadsheet or a birthday party would be just as effective. The key to Aboriginal Knowledge, as always, lies in the processes rather than just the content. Token inclusion of cultural clippings serves only to further diminish and exclude the cultural identities of First Peoples. This damage to culture and identity can also damage the mind.

The mind extends to the non-tangible world, the left-hand circle of the sand-talk diagram, so it is not just limited to the physical brain. It bridges both worlds. Neural processes occur throughout the body and beyond it in the world around—this is known as haptic cognition or embodied cognition or distributed cognition in western science. This means that thinking and learning also occur outside of the brain in the objects and beings we interact with and the relationships in between. Cognitive science has so far found this only in humans, monkeys and otters (although I have observed it in many other species, including bowerbirds and crows).

At the simplest level, when we hold a tool our brain recognises it as an extension of our arm. It isn't really part of our body, but it becomes an embodied extension of our neural processes. At more complex levels, the meaning we make with places, people and objects and the way we organise interactions between these things becomes an extension of our thinking. Through meaning-making we effectively store information outside our brains, in objects, places and relationships with others. This is how spirit works.

If you use a familiar object to help you encode new knowledge you are learning, then when you pick up that object or even just visualise it you instantly remember what you learned. It has become a tangible metaphor, an overlap between the two worlds. This is why a lot of cultural

objects have special significance in Aboriginal societies—knowledge is encoded into them in a creation process that is sacred. This is how traditional message sticks work. This kind of haptic knowledge is also encoded in relationships, which is why kinship systems are so central to our cultures. If you learn something with somebody, you might have trouble remembering it on your own but recall it in vivid detail when you are with them again, or if you think of them or call out their name.

There is a similar haptic relationship with Country, or with the Ancestors you might call out to when walking in particular places. Memories attached to places can be evoked by revisiting those places or even imagining walking there again. Haptic cognition also occurs throughout your entire body. There is knowledge and intelligence in your hands, feet and even hair. Using your body consciously and meaningfully can unlock this intelligence. This is why any training that incorporates kinaesthetic learning is so effective.

The most intelligent part of your body is actually separate from your central nervous system. Your gut has its own independent nervous system that is still a mystery to modern science. If your head is cut off, your gut will continue to function on its own until it dies from lack of oxygen. There is no name for this in English, but every Aboriginal language has a term for it. In my language it is *ngangk pi'an*. In Western Australia some people call

it *ngarlu*. This is the seat of your big spirit, your higher intelligence. In Anglo cultures it is vaguely acknowledged when people refer to 'gut instinct'. In Eastern cultures it is the centre of a person's *qi*. In all cultures it grounds a person in the living world and connects us to all things. In the Aboriginal world, the energy of the gut must be kept clear and constantly moving through mental, spiritual and physical cultural activity, or it will become stagnant and make a person sick.

Although the gut is not connected directly to the brain (only indirectly through the cranial nerve complex), there must be interaction between these two systems in the same way that there must be interaction between the physical and spiritual worlds in the Turnaround, in order to maintain the whole system in a healthy balance. The interaction between the gut and the brain cannot happen mechanically through purely biological function, so it must be done through cultural practice. It is done by constantly making meaning in the worlds around us and within, transferring knowledge from one domain to another through use of metaphor. It is about making connections between things that would otherwise remain unconnected, using metaphors that are non-literal and often seemingly irrational. This gives rise to both complexity and clarity.

Paradoxically, the more complex the meaning-making is, the clearer your thinking will be and the more likely you will be to remember new knowledge. Two test groups

presented with the same list of long, unfamiliar words will have different results on a spelling test of those words depending on the complexity of the meaning-making they engage in. The control group is asked to memorise the spelling. The second group is asked to look up the meaning of the words. Every time, the second group does better on the spelling test. Any knowledge passed on as discrete information or skills is doomed to failure through disconnection and simplicity. Knowledge transmission must connect both abstract knowledge and concrete application through meaningful metaphors in order to be effective. Without this sacred and joyful act of creation, our systems become unstable and deteriorate. You need cultural metaphors of integrity to do it properly.

Working with grounded, complex metaphors that have integrity is the difference between decoration and art, tunes and music, commercialised fetishes and authentic cultural practice. When metaphors have integrity they are multi-layered, with complex levels that may be accessed by people who have prerequisite understandings.

Working with metaphors is a point of common ground between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge systems. We have a long tradition in Aboriginal society of ritual training in the use of metaphor during initiation into higher stages of knowledge. This is because metaphor is the way Law, Lore, Women's and Men's Business, ritual,

Ceremony and magic is worked (ritual and magic aren't capitalised here because anybody can do it). Powerful metaphors create the frameworks for powerful transformation processes, but only if they have that integrity. A metaphor that lacks integrity only damages connectedness—an action that is known as a curse, in Aboriginal culture.

For example, I once visited an Aboriginal community school in the Northern Territory that was using the metaphor of Aboriginal fishing nets as an education framework. This may have worked as an idea of school and community weaving their different threads together to make the nets, then the students using the nets to catch fish, with the fish representing knowledge and social/cultural capital. But this was not the case. The fish in the net represented the children themselves and the river represented the community, promoting a very problematic image of the school as an entity that captures children and takes them away to be consumed.

We have to be careful of the metaphors we use to make meaning, because metaphors are the language of spirit and that's how we operate in our fields of existence either to increase or decrease connectedness within creation. We are the custodians who are uniquely gifted to do this work, so we need to do it consciously and with mastery, within cultural frameworks aligned with the patterns of creation. If we allow the I-am-greater-than deception to enter this process, all is lost.

So I must reflect now on the story I have used to introduce the knowledge I have carved painstakingly for months into my pointy parrying shield. Is that ghost story an appropriate metaphor to bring people into this knowledge of spirit? Is it funny enough to spark learning or is it just silly? Is it also serious and interesting enough to spark deep concentration and engagement? Is it really a message that has been placed in my path that I am supposed to pass on in this yarn? Or am I just running all over cultural spaces like a mad emu and making a mess of things to feel better about myself?

Perhaps I was cracked on the head as a warning not to share any of this. I'm nervous about sharing these stories, but the crows outside my window are just relaxing and playing, not staring or screaming at me. Oldman Juma keeps telling me to share this knowledge without fear, but that hasn't always served me well. Maybe it's not meant to serve me at all, but serve something else. An old Islander fella once told me to get my eye off myself, share freely and it will all be taken care of. I am still struggling with that, even though I know he was right.

I guess I'll see what happens tonight. If that ghost comes back to torment me, I'll come back to delete things from these pages, and only include what I put on the shield. If he doesn't, I'll just leave it as it is.

I wasn't troubled after that, so I left it as it was. The staff at Varuna followed up with me later to let me know they were bringing in a local Elder to smoke the old house out and put the spirits to rest at last. I can't tell you how happy this made me feel. How wonderful would it be if everybody could work together to bring about the same kind of closure and healing all over this continent? Ghosts tend to linger where there is unfinished business and hard truths buried in shallow graves.