

*Different Ways of Knowing:
Trees Are Our Families Too*

Aboriginal people have different ways of knowing. One of the ways we know and make sense of the world around us is through stories given to us from the Dreaming. Stories tell us about the spirit of the world, and they come from trees, animal, rocks, rivers, the moon, stars, and country itself. Sometimes these stories come as dreams, or messages from our old people whose spirits are still with us, even though they have died. A dream can be a warning, given because you've gone the wrong way. Or there may be something you need to know to prepare for what is coming, or something you must do. It can be a way of reassuring and comforting us by letting us know we are going the right way. It's like a message stick, a way of communicating. In dreams we can be taken to other places, times, and the worlds between spaces. In dreams we must listen whether we like it or not; it is hard to walk away. We may do so when we awaken, but by then we will have been given the knowledge. Sometimes we do not know what we have been given or why, so it may take a long time to 'know'. Timing is uncertain; it goes its own way. Things can change. Knowing may come in the

depths of sleep, between sleeping and waking, or when we are awake but restful and quiet. In these times it is easier for us to listen to those other ways of knowing that are available to us. This is when we can tap into the deep knowledge all around us, not just the surface. So knowledge comes in many different ways and these ways are common to Indigenous peoples around the world. As Leon Secatero, Spiritual Elder of Mother Earth and Headman of the Canoncito Band of Navajo explains:

For a while when I talked about sacred things like this, I used words like 'revelation' and 'prophecy'. But those words do not represent real Indigenous thought. More appropriately, I would speak of 'a way of being', or a 'knowing' — the knowing that's in us.²⁴

This kind of knowing is not unique to Indigenous people: knowing lies within us all. Unfortunately, it is a way of knowing that has been discarded by many of the world's cultures, and removed from their formal knowledge and learning systems. Western knowledge, as it is currently constituted, excludes or marginalises many ways of knowing, including its own ancient ways. Western knowledge is increasingly problematic because of its dominance over other people's world knowledge and learning systems, its innate belief in its superiority over *all* other forms of 'knowing', and its claims to universality when it is only a 'particular' way of knowing. The westernisation of knowledge has meant that many Indigenous ways of knowing have been labelled as myth and described as anecdotal and unreliable. This type of denigration has damaged people and their relationships with each other and

with the natural world around them. As one of the senior Aboriginal women of Coober Pedy, who fought successfully to keep a nuclear waste dump from being built on their country, Eileen Unkari Crombie says:

*The learning isn't written on paper, as whitefellas' knowledge is. We carry it instead in our heads and we're talking from our hearts, for the land. You fellas, whitefellas, put us in the back all the time, like we've got no language for the land. But we've got the story for the land.*²⁵

For Aboriginal people, the land is full of stories, and we are born from our Mother the land, into these stories. The old people tell us stories that nurture and sustain us through life into old age, so that we can tell children the stories they will need to sustain them. The great life-story cycle has been the way for millennia. It is the birthright of all Aboriginal children to be born into the *right* story. Indeed, it is the birthright and greatest gift we can give all children. The *right* story connects us intimately to our country, giving us our place and our identity. The *right* story embeds us deeply in nature, connected to the living spirit. As Bill Neidjie, the legendary Kakadu man, explains:

*Tree
He watching you
You look at tree,
He listen to you.
He got no finger,
He can't speak.
But that leaf,
He pumping, growing*

*Growing in the night.
While you sleeping
You dream something.
Tree and grass same thing.
They grow with your body,
With your feeling.*

*If you feel sore,
Headache, sore body,
That mean somebody killing tree or grass.*

*You feel
because your body in that tree or earth.
Nobody can tell you,
You got to feel it yourself²⁶*

My grandmother Daisy could not read or write but gave all of us kids' stories. My mother Gladys and I continue to see the world in stories. When we began to talk about what story we should write for this book, what kept coming to us was a cry from the trees to help them tell their story. Not just because it is important for them, because it is important for us. To help us begin, my mother, Gladys, was given a dream about the first tree.

