
Difficult Conversations



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Published by British Council Northern Ireland
in collaboration with the British Council
Research & Insight team

<https://nireland.britishcouncil.org/>

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight>

<http://adifficultconversation.com>

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DOI

<https://doi.org/10.57884/SR7K-9P66>

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The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. A registered charity: 209131 (England and Wales) SC037733 (Scotland).

Acknowledgements

The Editors wish to thank the British Council and the British Council UK/Australia 2021–2022 Season for their generous support for the difficult conversations project and in doing so fostering a global partnership between the University of Canberra and Ulster University. In particular we acknowledge the work of Camilla Rous, Jonathan Stewart, Helen Salmon and James Perkins. We also wish to thank Cian Smyth for his significant contribution to the design and development of the difficult conversations 2022 symposium and website, Ben Ennis Butler for design of the project website and all those who participated in these important forerunners to this edited volume. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers in the United Kingdom and Australia who offered their expertise and comments to authors and editors on this manuscript, and to Pablo Rossello, Rosanna Lewis, Jenny Daly, and Nikki Locke of the British Council for their helpful feedback and support.

Speaking of Violence on Women's Country

Paul Collis and Jen Crawford

The town of Bourke, in far north-western New South Wales, is unceded Barkindji Country, and home to 27 other language groups. Bourke became a centre for Western pastoral and agricultural industry following white colonial settlement in the 1830s. By the late 20th century, the once-booming wool industry had been superseded by cotton, with cotton one face of a cut-throat industry of water harvesting and trade. From early in the colonial period, traditional and totemic trees in this area, as elsewhere in Australia, were massacred, and ceremonial sites destroyed, in an effort to rid the land of evidence of Aboriginal ownership and Aboriginal ways. Human massacres also took place, usually unprosecuted and often still unacknowledged (Ryan et al 2017–2022). Legal fiction abounds. The white poet Henry Lawson, who lived in Bourke for some time, famously wrote that ‘if you know Bourke, you know Australia’ (Barnes 2017, p. 35), but much of Aboriginal experience remains unseen and unremembered by white settler Australia.

Barkindji Country is a place of Women's Dreaming, which means Women's Law – the law of matriarchy, which both women and men help to carry out. Barkindji Country is the resting place of Mungo Lady, who was cremated some 42,000 years ago, to emerge again in 1968 (Roberts, Russell & Bird 2018). Country holds the bones and stories of ancestors, and at times returns them to us.

We wrote the poem ‘Woman's Country’ during and after a recent research visit to Bourke, in a rare period of flood. Much of the previous 25 years (particularly 1997–2009 and 2017–2019 (Bureau of Meteorology, 2022)) had been marked by dire and ongoing drought, exacerbated by industrial water theft and overuse, alongside climate change. Among the

consequences are great strain and grief for Aboriginal communities as they see their rivers, here the Barka (the Darling), emptying, threatening the continuity of life, culture and Dreaming. When asked ‘What is a river?’ in our research discussions, traditional owner Wayne Knight answered, ‘That river is our spiritual lifeblood’ (Knight 2022). We heard that when the river was empty, Barkindji children, drawing on their own knowledge of Country, asked ‘Where does the Rainbow Serpent sleep now?’

Although the return of a flood period replenishes Country, the exploitation of water continues, and the children's question continues to haunt Barkindji people's visions of the future. It is estimated that 20–30% of the current floodwaters are being diverted to industrial dams, often well beyond legal quotas (Davies 2022). This water will never reach deep into Country to replenish trees, billabongs and rivers ahead of the next drought.

Bourke – on the edge of the desert – could be a hard place to live for those who came to take it, because of heat, water, weather and distance from Sydney, and because of colonial determination to rewrite the laws of Country. Racist violence and oppression has been a feature of white presence in the town since colonisation. Women's Law continues, but is continually threatened, too. Where cultural continuity is repressed and broken, more violence floods in. Although anecdotally we are told that the town has one of the highest police-citizen ratios in Australia (town or district-level data is not made publicly available), methamphetamine (‘ice’), alcohol and other drugs are readily available. Often it appears they are easier to access than services and resources to support individuals, and to support the maintenance of cultural ways that protect and guide. Regardless, these



Figure 1. Floodwaters at North Bourke. Women's country, river overflowing. Image: J. Crawford (2022).

cultural ways continue, due to the efforts of all who carry them forward.

The intensities we experience in Barkindji Country are alive in our relationship to one another and to Country itself. Some of these take voice in this poem.

Woman's Country

W: Voice as a woman

M: Voice as a man

V: Voices

Also speaking are Whiteness, Blackness, Country, the Law

M in Bourke,
writing
still on the road,
out on the track
windin back on ghost wind
touchin spirits

glimpses of family
the living and others who have passed
flash shadows
bloodstains on cemented paths

black earth country beneath my feet
lookin at Barka

shadow places everywhere
dark places where love found life
shadow places where life found death.
things fade.

