




COMMUNICATION

# Seeing, Feeling, and Hearing the World. A Regenerative Worldview: *Rinyi*, *Pirlirr* and *Liyan*

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## Abstract

In this communication, the Australian authors – two Indigenous women and one woman with Anglo-Celtic ancestry – take us into Western Australian Indigenous language and worldviews, to help us reach toward a regenerative worldview. Indigenous words such as *rinyi*, *pirlirr*, and *liyan* are explored to point us in a direction unfamiliar to many English speakers, to Land and Country as living and responsive. The authors notice that it is very difficult to describe these terms in English, because English language does not seem sufficiently capacious to describe the depth of relational being-with Country that Indigenous languages portray. This may be changing, as various Indigenous and place-based groups publish their messages to the world. Within a methodology that is poetic and ontological, a storytelling method is used to illustrate elements of an Indigenous regenerative worldview that highlights the lyrics of life, for hope. It is for change agents who want to be transformative of the ways they participate with Country; and enable children to learn.

**Keywords:** becoming family with place; environmental education; Indigenous knowledge; intergenerational cultural transfer; SDG13 Climate Action; transformative learning; worldview

**Kankawa:** I am a Gooniyandi, Walmatjarri and Bunuba woman, of the West Kimberley region in Western Australia. I am an Elder who has cultural lived experience and who is committed to preserving and celebrating this knowledge for our future generations; and those who wish to maintain cultural values and strengths. I am a musician.

**Anne:** I am a Nyikina Warrwa marnin who belongs to the Martuwarra Fitzroy River in the West Kimberley region in Western Australia. I am an advocate for human rights and earth justice, who honours the sacred relationship between humans and the natural world. I want to remind everyone that together we can ‘Wake Up the Snake’ – to revive the collective consciousness and work harmoniously with nature to restore the planet in this critical decade.

**Sandra:** I am a multigenerational Australian woman of mainly Anglo-Celtic ancestry who grew up in Noongar Country, in the southwest of Western Australia. I advocate for Indigenous and place-based philosophies, to create cultures that live the change we want to see. I feel the love and care of Country and River; and celebrate the collaborations in place across the world which model and sing out the lyrics of life.

... we see the ground we walk on and the places we live in as animate, responsive, and relational...

We – Kankawa, Anne and Sandra – recognise that the ways we see, feel, and hear the world is associated with how we relate to and respond to our places. If we see the ground we walk on and the places we live in as animate, responsive, and relational, we are highly likely to care for Country with love, gentleness of spirit and fullness of heart. We are all able to hear and participate in the music, the soundscape of our places – to honour and celebrate the lyrics of life.

When we use the terms Country (capital C), Land (capital L) or River (capital R) we refer to a broader, stronger, Indigenous use of the English language concepts of country, land, and river. Country (Capital C) is increasingly used in mainstream Australia by caring people, as is Land and River. These terms refer to places as relational, animate socio-ecosystems that are living and responsive. Country, Land and River include people as participants in a kin-centred ecology of being.

Of course, the opposite is also true: if we see Country as inert, passive, and lifeless we might as well quarry or frack our places, creating the lyrics of doom and gloom, the lyrics of death. Why would anyone do this, leaving unbearable costs to our more-than-human relations and our descendants? This leads us to be concerned for what a true regenerative worldview would entail.

Not to care for one's relations – being people, trees, River, barramundi fish or kangaroo – can be a sign of narcissism. (Narcissists need to be in command, blasé or even enjoying harming others). Change agents look towards solutions, from the point of view of love of place. This little article is for change agents, who create and use the lyrics of life. We invite readers to think and feel their way with the paper from their own situated places and histories of experience.

### **Kankawa. We need to participate in the storied soundscape of Country**

Indigenous people have knowledge for regeneration, because we have been living in relationship with Country since the dawn of time. Our culture functions as a kincentric ecology (Wooltorton, Poelina, & Claire, 2023), which means that all species within our places are related to us. From this viewpoint, we see with clear eyes the crawling, destructive illness that is climate change and species loss and diminishment. We need to listen to the stories and soundscape of Country. The Walmatjarri word for these meanings is *rinyi*. We hear *rinyi* from Country and *rinyi* is explained by Elders. There is no equivalent everyday word for *rinyi* in English, so we refer to it as a 'mystery language'. *Rinyi* is a language of place, and language is integral to culture. We need to restore relationships with each other (of all species), to heal and regenerate the living, vibrant spirit of people, places, and planet.