*The first tree
In the dream I was a young girl again, about twelve years old. I was walking around, searching for a tree to sit under, but everything was desolate and empty. There were no trees, just dried grass. All the trees were gone; it was as if they had just walked away. So I sat down on the dry grass by the road, and even though the sun was shining, it was very cold. Then*

I saw a man wearing a business suit and carrying a suitcase fly down from the sky and land a few yards away from me. He opened his suitcase, took off his wings, folded them up and put them inside his case. Then he picked the case up and walked to the side of the road. A yellow bus came and he got on it. I called out to him, but he took no notice. I walked over to where he had been and picked up a little grey feather he must have dropped. The feather stuck to my hand and carried me up to a high mountain all made of crystal. When I landed there, the feather flew from my hand and stuck in my hair, I noticed that it had got bigger. I walked into the beautiful crystal mountain and saw a lot of people, like nurses, running around carrying babies wrapped in baby blankets. They were placing them all together in a large room and took no notice of me, they all seemed to be in too much of a hurry.

I wanted to look at one of the babies so I pulled the blanket back from its face and saw tiny little leaves growing out of the blanket. I realised they were baby trees, not people. When I lifted the blanket, all the baby trees started crying. A nurse hurried into the room to see what was happening. She saw me standing there with the grey feather sticking out of my hair and looked shocked. She grabbed my hand and called out to the others, who all crowded around talking loudly, only I couldn't understand their language.

They took me into an enormous room, so high you couldn't see the ceiling. A beautiful, old, wise-looking tree sat at the end of the room, it was ancient and had thousands of branches reaching in all directions and disappearing into the ceiling. I thought it was so beautiful and so old it must be the earth's first tree. A little branch reached out and plucked the feather from my hair. A strand of my hair clung to the

feather as the branch placed it in the tree. The feather started growing bigger and bigger turning red and gold. I saw the crystal mountain starting to disintegrate and realised it was made of ice. I felt cold now the feather had left me, so I stood in the glow that was melting the ice. As the feather grew larger it became a beautiful golden-red firebird. The branches of the ancient tree started glowing, they reached out and began picking up all the baby trees. The ancient branches covered the world, planting the baby trees all over the earth. The firebird flew around the world three times, then came back to its nest in the ancient tree. I looked out at the landscape and saw it was covered with wonderful trees of all colours. I wanted to find my own special tree, I turned back to thank the first tree and the firebird for bringing the trees back, but they were no longer there. I felt so happy the trees had returned, I laughed and danced among them looking for my special tree friend. The sun was warm again, black cockatoos flew from the earth, singing and calling to each other. They gently lifted me up and flew with me across a shining blue lake with a mirror-like surface. I glanced down at my reflection on the lake and saw that I was no longer a young girl; I was a lovely red-tailed black cockatoo flying with my family back home to country.

It is through the eyes of our children that people will see the empty world we have created. We, who have folded away our spiritual lives and packed them into suitcases, expect our children to do the same. We wish them to find wisdom on wheels within the Western education system, not in an Aboriginal one with living trees. Trees are families too, and they give birth and nurture and care for their babies, just like humans. Children, trees and birds are all

meant to grow up together. When we make our children pack away their spiritual lives in little brown suitcases, they learn only half of what they need to know. The full knowledge of the world gives children the feathers from their suitcases, the means to fly. In my mother's case, she became the red-tailed black cockatoo because this is her special bird (what is often referred to as her 'totem'). Of course, red-tailed black cockatoos need old forests to live in. They are big birds and need the large old trees to provide hollow logs big enough for them to nest in. Trees, birds and people are intimately connected; we are meant to be in the same story. It is people who break this connection, and create separate stories.

The story nomads

In Western scholarship, those writing about Aboriginal people have often called us 'nomads'. This really had a pejorative meaning, labelling us as wanderers, with no fixed home. 'Nomads' were the opposite of 'settled' people like the British and other Europeans who lived in agricultural and industrialised societies, and who had cities from which had come civilisations. The label, 'nomads' of course, has been very useful in undermining Aboriginal claims to land. Yet Aboriginal people never 'wandered' far from country and always struggled to stay close to it. We did not leave it but were taken from it and we still grieve for country we lost, as country grieves for us. We did not seek other peoples' country to make our own, we lived in our country and moved as country showed us. We followed song lines, Dreaming tracks and stories within our country, keeping country healthy through our presence and ceremony, which

in turn kept us healthy. We cared for country, and country still cares for us.