I walk where the old man walked
on ceremonial ground
dancin up dust
from day to night

•

near the courthouse,
trade
echoes float easy on night breeze
you're still on my mind

woman's law, this place
girls rush across
flashing eyes long enough

ask the unspeakable question.
like little ghosts
they disappear into shadows.

morning brings tired old voices
Barka grows wilder
stretching herself with new life.
Aunt takes to talk of night things
of being sung to the charm
of a clever man

•

W you be a pedestrian light,

green: walk now
walk quick
don't run

signalling
from the door of the chemist
your face as calm as a mother's
I cross

blood pilot
calls behind me
wings out at full stretch

•

V whisper
Mooda-Gutta

•

W young men fly the streets
blood pilots with cut faces
turn me female
turn me glue-footed
back on myself

•

V I cross the road when I see them coming
I check both sides of the street before I get
out of the car
I get back in the car when I get that feeling
I lock the doors; wind up the windows

W although
six kinds of bird are singing their songs
and the breeze is gentle in the red river
gums

- that run long fingers through the water's
flow
and the sunlight's strong
on the stricken and on me
-
- V red-tailed black cockatoos cry welcome
- women's country
river overflowing
-
- W departure halls fill up with mobilized
soldiers
and we go too, me and these men,
my friends, traveling companions,
into the mouth of our violence
carried on through each checkpoint
weaving back all the while
-
- suck the milk, they call
to each other
on the verandah, on the street
in the studio, in dreams
suck the milk!
suck the milk, they call to the sunset
to the inundated trees
- & each
approaches the milk, enters the milk
laps, & sucks, &
breathes in the air
sweetness of night flowers
all of music, all philosophy
-
- M I was born to woman's country woman's
dreaming woman's law
creation stories.
women's country.
- embraced in women's dreaming
we are held, raised up
take our women's name, our mother's
name,
not our father's.
aunties, too, become mothers to us.
it's all a woman's embrace –
- plants, animals, water,
life.
all woman's country
and woman's dreaming.
-
- V rain comes, the ground is soaked
floodwater rises
earth slips
not all the bones are in the right place
-
- whisper
Mooda-Gutta
-
- W I'll be country
you be country too
- I'm in the milk and the milk's in me
-
- night comes earlier and earlier
- there he is
by the bowling club gate
reeling in place, rolling a smoke
bung eye, bleeding cheek
will I slip past unseen
ghost on black ice
a chill
-
- M some dance some night kardatchi man
from out of town plucks one hair from her
head. 'If I want you, you'll come.'
- W where else would she go but the police?
trust held out in her hand. dragonfly. 'can
you help me. he said he'd sing me.' where
would she have gone, but for the police?
rows of the silenced. rows of protectors
cut down. to the police: 'listen: he took
my hair.'
-



Figure 1. Floodwaters at North Bourke. Country is a full belly. Image: P. Magee (2022).

M hunger
 sly things happen on the sly
 there is violence in threatening breaths,
 and young men with blood faces
 screaming into the night

hungry, craving... nothing is not enough,
 everything is never enough,
 everywhere the hunger,
 and the law can go and hide like the slimy
 dog it is
 it's never there when you need it, anyway.
 hide and slide, you dogs,
 catch and kill your own out here,
 the weak ones are targets and desired, the
 naive
 try look tough, even while you're pissin in
 your boots,
 walk straight, walk fast, don't turn back to
 fight–
 blood everywhere

•

I've touched that tree,
 where she was.
 tears run with Barka
 they are not different gamoo

woman's law, this place
 filled and overflows on
 woman's dreaming.
 country is a full belly
 humming with life

•

W little bug bangs the drum
 crawls in me
 can't get out
 I'm reading my phone
 on the floodplain at night
 in the joyous proliferation

•

V bang my head
 bang a way in

•

W standing at the door of the dark hospital
 ringing the bell

me and these men, my friends

I'll be a jumping bean and you be two
 chairs

I'll be the dark and you be the eyes
 I'll be here when you hold my arm

but the bug will die in here
 whole body kicking
 against the drum

I'll be an orifice
 I'll be a cell

•

V I'll be here
 dragonfly
 floodplain in flood
 one drop of rain
 alive

•

stories, whispery voice
 Mooda-Gutta!
 warning sign, stampede horse.
 Mooda-Gutta!
 waterspout ... sounds like petrol on fire –
 don't cross there! Mooda-Gutta
 don't say it

Notes:

Barka: Barkindji name for the Darling River on Barkindji Country. Barka means 'my darling'.

Gamoo: water.

Kardatchi man is one term Barkindji people use for a cleverfulla, clever man or dthingagulla.

About Mooda-Gutta (or Mundaguddah), Kunya artist Brian Smith writes the following:

I've heard it described as a serpent, sometimes even heard it connected to the rainbow serpent story, and it's definitely got connections up in Kunya country, where my family came from. But all the rivers around here, the Warrego, the Paroo, they all have clans and people that belong here and they are all represented in Bourke, and they all have a story about the Mundaguddah. It may have different stories associated, but when you say that one word, it always means the same thing, 'stay out of the water'.

Those stories are important to our mob, and they kept us alive. In the simplest way, don't be near a dangerous place, like the river, without supervision. The sculpture [Andrew Hull's sculpture of Mundaguddah] has a gaping maw-like mouth and thousands of teeth like a cod, it could swallow you whole. (Smith, 2022)

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