We listen for *rinyi* with our ears, and we hear it with the ears of our hearts. To revitalise *rinyi* is to regenerate Country because they are intrinsic to each other. When we were young, our Elders told us stories that convey the depth of perception of *rinyi*. We didn't understand it at first, so they repeated it until we learned it as we grew up. *Rinyi* is a deep meaning – Country's meaning. *Rinyi* might refer to communications such as bird calls, or wind curls, or maybe a message from crickets. The smallest creatures – perhaps a bush cockroach, or perhaps an ant – has a story and uses *rinyi*. In this way, we see that climate change is *rinyi*, because it is a message that conveys Country is sick. As humans, it is imperative that we relearn *rinyi*, for the sake of the planet. Losing one's human spirit causes the inability to comprehend and understand *rinyi*, and this is damaging the planet.

Regeneration means to refresh knowledge systems and strengthen or renew earth-based cultures and celebrate these again. Country needs healing too. We know this because of climate change, and because the seasons no longer attune with species-kin as they have for millennia. For example, in recent years in my area of the Martuwarra River Country and its surrounds, a beetle that as a child I collected, cooked, and ate as a dietary supplement is slowly disappearing. I feel very sad about the loss of the beetle (*murrutitjin*). What happened? Was it the drying out, and the climatic conditions where it burrowed itself? What happens to other species that are interdependent with *murrutitjin*?

*Rinyi implies a dimension of being, or 'another world' that holds the soundscape where the birds and animals communicate with each other.*

*Rinyi* means we must listen very carefully to the sounds around us. *Rinyi* is a mysterious language, the language of places and species, which requires us to pay deep attention to the world around us. *Rinyi* implies a dimension of being, or 'another world' that holds the soundscape of meaning. In this sense, *rinyi* is also the dimension of the soundscape, and the communication medium within which meaning is derived. Everyone can learn to do this – we need to perceive with all our senses together. We are 'sensing' and feeling all the time and watching every step.

We need to grow up hearing and understanding these sounds. For instance, cricket may warn us about imminent danger with a lengthy trill. Indigenous children learn from a very young age to watch, feel and hear sounds near us, that might be meant as message for us. *Rinyi*, or the sound the cricket makes, can mean 'warning'. It means there are linkages we need to revitalise emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

... we can think of *pirilirr* as the ears of the heart.

Country is communicative and responsive, within the dimension of *rinyi*. In my Walmatjarri language, the spirit is *pirilirr*; people have *pirilirr* and *pirilirr* is the actual spirit. We can think of *pirilirr* as the ears of the heart. This is the basis of a communicative bond joining the spirit of the people with the spirit of Country that we must recognise and honour. It is how we maintain a strong relationship with Country, by which I mean all the species and creatures I relate to. As an example, when I shelter from the sun underneath a cool paperbark tree by the creek, I feel and hear many stories from that tree.

Because I am a poet, I will create some poetry for the paperbark tree. For example, I hear the leaves making a certain swishing noise. I understand its message, to settle and be calm. I diligently attend to things I hear, feel, and see around me. I breathe with intent to relax and heal.

