

# 'Seated between the eyes of two worlds'

## The Intercultural Work of Craig San Roque

Joan Fleming<sup>1</sup>

The intricate and inscrutable workings of Central Desert Law and mythopoesis continue to hold sway over the Australian settler imagination. We are moved to vertigo by the vibrating fields of dot paintings, and the brutal exploits of Dreaming heroes suggest enigmatic codes for social behaviour and care of country. Those of us who feel affronted and sorrowed by the ongoing colonial suppressions of Indigenous sovereignty, such as the Northern Territory Intervention, may wish to deepen our understanding or be an ally. Our anger is fueled by our imperfect intuition of the deep knowledge of the land held by Central Desert peoples. However, navigating the ethical and political space between settler, or *kardiya*, and Central Desert Aboriginal, or *yapa*, remains fraught.<sup>2</sup> One of the under-sung guides to working in this intercultural space is the psychoanalyst, scholar, and poet Craig San Roque. San Roque's intercultural work might help *kardiya* understand how an inherited cultural framework can obscure our capacity to fully understand the Aboriginal lifeworld. Reflexive in philosophy, exploratory in intention, and privileging the imagination above all, San Roque's work is unique among those working in, and with, Central Desert communities.

San Roque is known primarily as a psychoanalyst and community therapist. His scholarly writings are ambiguously sited, as they use creative processes of language, storytelling, lateral reasoning, composition, imagery, and parable, which are common to poetry and creative prose. In a remarkable essay previously published in PAN, in which San Roque contemplates the complex points of difference and sympathy between *yapa* and *kardiya* lifeworlds, he self-defines as a "psychological thinker who values a poetic sensibility" (San Roque 2009, 47–8). His imaginative essays unpack ideas of the intercultural space, cultural complexes, and the *yapa* and *kardiya* psyche. Excerpts of scripts for theatre performances have been published as stand-alone works of poetry (San Roque 1997). The plainspoken diction of these poetic scripts, their mode of direct address, their staccato narrative, and their lucid imagery are deliberately reminiscent of Dreaming stories. The unpretentious aesthetic of these texts is made to carry enormous metaphysical weight.

The tenets of Jungian psychoanalysis are central to San Roque's work in the intercultural spaces of Central Australia, and can be brought to bear on the issues of anthropological reflexivity and cultural self-awareness. It is noteworthy that Jung based his notions of the collective unconscious, archetypes, and complexes on extensive study of anthropology and mythology. The conclusions Jung came to about the fundamental, shared mythic blueprint of human thinking and behaviour have analogies in anthropology, with Claude Levi-Strauss' structuralism, and linguistics, with Noam Chomsky's notion of deep structures. While the search for 'universal truths' is problematic, and grates against the striking realities of cultural difference that anyone who has spent time in Central Desert communities has experienced, nevertheless a cross-fertilization between ethnography and psychoanalytic theory has been in play since its earliest inception.

The legacy of Jung's that I find most remarkable in San Roque's work is Jung's commitment to remain non-dogmatic, and his conception of therapy as dialectical. Jung repeatedly expressed the commitment to stay open and unfixed in his thinking and

conclusions. For example, when Jung's colleague E.A. Bennet told him he was writing an article about him for the *British Medical Journal*, Jung said, "Whatever you say, make it clear that I have no dogma, I'm still open and haven't got things fixed" (Bennet 1985). Jung also conceived of the psychotherapeutic relationship as fundamentally dialogic and dialectical: a two-way exchange that takes place between involved individuals. Freud's example was of the expert analyst, sitting out of the patient's sight, making detached and authoritative pronouncements. This is an approach aligned with objective and 'observational' modes of anthropology: asking questions, gathering data, making objective conclusions. Rather than knowledge about, Jung proposed knowledge with the other – an approach that is now echoed by many theorists of reflexive, sensuous, affective anthropology (Biddle 2007; Bradley and Families 2010; Butt 2009). The personality and intentions of the *kardiya* working to comprehend *yapa*, and vice versa, are not irrelevant; they are central. Jung's influence can be seen in San Roque's paradoxically non-prescriptive prescription of openness to whatever might arise in the interpersonal, ethnographic, dialogical space:

And the question might be, "What is in our minds as we sit together, you and I?" with the fire simmering, tea stewing, ants busy on the sand, and maybe the heat of coals drifting through the shade of a *mulga* tree. These settings are fitting for reflective conversations between men of two worlds – Indigenous Warlpiri, perhaps, and the travelling Caucasian. Such conversations take place on the edges of campsites, on the edges of settlements, on the edges of and between dreams, between times, between languages, a shimmering, dusty place where nothing much is really what it seems. And nothing spoken is exactly what it might mean and nothing heard is quite what is intended, perhaps. Ambiguous answers and ambiguous tracks of thought are exchanged between persons in exactly the settings where transference phenomena might readily be found, if Freud or Jung had time enough and the chance to sit there long enough – learning, letting go of anticipation, observing the flow of desire and projection. Seated between the eyes of two worlds. That sort of thing. (San Roque 2009, 41)

Thus, we arrive at the question of how San Roque has come to do his work, and, crucially, how he has fostered the relationships that drive the work. The "flow of desire" must be considered; the desire that pushes a boy through an early curiosity and a half-articulated troubled feeling about Indigenous intoxication, to early attempts to dramatise this inner and outer trouble, to decades of training in reading the mind and its unconscious drives, to a point of dialogue and attempted efficacy beside the campfires of Central Australia. In a 2003 interview, San Roque recounts the scorching early experience of witnessing Charlie Goolagong being assaulted by the local police sergeant and thrown out of his small NSW hometown. San Roque was five years old, and Charlie had looked after him for many years; he was "practically...a member of our household" (Power 2003, 205). Charlie was also black. While he "probably did drink" (205), the bottle Charlie was carrying in this instance was kerosene, not grog. This early experience of the abuse of settler power was imprinted. As a young man in the 1960s, San Roque worked to alchemise these and other troubling experiences of intoxication and (violent) misunderstanding between settler and Indigenous culture by writing plays. An early play, called *Brandy*, was about a young man of mixed heritage who encountered trouble with both black and white law.

Other stories of coming into charged contact with hurt and yearning in the intercultural space, and trying to make sense of it, or make art out of it, appear throughout San Roque's writings. He insists on the role of the personal history in the collective psychological reality of colonial Australia: "each history must contribute to describing the strange region of psychic pain and pleasure that swells between the indigenous Dreaming and the Caucasian dream. Even absencing oneself from that between-space has its impact. My story is, basically, a story of trying not to be absent" (San Roque 2007, 110). In line with the injunctions of reflexive anthropology to close the "distance between social analysis and lived experience" (Herzfeld 1997, 2), and to perform knowledge with rather than acquire knowledge about the other, San Roque foregrounds personal story, desire, experience, and cultural inheritance.

What are the reflections of San Roque's personal history in the broader mental portrait of settler Australia, and how does he represent or invoke the 'Australian psyche' in his work of intercultural offering? He describes a sickness or a lack in the settler Australian mind, and theorises its genesis as a disconnect between settler psyche and place: "An appreciation of both the indigenous and the European psyche is necessary for those of us who suffer under the contemporary Australian disorder. This

consists of an emptiness created by the absence of authentic interaction between the indigenous presence and the European presence" (San Roque 2007, 139). At the risk of sounding obvious, the settler relationship with land, place, site, and country is divergent absolutely from Yapa relationships. As Indigenous feminist and academic Eileen Moreton-Robinson writes, "Our ontological relationship to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relationship to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous" (Moreton-Robinson 2003). The settler discomfort with our relationship (or lack thereof) with the terra of our own country is inextricable from our anxiety when it comes to acknowledging violent settler history, and our inheritance – or denial and unconscious re-enactment (Attwood 2007) – of this narrative. We build our cities on the coast, looking outwards over the water, with our backs to the red centre. Further, "the real decisive moment that shaped the ontology of the white collective was the fall of the first eucalyptus to the axe of the white settler and not the death of the first Indigenous Australian at the hands of the white invader" (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014, 19). It may be overstating the point to equate violence toward the land with violence toward the Other. Then again, perhaps not. Settler approaches to the country we<sup>3</sup> have 'settled' betray more about our attitudes than it is comfortable to admit.

Part of San Roque's work, however, is to suggest that deeply held and mythically important relationships to place, site, and country can be found in our own foundational myths.