The real *nomads*, of course, were the people who gave us that name: the British never stayed home, they have wandered the world. As a consequence, Aboriginal people have had to contend with what we could describe as *story nomads*. These *story nomads* wander about in other people's stories, mucking them up and changing the endings; disbelieving most, stealing some, selling others. They often come too late to understand what the story is about, starting in the middle of a story but claiming it is the beginning. They may leave before the end, so they don't have to face the consequences of broken stories. They are the perpetual travellers of the story world because they have 'disremembered' their own stories, consigning them to myth, mysticism, religion, allegory, metaphor or narrative: the 'not quite true' category. By dis(re)membering stories, they create limited knowledge systems. Telling other people's stories for them, *story nomads* believe the 'new' stories they create are true and more important than any others. Aboriginal people know these aren't proper true stories, but they are often trapped in them nonetheless. So are trees, and we can gain some insight into this strange situation through two Aboriginal storytellers, Dingo and Wombat.

Dingo and Wombat

It is important to understand who Dingo and Wombat are. To begin with, they inhabit a real world. Wombat guards the green world, the inner world. We can't see his secret life, as he sleeps deep in the earth. Dingo guards the outer world

and talks to the moon while we sleep. Dingo is always finding things that are lost and Wombat is always trying to help him with them. Together, they give us lessons in how to restore everything to its proper place in order to ensure the future. They also help us understand what is important and what isn't. Their wisdom is useful to all people, particularly *story nomads*. If the current attorney-general, Philip Ruddock, had had access to Dingo and Wombat's wisdom in 2000, then he might not have been reported in the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, as attributing the then Aboriginal disadvantage to the nature of Aboriginal society itself, by virtue of the fact that 'Aborigines were hunter-gatherers not familiar with the wheel'.²⁷ Similarly, the prime minister, John Howard, might not have agreed that no apology or censure was needed, because Ruddock had been merely stating a 'historical fact'. But like a coin, there are two sides to a wheel, as Dingo and Wombat discovered.

The lost tree

Dingo walked restlessly outside Wombat's burrow; he was anxious for Wombat to wake up because he had found something very special. Dingo thought everything he found was very special, but he wasn't allowed to wake Wombat, not when Wombat was dreaming about how to change the world. Wombat could hear Dingo walking up and down outside, so he eventually gave in and asked Dingo what he wanted.

'I've found something very special and I need you to help me put it in my cave. It's a round tree', he said showing Wombat his latest find.

'Don't be silly', said Wombat, 'It doesn't look like a tree

to me'. But he helped Dingo try to put it in his cave anyway, only it wouldn't fit.

'Let's stand it up and try that way', suggested Wombat.

When they stood the round tree up, it started rolling down the hill. Wombat and Dingo chased after it, but it rolled faster and faster until it flew off a high cliff, fell into a deep ravine and disappeared out of sight. Dingo was very upset and in his heart he blamed Wombat for standing it up in the first place. He went back to his cave and drew a picture of his round tree on a rock, so if he ever found it again he would remember what it looked like.

That night, Dingo went to see his friend, the moon, and told him of his special find. 'It wasn't like anything I've found before', said Dingo.

'What did it look like?' asked Moon.

'I drew it on my rock over there', said Dingo.

Moon shone his light on the rock and saw Dingo's drawing.

'Oh that's no longer a tree,' explained Moon, 'though it was once. That's a wheel.'

Dingo got so excited his lost object had a name that he couldn't wait to tell Wombat and he raced off while Moon was still talking. When he found Wombat, he proudly told him he had found a 'wheel'.

'Now, we'll have to go and get it', said Dingo.

'No, Dingo', said Wombat, 'it has fallen back into Time, we can't go there, that's someone else's story.'

The wheel of time

The British valued the wheel, but they did not value its connection to the tree. The invention of the wheel is tied

inexorably to the progress of Western civilisation, but at the heart of the wheel, was the death of the tree. And allied to the 'wheel', for Aboriginal peoples worldwide, was another dead tree, the sailing ship. The wheel and the sailing ship were instrumental in disconnecting people from country and the natural world. Similarly, the spiritually rich nature of Aboriginal cultures, where knowledge and relationships between people, country and all living things are highly prized, went unappreciated by the *story nomads*, because they could not see beyond the missing wheel to the living tree. What they valued was the resources and material wealth the land could provide, with no understanding of, or care for, the deeper story. Western progress required the plunder of the world.

Ordering the landscape, disordering country

The first thing the *story nomads* do when they arrive somewhere is to begin to order the 'landscape' to establish their 'view' of country, what they want to see in their field of vision, and what they want to exclude. What they really do is *disorder* country, removing it from its own story. They write the storybook they want to read. Land becomes *real estate*, an economic commodity, and a source of tradable wealth, duly assigned a particular value based on productivity or use. Land is packaged and parcelled: towns, parks, gardens, farms, stations, missions, reserves, mines, factories and prisons. There are desirable and undesirable places. Fences are erected, people are locked out and country is locked up.