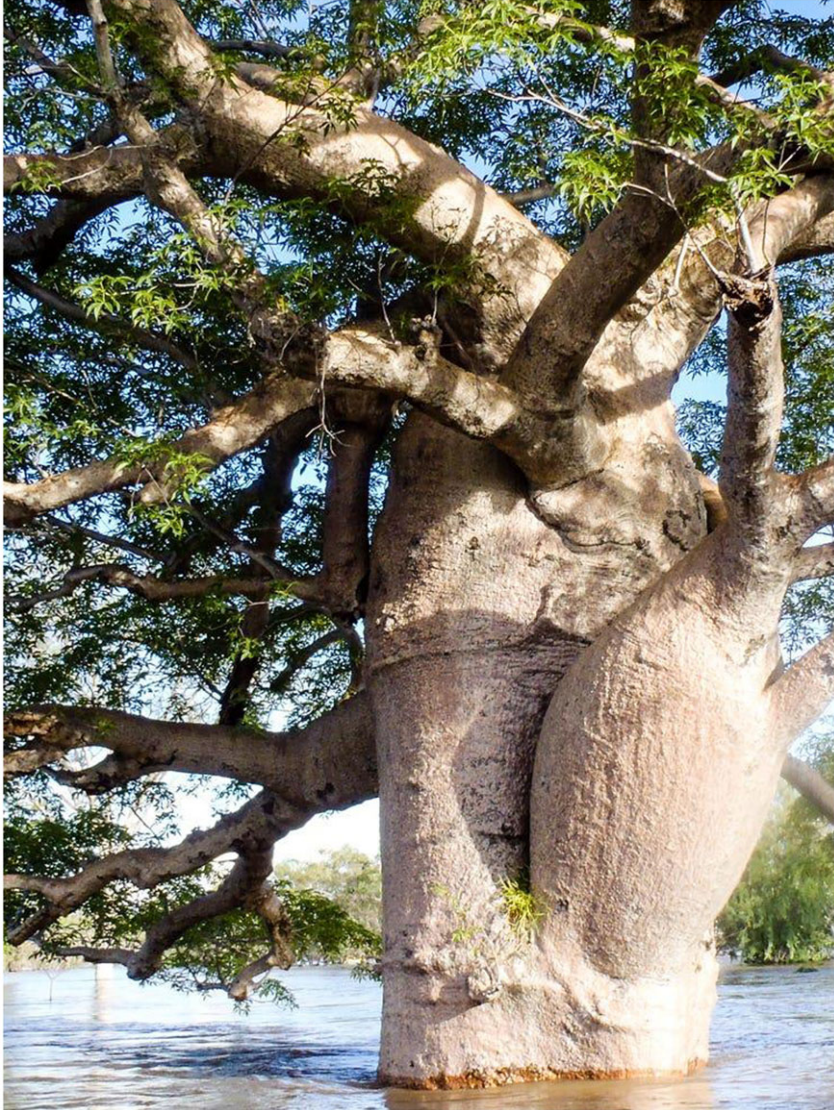
Country and people can lose its *pirilirr* perhaps by mining or removing its original landscape. An Indigenous person who is a traditional owner can lose his or her *pirilirr* too, perhaps by giving permission to mine – even if permission is forced. He or she can die because they are just an empty shell if their *pirilirr* has left them.

Perhaps English language has a word for *pirilirr*, that recognises the depth of human relationship with Country, by which I mean spirits and species that are interrelated with Country in a place. Is this term: response-ability? Bawaka Country et al. (2019) write about 'responding as', with response-ability requiring:

- An ability to pay close and careful attention, as part of more-than-human worlds and
- An imperative to respond as, rather than to be responsible to or responsible for, what is seen/learnt/understood/communicated in more-than-human, situated, ethical ways. (Bawaka Country et al., 2019, p. 684)

They remind us that in colonising contexts (like the Kimberley), it is Indigenous Land.

Because of its communicative nature, we relate with Country with deep respect through our *pirilirr*. For example, barramundi fish is a kin relation to me, a mother, so I am obliged to care for, protect and defend the barramundi with the same energy I would a mother. I can eat a little, but I must ensure it is treated with care, and its habitat is safe. Indigenous people never take more to eat than we need. We don't store it for long because we don't need to. Our environments are plentiful in season – our food is everywhere at the right time because we look after our places through our *pirilirr*. This is the problem of the sickness that is climate change. As humans, we need to heal our relationships.



**Figure 1.** Kimberley boab while the Martuwarra Fitzroy River was in flood: photo Lachie Carracher.

As I sit to tell you this account, the Kimberley bauhinia tree and several other species are flowering several months before the seasonal pattern they have followed for aeons. Many species depend upon these annual flowering events, such as native bees and butterflies. If they arrive at the time they normally do, they will miss their food supply because the tree will have finished flowering. See Figure 1, the Kimberley boab tree which seems to be vulnerable to this phenomenon. To me, Country is saying ‘please stop doing that’. Country says, ‘I will look after you and you must look after me’. My message is to hear the music of life, and feel the soundscapes of place, to practice participating in *rinyi*. Use the lyrics of life and sing them wherever you go. All our relations of all species want to hear this.



Figure 2. Martuwarra: photo Lachie Carracher.

### Anne. We show our children, and they watch us

In my Nyikina language, *pirlirr* translates to *liyan*. It translates into many Indigenous languages in Western Australia, and perhaps this is the case everywhere. Everything is related – all beings are kin with us in our Kimberley home. My *liyan* acts as my moral compass. I feel with my *liyan*, my feelings or spiritual reactions are always through my *liyan*. It is my intuition, for reading and feeling my situation and context. Sometimes when I get back from a long trip and I feel exhausted on the inside, I need to go to my homeland on the bank of our sacred living waters of Balginjirr connecting me to Martuwarra Fitzroy River and lie flat down, to reconnect and restore my spirit, to revitalise my soul or my *liyan*. When I do this, I feel my strength, my commitment, and the vibration of the Earth. Country energises my body to return to the purpose of why I need to recharge my *liyan*; to resume the tasks I need to work towards. (See Figure 2: Martuwarra.)