One of San Roque's creative projects is a re-imagining of the Kore/Persephone myth. He has rewritten in rhythms that echo Dreaming stories, and performed it in a desert location that is akin to Eleusis, the "broken site" in ancient Greece where the story was performed for centuries before the site was destroyed by those proselytising a new religion (Finnane 2016). Of course, a *kardiya* audience member who sits through the performance will not suddenly 'understand' the grief that Central Desert people feel at the destruction of their own sacred sites. There is no easy bridge to be built between these incommensurable paradigms. If it was built so quickly, it would be made of matchsticks. However, in producing a moment where *kardiya* might glimpse the character of *yapa* feeling for country, San Roque is contributing imaginatively to a process of waking up.

For the ethnopoet Jerome Rothenberg, who was working in the 1960s and 70s to champion 'tribal' poetries and integrate 'primitive' or ritual creative power into his own writing practice, the prescription for the lack, emptiness, or absence felt by contemporary settler society was "a recovery of the 'red power' that's been here from the beginning" in order to "be whole" (Rothenberg 2014, xxii). Rothenberg's grand project operated on a dual proposition: to integrate what he perceived as procedures of dream-logic, intuition, ritual performance and 'total poetry' into contemporary poetic practice, and to legitimise oral and ritual poetries as Art by illuminating their perceived similarities with first wave modernist and avant-garde methods of poetic innovation. For San Roque, a prescription for the suffering of "the contemporary Australian disorder" is to reawaken and perform "white people's *Jukurrpa*<sup>4</sup> equivalent" (San Roque 2009, 58), with reference to ancient Greek models of mythic and psychic archetypes. Rothenberg has been roundly criticised for appropriating 'Indigeneity', for mining and altering ethnographic source texts without acknowledgement, and for regarding Indigenous people themselves as "the lopped-off portion of the Westerner's own soul" (Christensen 1989, 143) – a portion that can be 'recovered' and integrated to benefit middle-class settler poets and heal our own emotional pain and ennui. San Roque, in arguably similar terms, speaks about working as a psychotherapist in Sydney, with patients who "were also distressingly aware that a part of their substance was missing. There was also among us this undertone of elusive distress, this 'whispering in our hearts'" (San Roque 2007, 112). Are these aims so very different? The articulation of lack, and the turning-to Indigenous models of engagement and integration, are at least partially aligned.

Rothenberg and San Roque also make similar articulations about the parallels between Indigenous mythopoesis and creative work. San Roque emphasises the nature of *Jukurrpa* as enigma or mystery, and Rothenberg invokes a kind of anti-rational 'dream logic' that he inherits from Surrealism and Dada. They both suggest that minds practiced at the intuitive and lateral work of creative composition (like poets) are particularly primed to comprehend Indigenous mythopoesis. San Roque invokes Keats' notion of "negative capability" (San Roque 2007, 117) and elsewhere states that "the

metaphysical, animistic, mythopoetic pragmatic of Pintubi/Warlpiri thinking may not follow the same lines as a thought in the mind of a person brought up under the demands of rational, postmodern, Western, scientific or therapeutic schooling. Folk without a poetic sensibility may have problems of comprehension" (San Roque 2009, 45). In both poets can be found an attitude of approaching creative work as a kind of mystic apprenticeship to the enigma of mythopoesis. Rothenberg's project was involved with educating the science community of ethnographers and anthropologists on the value of the insights of poets, and San Roque is clearly committed to integrating creative and performative approaches into psychotherapeutic practices. San Roque's description of the mode of intercultural attention to be practiced in therapeutic encounters might also describe the quality of attention needed to make poems: "Travelling in uncertainty within Aboriginal territories invariably leads to something spontaneously evocative, and much could be written about the value of quietly, un-anxiously allowing experiences in order to cultivate a mode of receptivity to unknown outcomes, unprecedented ideas" (San Roque 2009, 45).