Felling trees begins the destruction of memory and the usurpation of place. In 1829, the *story nomads* arrived in

force in Western Australia and the founding of the new British colony was marked with the death of a tree. Mrs Dance, with axe in hand, made the first cut to fell a sheoak, to the accompaniment of rifle volleys, speeches and cheers. The ceremony is said to be accurately rendered in George Pitt Morrison's *The Foundation of Perth*, painted in the Centenary year, 1929, with copies distributed to Western Australian school children. Emblematic of the occasion, the imagery remains quintessentially Western Australian. Trees were an impediment to progress and development, so they had to be cleared. As the ancient giants were hacked to death, the birds, animals, insects were all cleared, along with Aboriginal people. The British imported into Australia their own plants, their own animals, their own birds, and their own people and made up their own story.

As Aboriginal song man Archie Roach laments in *The Native Born*:

*So bow your head old Eucalypt and Wattle Tree
Australia's bush is losing its identity
While the cities and the parks that they have planned
Look out of place because the spirit's in the land.*²⁸

The old ones

In Australia, there is ongoing conflict over the continued logging of old-growth forests. Prior to colonisation, all Australia's forests were old-growth, but in a little over two hundred years, ninety per cent of old-growth forests has been cleared. Just like shooting birds and animals for 'sport', there were popular contests to see who could fell the largest

tree. This usually meant the oldest tree, the tree with the most knowledge. Old-growth forests are always in danger in Australia. Thankfully, the trees have made deep friendships with many non-Aboriginal people who continue to fight for them. By supporting trees to keep their stories going, their friends live in the right stories too. This is a wonderful thing to do.

'Old-growth' and 're-growth' are very deceptive terms when applied to trees. They are meant to persuade us that it's a natural transition from one story to the other, to see not change but continuity, progress inherent in re-growth. Tourism mostly uses the more evocative term 'ancient forests', but this is a less desirable nomenclature in the forest logging debate. Ancient forests are made up of trees of many different ages, sizes and shapes, as well as fallen logs, and other plants that grow with them. This biodiversity supports a large variety of animals and birds. Trees themselves are in large extended families and communities with lots of support, love and care: grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and children. In contrast, re-growth forests are biologically simple. They are made up of trees that are nearly all the same age, where it's a bit like growing up in institutions, with lots of children, some foster parents, no grandparents, no family to grow you up. It's hard to imagine a world where everyone's the same age. It's a restricted view of life systems to believe that young trees will simply be able to grow without the support and guardianship of older trees. We *can't* really know if trees will be able to reach such great ages and sizes again; we can know that the minimum waiting time will be hundreds of years. This seems a needless and heedless risk to take, to break the story now. The destruction of the earth's green mantle has enormous

consequences for country and for what we pass on to future generations.

The tree of life

The tree is the symbol of life itself and trees actively support our life on earth, through all its cycles and in all its dimensions, physically, emotionally and spiritually. We all know what trees give us, but we act as if it isn't true. We know the right stories for trees, but tell the wrong ones. Everyone talks proudly of their family trees, but not everyone talks about the trees in their families. Trees are our relations. In the Dreaming, everything is related, as Yanuwa Elder Mussolini Harvey explains:

*The Dreamings are our ancestors, no matter if they are fish, birds, men, women, animals, wind or rain. It was these Dreamings that made our Law. All things in our country have Law, they have ceremony and song, and they have people who are related to them.*²⁹

Trees have always cared for humans and offered shelter in life and in its passing. For millennia, even for the *story nomads*, the tree was the child's wooden cradle, to hold the baby close to the mother, rocking as she worked. In death, the coffin was the loving rest, protection from bare earth. For Aboriginal women, trees are the midwives when children are birthed on the banks of dry riverbeds where the tall gums grow, and where each child has a birth tree. To protect mother and child, there is cleansing and healing smoke from gum leaves, with ashes rubbed into the child's head. To cradle the child, the *coolamon* is taken carefully



Birth tree, Palyku Country

Courtesy Gladys Milroy

from the tree and the mother carries the child nestled in its soft curves. At the end of our journey here, in our passing, we are held once more in the loving embrace of trees, held aloft, wrapped in paperbark, hollow logs, a resting place.