*Everyone in the Kimberley knows that when you care for Country, Country will care for you . . .*

Senior Nyikina elder Paddy Roe, my uncle, taught me ‘to send the Dream out’ and to work hard with others to walk together to the dream the change. To create hope, I sing out to Martuwarra again with a full spirit, and I know ‘E’ will respond to me and care for me (‘E’ is an Indigenous English word for ungendered he/she). Everyone in the Kimberley knows that when you care for Country, Country will care for you through its living nature. This reciprocity is age-old, and our children learn it as they grow. They watch us, and we show them. We show them how to sing out to Country, and we know that they will do this as they grow up. They know this before they can talk. Kimberley people offer this gift to everyone – and once you know it, we hope you will practice it wherever you go. It is a way to help us heal ourselves and heal climate. We offer this to

schoolteachers and parents to teach their children, and to know that it means we care for Country by treating all species reverently and with love.

### **Sandra: We all have capacity to reconnect with the world's being**

I sing out to Country too, and to River, particularly the Collie River and its beautiful estuary. I've been doing this since I was young. In Noongar Country, I was also taught about respect for Country and care of Country as a child. I'm adopted into this Country, being a multigenerational Australian of eight or nine generations on our mum's side, with an English dad. It was our dad who taught my siblings and I to sit and listen to the sounds of place. When I was very young, Dad built a little wooden boat, and he took me (I was the eldest child) out in the boat to go fishing in the Peel Estuary before its riparian zones were overcrowded by houses. Of course, later Dad took my siblings in the boat too. He taught us to watch, feel and listen – and not to talk loudly in the boat; just sit quietly and pay attention.

*... we all have indigeneity, or capacity to reconnect with the world's being*

When I was a young woman, I was taught Noongar language by Noongar Elders, giving me knowledge about people being part of Country. Noongar people use the word *wirrin* which translates into *liyan* and *pirilrr*. *Wirrin* helps guide people safely through Country and culture, recognising that Country needs people who care. *Wirrin* is spirit that links people and place, River, the breath, the energy, the being of things (Poelina *et al.* 2020).

Kankawa and I met over forty years ago when I was a young schoolteacher and Kankawa was a young parent, in the Kimberley town of Derby, which is in Nyikina Country. She had a significant influence on me then, as she does now. I met Anne ten years ago, when I started working at the Nulungu Research Institute, and I continually learn with her. I've been made very welcome in the Kimberley, my second home. When we learn-with Indigenous people, comprehend Indigenous wisdom and participate in Indigenous ceremonies and festivals, it is natural to feel one's Indigenous roots, to understand how to hear and feel knowledge of Country; and experience the mysterious language shared and perceived by all of us who know we share in the community of life. This language of *rinyi* is particularly noticeable in the world's daily ceremony of sunset when the wind slows, the sky colours with radiant red hues and in good weather, the waves comply with the dusky mood. As both Kankawa and Anne often say, we all have indigeneity, or capacity to reconnect with the world's being. We might need to un-bury or rediscover those capacities in ourselves. This is who we are as humans.

### **How *rinyi*, *pirilrr* and *liyan*, lead to a regenerative worldview**

Whilst there doesn't seem to be an everyday English word for *rinyi*, there is a similar concept in Western philosophy: [ontopoetics](#) (Mathews, 2023). Elsewhere, Mathews describes the onto-poetic dimension as a 'world hidden within the world' (2009, p. 6). She says, 'to experience the world from within ... is to experience it as a sphere of communicative meaning'. Ontopoetics, in this sense, is 'the study of the poetic order'; the 'poetic meanings that structure the core of things' (Mathews, 2009, p. 15).

Our point is that there are knowledge sets and ways of knowing that Indigenous people have practiced for millennia. Western philosophers are also recognising, experiencing, and writing about the dimension Walmatjarri philosophers call *rinyi*, for whom *rinyi* is also the language. Mathews calls it the 'poetic language of things as opposed to the conceptual language of words' (Mathews, 2009, p. 11).

Anne and Sandra have used the notion of onto-poetics before, which they described as part of a participative way of knowing that is relational with Country. With colleagues, they wrote:

We propose a practice for people new to this participation; of ‘becoming family with place’ (Wooltorton et al., 2020). It integrates four ways of knowing, to celebrate an onto-poetic for Country that is experiential, creative, propositional, and participative – a post-conceptual knowing for human flourishing. It is for coming home to Country and is for learning and educational purposes (Poelina et al., 2020).