However, the crucial differences between Rothenberg and San Roque have to do with place, relationships, and history. The quality of San Roque's work is local, personal, and active or experiential, in counterpoint to Rothenberg's work, which is global in scope and generally based on an engagement with texts, not people. The difference between the two has to do with being or not being *placed*, both in the story and in the site where mythopoesis is grounded. San Roque approaches *Jukurrpa* from the perspective of a therapist, offering performative opportunities that represent "an incremental effort at collaboration between the two paradigms" (San Roque 2012, 93). These actions may not result in an alleviation of the brutal realities of suffering in contemporary Indigenous communities. This is a tall order, a wish grand enough to smell of absurdity. The fast hop to a quick fix is beside the point. The point, rather, is to dwell in an engaged space where there might arise fleeting opportunities for *kardiya* and *yapa* to hear each other, however coded or gnomic the music might be. San Roque translates the intention behind Japaljarri Spencer's and others' conversations as conveying "the need ... to hold the space for thinking" (San Roque 2009, 54). This holding of space can only be informed by and effected through relationships with Warlpiri and other Indigenous people, relationships that are personal and localised. They take place in Alice Springs and surrounds: in particular places, at distinct sites, in contextual performances of intimacy. San Roque emphasises "direct physical and personal engagement" (San Roque 2009, 51) and writes "country is a third element in the equation of 'black' plus 'white'" (San Roque 2007, 109).

Notwithstanding Rothenberg's time on the Allegany Seneca Reservation, where personal relationships with Seneca were established and fostered, his path to the Other has been through source texts from every continent in the globe. While the near-universal scope of the project is seductive, suggesting broad perspectives and global sympathies, contact with Indigenous law and culture through texts alone is both limited and limiting. It may also have the effect of ignoring the salience of the homeland for Indigenous peoples. Repeatedly, a diversity of first peoples who cannot be meaningfully contained under the umbrella term 'Indigenous' insist on the centrality of place, site, country. Some champions of Indigenous literature have taken issue with settlers who insist on the importance of going into country, characterising them as "gatekeepers" who seek to suppress Indigenous agency by claiming that the full 'text' can only be found in its lived context: "Aboriginal writing from and about Australia is instead located somewhere in the minority culture hinterlands, and if you want it you will have to go and find it yourself, in the bibliographic equivalent of an outback adventure" (Grossman 2001, 154). This approach ignores *yapa* values of storytelling, and the highly specific and site-based nature of sharing knowledge in *yapa* culture. Being in country, attentively and openly, is crucial to the reaching work of attempted comprehension.

Place is not mere context. Place *works* on people. I myself have felt the insistent warning energy of certain *Jukurrpa* sites. I have felt them radiate an atmosphere that physically repelled me, blocking any inclination I had to walk up to the fissure where the rainbow snake came out, or to climb to the top of a jumble of sandstone significant for men's dreaming. The knowledge shared with me by Warlpiri traditional owners has often confirmed the sensations I felt the place itself was communicating: "That place *Jukurrpa* for *ninu*<sup>5</sup>, where that snake came out." Such 'lessons' are typically imparted by Warlpiri in a laconic mode, while hunting or sharing food by the campfire. Subtle physical clues, details tossed over a shoulder. In an essay from 2007, San Roque describes a bewildering experience of a new and unsettling perception in country. After

stopping on a long drive outside of Alice Springs to take a rest, he sees a rock in Warlpiri country change colour, vibrate, move, and emit emotion. San Roque describes the feeling as “imperishable grief”; as “a sensation of mothers” (San Roque 2007, 134). When speaking with Jangala Egan at a conference a few nights later, San Roque describes the place in detail, and Jangala tells him:

“That’s my dreaming along there . . . my country. Jangala country. You can go there, too, Jungarra<sup>6</sup>, don’t worry. That’s where all the lost children go. There’s a big mother there crying out for her children. When all the kids get lost, that’s where they go, into that place...You walked in there...where the lost children go. Poor things. You walked in there” (San Roque 2007, 136).

The interaction between *Jukurrpa*, individual experience, notions of a ‘sentient’ land, and shared cultural thought structures is a subject larger than can be broached in this essay. It requires a significant relinquishing of the inherited cultural lenses of the settler descendant, and this is a trick I find I can only accomplish in poetry. San Roque’s analysis of this experience is one of simultaneous acceptance and unknowing: “There is a plurality of experience embedded somehow in the rocks of the country. This plurality I can accept, even if I do not understand how sites can be alive to human feeling” (San Roque 2007, 137).