Trees are the very breath of life. An average tree produces enough oxygen in a year to keep a family of four breathing. As well as absorbing harmful carbon dioxide, trees provide shelter, shade, warmth and cooling. Trees and plants freely give us essential foods and medicines. It is now well recognised that Aboriginal people have a diverse and sophisticated pharmacopoeia in Australia. The eucalypt provides a powerful antiseptic, used worldwide for coughs, colds and sore throats; the disinfectant and antiseptic properties of melaleuca makes it particularly good for healing skin infections; acacia is used to make medicine for colds and flu and its bark for covering sores, wounds and burns. The smoke that results from laying leaves and twigs over a fire was used widely to keep people healthy as well as healing sickness. Aboriginal people have always known how trees look after our health and promote our wellbeing. They cure sickness and despair. Western studies now also show that patients heal more quickly when they have a view of trees; workers are more productive. Trees make us feel good; like

the backbone of the universe, they lift us up and hold us there.

Trees protect water and soil quality, and replenish our water supplies. The world is facing a water crisis and several world leaders warn that this century, wars will be about water. Yet the rainforests that are needed to seed the rain clouds are fast disappearing. Australia is the oldest and driest continent on earth. Seventy five per cent of its vegetation is eucalypts, whose roots store water, a valuable reserve known to Aboriginal people. For Aboriginal people our most powerful spirit, the Rainbow Serpent is associated with water. While Australia continues to kill our trees, it fails to protect our most valuable resources: soil and water. Such thinking pervades all levels of Australian society. In suburbs along Perth's Swan River foreshore, trees are occasionally found poisoned or ring-barked, the suspected culprits nearby residents or developers keen to enlarge their river view and enhance the value of property. They cannot see the beauty of trees right in front of them. They don't realise that trees anchor the earth; they provide the eternal maternal bloodline that nourishes us all.

The smell of home

Aboriginal people can tell you that country recognises people by their smell, just as we recognise our country by its smell. Most of the world's eucalypt species are endemic to Australia; eucalypts, or gum trees, are the essence of the country. Gum trees are part of Australian folklore and national identity. Every Australian knows what gum trees look like and what they smell like. It is a unique and evocative scent. Soldiers returning by ship from the two world wars are said to have been able to smell eucalypts

from many miles off shore, long before land was visible. Trees have always been the first to welcome us home. The cleansing, healing scent of eucalypts refreshed the weary traveller and restored the battered soul. What does our country smell like now? Can we still smell eucalypts far from shore? The genocide of the trees in Australia leaves a bloodied landscape, that's why the land is so salty and there's a metallic smell beneath the surface of Australia now. It makes people restless, anxious; it's hard to sleep. Trees have always been our spiritual reservoirs, but many trees are invisible now. In the invisible forest, the ghosts of gums wander aimlessly, for there is no resting place. The tree spirits still cling to country, protecting the spirit of the land, for the land is never empty. But the deep healing wells are hidden. When all the trees and all the forests are invisible, will our children cry in despair, 'Where are the gums gone, the smell of our nation is killing us'?

The bone tree

Wombat was dreaming peacefully when a blob of dirt hit his face, waking him up.

'What's going on?' he spluttered, getting another face full of sand. 'Oh, it's you, Dingo. What are you doing digging near my burrow?'

Wombat saw that Dingo had a big bone in his mouth. 'Don't bury that bone here,' said Wombat, 'Why have you got it, anyway? There's no meat on it.'

'It's lost,' said Dingo. 'I'm looking after it.' Dingo was always looking after lost things.

'Don't be silly,' said Wombat, 'Bones don't get lost, now go away!'

Dingo was so upset that Wombat was not interested in his lost bone that he wandered off and sat on his own. But that night, Wombat dreamed that Dingo's lost bone was knocking on his burrow, calling 'Help me, help me!'

The next morning, Wombat went looking for Dingo and found him fast asleep, hugging the large bone. 'Dingo, wake up!' Wombat said, 'Where did you find that bone?' Dingo jumped up, pleased that Wombat was finally interested in his lost bone and ran ahead to show him the tree where he found it. Wombat looked up, and saw that the tree was covered in bones, except for one branch, where there was an empty space.

'What sort of tree is this?' asked Wombat.

'I call it dog's heaven,' said Dingo.

'Don't be silly,' said Wombat, 'We have to put the bone back where it belongs.'

Then the tree started singing, 'Put the bone back, put the bone back!'