It is this concept and way of knowing that we need in everyday English now, so that people can acquire the know-how for living differently. We need to ‘wake up the snake’, wake up the collective consciousness of the people for place-engagement and communication (Poelina et al., 2024). This is an element of a regenerative worldview – to learn how to communicate and relate within the community of life.

*A regenerative worldview is based on feeling, hearing, and healing Country.*

From our perspective, a regenerative worldview is to see, experience and participate with the world’s capacity to heal, to renew, to revitalise and to return its vigorous, life-giving capacities. Our places and our bodies get ‘hammered’, so to speak, by extractivist, competitive and individualist actions – by ourselves and others. A regenerative worldview is generous, generative, embodied, and creative. It recognises that humans are more than heads! We feel, experience, create and have ability to care.

Regeneration is to renew a relationship with place as kin, to recognise and honour species of place who have the same right to flourish as humans do. It is to walk with Country, to sit with Country, to converse with Country, to respond-with Country, to be with Country – in ways that are experiential, creative, and practical. It is a life-long, ongoing everyday embodied routine or habit. As Williams (2021) describes with beauty, attributes like these attune people with their places, alluding to a sense of ‘becoming indigenous to place’. Even after many generations of separation, the animacy and liveliness of ancestral place relations remain part of who we are as humans – now in a colonising world. Decolonisation requires refusal to comply with corporates where their operations impact places and people who care.

A regenerative worldview is based on feeling, hearing, and healing Country. It encourages intergenerational cultural transfer, mentoring and caring for our children and young people so they have strength and confidence in the core of their being – their *pirilrr*, *liyan*, *wirrin*, ears of the heart, or intuition or response-ability with Country. It leads us to hear and engage with the more-than-human in the communicative existential sphere – call it *rinyi*, onto-poetics, or the mysterious living language of place that is always present; or indeed, in the Western philosophical language, some call it ‘[the invisible work](#)’ (Weber & Reason, 2024). With a regenerative worldview, we use the lyrics of flourishing, the lyrics of life, to support educators, colleagues, friends, board members, publics, corporations; and we sing this know-how out to the world.

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Kimberley nations care for many shared stories, each told within the contours and worldview of their own Country, languages, cultural perspectives, and particular locations. We acknowledge Elders who keep knowledge, skills and practices, and maintain cultural authority and strength since time immemorial; since the ancient dreaming times of the Bookarrigarra, which continues to the present through the living nature of Country and the work of these Elders. In this research, Kankawa Nagarra (Olive) Knight and Anne Poelina (Wagaba) are Elders and collaborators with Sandra Wooltorton (Mooja, friend), and all share ideals.

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**Ethical standard.** This research was implemented in accordance with the approval conditions of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Notre Dame Australia, reference number 2022-154B.

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## Author Biographies

**Kankawa Nagarra [Olive] Knight** is a Gooniyandi, Walmatjarri and Bunuba woman, of the West Kimberley region in Western Australia. She is an Elder with cultural lived experience, who is committed to preserving and celebrating this knowledge for our future generations; and those who wish to maintain cultural values and strengths. Kankawa is a musician: an international blues and gospel singer-songwriter, teacher and mentor, human rights advocate, and political activist. She helped develop the Walmatjarri dictionary in the 1960s, has supported research on understanding, preventing, and treating FASD in the Indigenous community, and continues to raise awareness about alcohol abuse. Kankawa is a Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council member.

**Anne Poelina** is a Nyikina woman who belongs to the Martuwarra Fitzroy River in the West Kimberley region in Western Australia. She is an advocate for human rights and earth justice, who honours the sacred relationship between humans and the natural world. Anne wants to remind everyone that together we can 'Wake Up the Snake' – to revive the collective consciousness and work harmoniously with nature to restore the planet in this critical decade. She is a Professor and Chair of Indigenous Knowledges, and Senior Research Fellow with the Nulungu Research Institute at the University of Notre Dame Australia (Broome).



**Sandra Wooltorton** is a multigenerational Australian woman of mainly Anglo-Celtic ancestry who grew up in Noongar Country, in the southwest of Western Australia. As a trans-disciplinary researcher with a background in cultural geography and environmental education, Sandra is interested in prefigurative cultures, for co-constructing the world we want to live in; or living the change we want to see. Her research aims to bring about societal transformation. She is a Professor and Senior Research Fellow with the Nulungu Research Institute at the University of Notre Dame Australia (Broome).

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