It might be said that these experiences, of sensing emotion and agency in the land, are merely ‘in your imagination.’ I do not dispute it. The powers of the imagination are central. They are central to intuiting ways of knowing and being beyond the cerebrally-centred mind-body dualism that is the inheritance of western, English-speaking culture, and to recognising that country has a life independent of our human conception of it. They are central, too, to any attempt to “live/be in two minds at once” (San Roque 2009, 45); to try and conceive of *Jukurrpa* and its centrality and salience for Warlpiri and other Indigenous peoples. As American poet Dean Young says to his students, “imagination is the highest accomplishment of consciousness, and empathy is the highest accomplishment of the imagination” (Young 2013, 314). Fostering self-aware imaginative engagements with this field of thought, without fettering the imagination with (albeit necessary) political and ethical considerations, is to walk a precarious path; it is necessary to keep the field open, with discourses such as those San Roque proposes.

Two Australian poets who have written into the ethnographic space in sensitive, politically self-aware, and reflexive ways must be acknowledged, as they have drawn their energy and imagery for poetry from their time *in* country. Lee Cataldi is a linguist, teacher, poet, and essayist, who lived and worked in the Central Desert Warlpiri community of Lajamanu from 1983 until recently. Her scholarly work moves in both anthropological and literary-critical spheres (Cataldi 1996; Cataldi 2000). Cataldi worked in intimate collaboration Peggy Rockman Napaljarri and other Warlpiri Law men and women to produce *Warlpiri Narratives and Histories* (Cataldi and Napaljarri 2011), a collection of dreaming narratives and history stories in both Warlpiri and English translation, and her collection of poems *The Women Who Live on the Ground* (Cataldi 1990) draws from her intimate lived experiences with yapa. This range of published work demonstrates Cataldi’s will to work for both the preservation of Central Desert language and culture, and to alchemise her lived experiences in Central Desert communities to make new creative work. Billy Marshall-Stoneking’s work has similarly dual concerns. Stoneking lived and worked in the Central Australian community of Papunya between 1979 and 1983. A poet, historian, essayist, critic, and filmmaker, Stoneking has worked to champion and preserve Pintupi culture and language in a range of forms, from his involvement in ‘capturing’ *Jukurrpa* stories for a literature production centre in Papunya, to his film biography of Tjungkarta ‘Nosepeg’ Tjupurrula (Frazer, Frazer, and Marshall-Stoneking 1988; Marshall-Stoneking 1983). Stoneking’s book *Singing the Snake* (Marshall-Stoneking 1990) collects poems that range from direct observations of ordinary events and conversations in community and camp life, to transcriptions and re-workings of Pintupi dreaming and history narratives. Importantly, Stoneking also wrote poetry into his own experiences of reaching across the gap between the cultures and trying to navigate the bewilderments of the Pintupi lifeworld. His descriptions of the intense discomfort when navigating cultural differences about, say, conceptions of money and obligation, are excruciatingly honest.

Stoneking and Cataldi are interesting studies because of how their political and ethical intentions interact with their poetic practice. The question of why they are drawn to write about the psychic territory shared by settler and Pintupi/Warlpiri lifeworlds is, one on level, easily answerable by a line from San Roque’s *The Long Weekend in Alice*

*Springs*: “I live in it” (San Roque and Santospirito 2013). Their poems arise from the imagery, conversations, intimacies, and observations that are sparked by an enfolded and mutually obligated experience of living in a Central Desert community. Both writers are critical of the ongoing colonial incursions into the lives and freedoms of Central Desert people, and both display discomfort with their implicit role in the continuation of colonisation. Cataldi’s environmentalist and anti-colonial politics are often made explicit. While she does not go so far as to “indiscriminately deride, criticise and undervalue almost everything European” (Marshall-Stoneking 1988, 112) – a common enough *kardiya* attitude of which Stoneking is justly suspicious – Cataldi does not avoid hard statements about the violent and deplorable aspects of Australian settler history. Moreover, she acknowledges this history as her heritage. She is overt about her privilege. One poem, titled ‘advice’, reads:

he plays  
with no cards        you have  
the pack

the toyota        the axe  
history as they say  
is in your hand

but don’t put yourself in his power  
he can’t forget how your father  
with a white face and a gun  
shot his father just for fun (Cataldi 1990, 48)