It was very high but they pushed a rock under the tree to stand on, and Dingo stretched up and just managed to put the bone back in its place. Suddenly, beautiful green leaves started to grow and when they covered the tree, golden blossoms appeared. A small willy-willy swept across the tree and carried the golden blooms high into the blue sky.

That night, when Dingo was sitting talking to his friend the moon, he was amazed to see the sky completely covered with shiny new stars. 'The sky is so beautiful tonight, Moon,' said Dingo.

'Yes,' replied Moon. 'You did a great thing today, Dingo, you saved the spirits of the children not yet born, they are the stars you see.'

Now Dingo always guards the bone tree.

The living tree

We are the guardians of children and of all life on earth. But what is happening to the Tree of Life in this country? We have stopped valuing the living tree, seeing *who* the tree is, body and spirit. In Australia now there are two knowledge trees. One springs from the *story nomads* and represents Western ways of knowing, while the other arises from Aboriginal ways of knowing that come from the living tree. Aboriginal people have been taken from our sacred tree, and some of our stories have been broken. Aboriginal people collectively have the oldest living knowledge system in the world. Our 'tree' is made up of many living trees. Aboriginal Australia has more than two hundred languages and some six hundred 'nations'. Aboriginal people are culturally and linguistically diverse, but share a holistic, animate, interconnected system of knowledge that knows the stories for country, the spirit in the land and the relationships between all living things. This is entrusted to us from the Dreaming, the boundless, eternal enduring spirit of time. Aboriginal communities no longer have the resources to protect, sustain and grow our knowledge. The *story nomads'* tree has grown very large. It is highly prized, well fed and well watered, but it takes all the resources from the trees that Aboriginal people have to nurture and care for, our family trees and the trees in our families. Resources and funding overwhelmingly and disproportionately privilege Western knowledge, which, however prominent, is only *one* of the knowledge systems that exist in Australia and should not dominate all available resources. There is a national failure to formally acknowledge and value Aboriginal knowledge systems and Aboriginal ways of knowing. There is a national

failure to protect Aboriginal knowledge holders: people, places, rock art, trees, animals, and birds. This has disastrous consequences for Aboriginal children and ultimately all of Australia's children. If we put the Western and Aboriginal systems together, Australia would have one of the most complete and unique knowledge systems in the world and one that all Australians could share. In such a partnership though, Aboriginal knowledge has to be *privileged because it is the knowledge of the land itself*. If Aboriginal knowledge is not sustained in this country, if it no longer exists in Australia, it will no longer exist anywhere in *this world*. If Western knowledge no longer existed in Australia, it would be very difficult for us, but Western knowledge would still exist in the world, in other countries, and we could always pack our suitcases and visit it there.

The great difficulty is that some *story nomads* call their story the nation's story and think it is the only one. Its essence is encapsulated in a verse from a poem, *Old Botany Bay*, written by Dame Mary Gilmore, one of Australia's most popular poets, and whose portrait adorns our ten-dollar note. To demonstrate the currency of the sentiment (and well matched to Philip Ruddock's comments about the wheel in the same year), the poem was recited by Australian actor Jack Thompson at the 2000 Sydney Paralympics. In *Old Botany Bay*, the verse concerned is:

*I split the rock;
I felled the tree:
The nation was –
Because of me!*³⁰

This is one of the many illusions that can keep us from

knowing our country. We should not mistake 'nation' for country. Nations come and go, but country is forever. The land speaks true; there are no lies in country. When we lie down in country against our mother, skin to skin, she enfolds us in her arms. Our spiritual heart connects us to country; there can be no lies. The Tree of Life that exists here is Aboriginal. Yet Aboriginal children continue to be born into a disconnected, inanimate world that mistakes the idea of what a nation is, for the truth of *country*, the surface for what lies beneath. This interferes with children's birthright and pushes them into someone else's story. Aboriginal children have a right to be born into the right stories, their own stories that connect them to country, and to Aboriginal ways of knowing that are respected and valued. All Australian children deserve to know the country that they share through the stories that Aboriginal people can tell them and through the different ways of knowing country. This is what gives children the feathers to fly with the birds and grow with the trees. To deny non-Aboriginal Australian children this knowledge is also to deny them a part of their birthright (the other parts, of course, are all the trees of life and knowledge that they are also tied to by their ancestors). If all Australian children are given their proper birthright to be born into the *right story*, then this country will have a future in which all Australians can share and all children proudly recite:

*I saved the rock;
I saved the tree:
The country is –
Because of me!*