One of my central discomforts with the approach of Rothenberg and his ethnopoetic contemporaries is how they ignore their implicit role in the ongoing textual and ideological violence of colonisation. In poems like this, Cataldi’s self-talk warns away presumptions of access – access, perhaps, to the ‘power’ of the Warlpiri mythopoetic lifeworld – by reminding herself of her privilege and her implicit, ongoing participation in the power structures that advantage white over black. Her observations of white oppression in the community are described with unflinching judgment and humour:

the white woman  
riding her mop like a broomstick  
screams about the building  
what a waste of time        they should be  
learning to spell must and ought  
they are filthy        look  
at their noses        look  
at the dust on the floor        look  
at the dust on the ground (Cataldi 1990, 38)

The villainous character of “the white woman” is cast as a fairytale witch, “riding her...broomstick”. Her righteous screeching is familiar. It echoes the sorts of things my missionary grandmother wrote in her diaries. However warranted the poet-speaker’s judgement of the white woman’s disgust at the filth and the dirt and the “waste of time” in going hunting instead of learning to spell English words, both sides here are one-note in their stance. The white ‘other’ who simply does not understand the importance of hunting, of sitting on the ground, of the dirt itself, is easy to hate and criticise. What of the judgments and sticky cultural inscriptions of the poet herself? How do her own lenses block her from understanding ‘yapa way’?

Stoneking’s self-positioning in his essays is admirably reflexive, tentative, and curious. He overtly demonstrates his awareness of the problems with bringing richly contextual oral forms of Pintupi intellectual property over into English. In terms of making pronouncements of access to the Pintupi lifeworld, he writes, “As a white writer, you cannot presume anything about black people – what they think, what they believe, what they feel. You cannot put yourself in their skin. All you can report is what they say and what they do, and how you feel about what they say and do. And if this is done well, it is enough” (Marshall-Stoneking 1988, 110). This articulates an ethically evolved position, although it is a position that is not always consistently worked out in the poems themselves. For example, the poem titled ‘Martha,’ a portrait of a Pintupi law

woman who “carries the songs”, who “knows the distances between / every sand-dune, creekbed and rockhole” ends:

She has no regrets.  
She remembers everything.  
She knows who she is.

No-one can take that away from her. (Marshall-Stoneking 1990, 18)

I can identify with the poet’s desire to convey the strength, self-assuredness, and strong continuing culture of Central Desert people. However, the sentimental proclamations that end the poem – “no regrets”, “No-one can take that away from her” – undercut, even deny, the unavoidable and damaging influence that settler culture has had on Central Desert communities, where freedoms are continually managed, offered, and undermined by ever-changing *kardiya* processes that often seem inscrutable to *yapa*. However, the poet – any poet – working in this space is put in an impossible position. On the one hand, there is the desire to describe the brutality, brokenness, and violence in these Central Desert communities. To pretend this does not exist is to deny the legacy of colonisation. On the other hand, however, there is the desire to convey the “sneaking admiration”, in Kim Mahood’s words, “for the consistency with which Aboriginal people insist on being Aboriginal” (Mahood 2012). These twin realities sit uncomfortably, even irresolvably, in the mind. As San Roque articulates it, in characteristically poetic terms: “Irreconcilable parallel laws, cognitive dissonance, daily bread” (San Roque 2009, 41).

Cataldi and Stoneking’s poems convey occasional moments of brutal honesty, and a desire to celebrate the continuing connections to country and song and kin (though often these distinct tones do not occur in the same poem). This desire, being personal and specific and lived, might be read as part of the antidote to the ongoing dominant narrative that the extinction of first Australian cultures has been achieved. At their best, the poems of Cataldi and Stoneking are a lens on camp and community life told through the eyes of a poet who has sat on the ground.

From emphasising the importance of sitting on the ground, listening, and allowing experiences and sensations, to a theoretical preoccupation with the thought-forming power of country, the vitality of place is embedded in San Roque’s work. This goes beyond merely invoking the elements of *Jukurrpa* that are specific to sites in country. San Roque appears to have internalised the import of place: an early “shock of recognition” (San Roque 2007, 114) in first coming to Central Australia, which has been thickened over time spent with Warlpiri and other Central Desert peoples, for whom place is absolutely central to structuring thought, experience, and identity. In my experience, Warlpiri people show as much pride in sharing country and the hunting experiences embedded in it, as they do in showing off a fat, shiny new baby – to say nothing of the fundamental ways that Central Desert sites shape the language, concepts, and mythopoesis of *Jukurrpa*. San Roque theorises at length about “the dynamics of environmentally specific experience” (San Roque 2009, 40) and how it may shape thought and mythopoesis; how “‘country’ forms symbolic imagery in the human mind” (46). Often, he describes the route he has driven or walked as he has held a particular idea in mind, thus connecting deep thinking with the sites passed through on travels. For example, “between a Stuart Highway roadhouse and the turnoff toward the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands I am thinking about the simplicity of listening” (48). Thought, arising from and in place, appears repeatedly throughout his essays.

The creative-therapeutic myth-making projects of *Sugarman* and *The Kore Story/Persephone’s Dog* are also fundamentally driven by a concern with place. These projects stage mythic narratives set at ancient Greek sites, which correspond to the formations of Western cultural complexes around alcohol and agriculture, respectively. By demonstrating the formative relationship between place and our own western mythopoetic inheritance, San Roque hopes to jolt *kardiya* audiences into an imaginative contact with the centrality of *Jukurrpa* for Central Desert peoples.

The English word ‘place’ is woefully insufficient to speak about these concepts. The Aboriginal English term ‘country’ is better, so long as we keep in mind the vitality and resonances that are emic to its context. As Deborah Bird Rose says:

“Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. . . . Country is a living entity with a yesterday, today, and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will towards life.” (Rose 1996, 7)

We need poetic formulations such as Rose’s to do the intercultural thinking work that this essay proposes. The tension between the wish to explore these ideas, and the paucity of a flat, closed, English-language text to hold these explorations, is at the heart of the difficult intercultural conversation that San Roque works to make space for. Language differences both hold and signal cultural differences. However, there are also fundamental differences in perception that language can only insufficiently convey. Is it possible that a yapa person walking their country is not only seeing a mountain differently than a kardiya, but is seeing a different mountain altogether? (Ravenscroft 2013; Ravenscroft 2016, 40). How can the word ‘mountain’ serve, here? This is a necessary mindset: to acknowledge that our attempts to understand Indigenous mythopoesis are consigned to partiality at best, and are inescapably clouded by our own perceptions and the limitations of our language.

As a therapist, San Roque of course calls on therapeutic analogies to make sense of the reflexive work required here. Invoking British psychotherapist Bion, San Roque insists on the impossibility of an “uncontaminated” mind (San Roque 2009, 49) when coming to an intercultural engagement. Openness is not emptiness; we cannot meet someone from a radically different culture without our mental cargo of “memory and desire” (Bion 1984, 31–35). Prejudice, judgement, expectation, naiveté, emotion and resistance freight every encounter. San Roque has transferred Jung’s dialectical imperative to his creative projects. Within the conceit of the *Sugarman* project, every central question about the anthropological or therapeutic ‘subject’ spurs a turning-back to the self, the author, and the cultural frames of reference that construct his way of seeing and thinking. *Sugarman* began with a conversation between San Roque and Central Desert elder and healer Andrew Japaljarri Spencer about the ravages of grog. They were discussing the difficulty of getting through to people, and how to manage the addictive substances that are destroying Central Desert communities. The crucial moment came when Japaljarri asked San Roque and his colleagues whether there was a “whitefeller Tjukurrpa” for grog (San Roque 2007, 127). Japaljarri suggests that because kardiya brought the grog, kardiya must dream a way of controlling it. To ask yapa to dream songs to govern, control, and integrate this powerful poison is “too much” (44).

The question, then, ‘What can we do to prevent alcohol addiction in Central Desert communities?’ is answered, slantly, imaginatively, by turning to Dionysian myth. The question, ‘How can Jukurrpa be mobilised here?’ provokes the response, ‘What about the myths and archetypes underlying our own settler cultural inheritance?’ Years of researching the ancient Greek cycle of Dionysus’ travels resulted in a lengthy script for performance. On the page, it reads like an epic poem, and recasts Dionysus as ‘Sugarman’ – a Dreaming hero whose exploits are told with the techniques of *Jukurrpa* stories. There is lots of repetition and Central Desert idioms, images of travelling, sexual anarchy, gender dynamics, being eating and regurgitated, disappearing into and appearing out of the earth, and the slow and recursive building-up of concrete language typical of *Jukurrpa* narratives. The script has been performed in a series of communal, collaborative performances, at the Injartnama outstation rehabilitation program, and at the Araluen Art Centre in Alice Springs. The more recent project, *The Kore Story / Persephone’s Dog*, takes agriculture, not alcohol, as its central question. It creates an imaginative space for thinking through – perhaps *dreaming* through – how the seeds of settler culture’s agricultural mindset are embedded in our mythic inheritances, and how those same seeds might take root in Yapa minds.

San Roque’s projects might be misunderstood as a kardiya’s attempt to write ‘Aboriginality’. San Roque has internalised certain modes of yapa storytelling and certain yapa values. However, internalisation is distinct from the cannibalisation that characterises dominant Western practices of acquiring knowledge about (and power over) the other (San Roque and Santospirito 2013). San Roque’s preoccupations are not with definitively understanding the yapa mind. Rather, his concern is the conversation between yapa and kardiya, “what happens between ‘black and white’ as they are speaking” (San Roque 2009, 41). The author behind the therapeutic-creative projects of *The Kore Story/Persephone’s Dog* and *Sugarman* is in no sense the authoritative hermeneut,

an identity that reflexive anthropology has worked hard to shuck off. Rather, San Roque takes up Johannes Fabian's proposition that the role might more ethically and usefully be viewed as a "provider of occasions," a "producer" like a theatre producer, or, after Victor Turner, an "ethnodramaturg" (Fabian 1990, 7). What these occasions might enable, beyond the performance of intercultural dialogue, remains to be seen.

San Roque's project of acknowledging his 'head notes', those preconceptions that form our understanding of the Other, involves nothing less than the interrogation of the mythopoetic inheritance and cultural complexes of the West. The grandness, ambition, and imagination of his approach means that its integration into the policies that structure kardiya management of yapa affairs is rather unlikely. Making space for slow thought, the entertainment of mystery, and self-interrogation hardly lends itself to a quick fix for 'the Aboriginal problem' — a repulsive term that masks the real challenge, which is owning up to our own misunderstandings. What San Roque's work helps us to see is that the problem is ours: it is one of understanding, and the incommensurability of the two worlds will not be easily integrated. San Roque's work exemplifies a worthy twin action: reaching out for comprehension, while allowing enigma. This is a fine guide to encountering the yapa lifeworld, and tending the imaginative processes that might allow us to see ourselves clearly inside of it.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joan Fleming is an award winning poet and a writer, undertaking a PhD on ethnopoetics with a focus on Central Australia, with Monash University. Her two poetry collections, *Failed Love Poems* (2015) and *The Same as Yes* (2010), are published by Victoria University Press. Honours include the Biggs Poetry Prize, the Verge Prize for Poetry and the Harri Jones Memorial Prize. Her work can be found at [www.joanflemingpoet.com](http://www.joanflemingpoet.com)

<sup>2</sup> The terms *kardiya* (a white or non-Aboriginal person or people) and *yapa* (an Indigenous or Aboriginal person or people) are specific to Warlpiri and other Central Desert people of Australia. I use these terms here to try and avoid the inaccurate and insufficient umbrella terms 'Aboriginal' or 'Indigenous.' While sometimes useful, these terms elide cultural specificity, and carry the etymological history of settler imposition and control by way of definition of the other. For further discussion on the colonial projections of terminology and their relation to power and oppression, see (Wolfe 1997; Green 2012).

<sup>3</sup> As a fourth-generation Australian citizen of English, Irish, and Scottish descent, it is with mixed feelings that I identify as a member of white settler culture. To borrow the words of Fee and Russel, I am "both part of and stand against the colonial project" (Fee and Russell 2007, 188).

<sup>4</sup> *Jukurrpa* is the Warlpiri word for 'Dreaming' or 'Law'. The term encompasses story, ceremony, myth, dance, concepts of time and space, social law, site, and country.

<sup>5</sup> *Ninu* is the Warlpiri word for bilby, or rabbit-bandicoot, a small marsupial native to the Central Desert.

<sup>6</sup> *Jungarrayi* is San Roque's skin name. All *Kardiya* who are more than fly-ins in Central Desert communities are given skin names, which are a way of placing *kardiya* in the Warlpiri social web and dictating modes of interaction and obligation. My skin name is *Nungarrayi*, which would make San Roque and I siblings in Warlpiri law.