The Observer

The Aborigines who've walked for 40,000 years

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Imagine a beginning, when man and woman first named the world. A "Songline" or "Dreaming Track" in the Australian outback can still be walked, perhaps by the Arrernte or Pintupi or other Aboriginal peoples, and for them, it is nothing less than creation, the world sung into existence by naming all plants and animals and the landscape itself. Reaching back at least 40,000 years, a singer can find his or her way along the ancient path of one of the "Ancestors" retracing a Lizard Dreaming, or a Kangaroo Dreaming, or a Rain-Maker Dreaming, refreshing existence and "singing up the land".

The outback is a different place entirely to what I had expected: welcoming, safe, the snakes all asleep in this season. We're in John's country, his home. A wide, dry river of red sand with old white trees, thick trunks. John Kemarre Cavanaugh is a traditional landowner, an Arrernte man who still follows traditional Aboriginal law. He comes from a family of healers and cracks jokes about "witch doctors". He's invited me here to Urlpmerre, his country east of Alice Springs, along with his "old men", Ken and Frankie

Tilmouth, who are his *kwertengwerle*, his ritual caretakers, related through a maternal line. He can't tell stories in his land or make decisions about the land without their presence and approval. And he fulfils the same role for them on their land.

In the centre of John's country, Rain-Maker tracks head off in all directions, a crossroads for all of Australia. An Emu Dreaming crosses through here, too, and John shows me the flat plateau that is the emu's nest. Two small hills beside it are the emu chicks. "Dingo come bite old man Emu in his side," John says, and points to a sharp saddle cut into the ridge, "and the emu chicks all run that way."

"So someone following the Emu Dreaming follows the way the chicks ran off?" I ask.

"Yes," he says. "We go there now. A Rain-Maker Dreaming track go that way also. *Kwatye ke artweye.* It means Rain-Maker, owner of water."

John owns the Rain-Maker Dreaming here, and he's responsible for it as far as the boundaries of his country, where other traditional owners take over. He can follow the dreaming through their land, but only if he's invited. He's also responsible for other dreamings that pass through his land, including the emu and goanna, or lizard, and he knows their songs, too. But his most private dreaming, most sacred, is his *altyerre*, the possum. Altyerre means something like totem, but it also means dreamtime, creation time. The altyerre is given at birth or during pregnancy according to a sign, which could be a kangaroo crossing a mother's path, or a birthmark. John won't tell me about the possum. He asks Ken, and Ken says "possum all through here", but they don't say more, because John's altyerre is "men's business" - sacred, closed to outsiders and women, neighbours and boys. To tell me would be against traditional law.

Australia, the recent movie with Nicole Kidman, dramatises what happened to the "stolen generation", children born of Aboriginal mothers but fathered by white men, removed from their mothers and sent to missions. But full-blooded Aboriginal children were taken away from their families, too, and this is a story less well-known.

John was born in 1957 and taken away from his parents by missionaries. When we visit these old places, John doesn't say much. It's not until early one morning that John sits by the still-smouldering coals of the night's fire, drawing with a stick in the sand. The dormitory of Santa Theresa Mission, a line coming from either side, showing the yard separated, one side for boys, the other for girls. "If you're playing, and a ball go over this line, you can't cross. They watching us like hawks, all the time. My older sister like a stranger to me."

John's parents were nearby, and he would sometimes see them lining up to collect rations, but he couldn't wave to them. They'd just look at each other across the yard in silence. "Christian people done cruel things to Aboriginal people. It was like a prison. Small windows, lock us in. Children want to see their mothers and fathers. In 1967, when the freedom act happened, they finally send the children back, but many go back to empty houses. Their parents dead or gone. It's too late."

John ran away from the mission several times before this referendum. He thinks he may have been about seven years old when he first ran away, but he can't remember. "Those years missing," he says. John didn't have his first paid job until 1973. By then he'd worked for almost 10 years for white men for free. What amazes me about John is that he's still open-hearted, not bitter or angry, though he'd be more than justified. He wants to share his story, wants to invite outsiders to his land, wants different peoples to understand each other.

We walk along flat, open country, red dirt and spinifex grass, a few short trees, along a Rain-Maker Dreaming. "Old Man wakes up hungry," John says, and his arm raises up, showing far back, dreamtime. "He asks two girls, his wives, to get him some yams and other bush tucker - witchetty grubs and other things, and have a feed. They go out and gather a lot of tucker, but they decide to build a fire and eat it all themselves. The old man is watching from on top a hill, though. He sends rain for them, a big storm, lot of water, and they run, but the earth becomes soft and they sink in, like quicksand. They have that here," John points off to our side, "like quicksand."

We walk on through flat land, and John shows me where a group of kangaroos has taken advantage of a fallen tree as a windbreak. "Big mob," he says, "stay the night." I can see their distinctive tail tracks all around, and droppings, and the red earth dug up where they lay down. Then John shows me scorpion diggings. "Not a good place to camp," he laughs.

John tells another story for this place called Ambalindum. "See those mountains, the woman in front, and two men." I see smaller hills in front of a large mountain. "Baby crawls away from mother, goes a long way off. Night and day that baby would crawl. Crawls to the waterhole for a drink. Baby smelling water. That's where the old men was eating frog. They see that kid coming along and they took off with it. Mother followed the track. Mother been chasing. Big battle with them two. She gives them a beating, takes that child back. Story from thousands of years, was told, dreamtime story."

Then John squats down and draws in the dirt, shows how aboriginal art tells the story. He draws a circle for Ambalindum, a homestead in the Northern Territory, and a larger circle around it for this country. Then three fingers, spread, to draw three wavy lines

coming to the circle. "This here is the river." The ends of four fingers to make dots all along the banks of the river. "These the possums, all along here, going for a drink." Then he draws half circles facing the river. "These the people, sitting by the river, looking." Then John stands and scuffs out the painting with his boot.

"Why do you always erase?"

"Don't want people looking," he says. "Come along behind, see what I draw."

We come to a large riverbed lined by the largest red river gum trees I've seen yet, root-bases 10ft wide. "Crow Dreaming up here. Water-hole, important story, crow come and take a drink. Let me ask Old Ken and then I'll tell you."

When we arrive at the rock hole, Ken and Frankie are waiting. A fire is going. It's almost noon. "We have a feed," John says, "then take a rest."

I'd like to hear the Crow Dreaming story, of course, but I eat lunch and wait, and we sit for a long time. When it seems we're leaving, though, I ask, "Is it OK to tell the story here, for the rock hole? Is it a public story?"

John talks with Ken in Arrernte while Frankie looks on. "I don't think there's a story," Ken finally says. "Just a name. Angerle. Crow." So Ken has said no. As kwertengwerle, he's decided John can't share this story.

We drive to the other end of the valley, to another boundary of John's land. "A sacred place," Ken says. "I'll show you. A women's place." We walk along a cattle fenceline. "Rain-Maker Dreaming all through here," John says, and he shows it with a sweep of his arm. I can't help thinking of a thousand generations ago, their ancestors following this same dreaming, crossing this same open plain.

We come to a lone tree. "Red river gum usually in creeks," John says. "Unnatural here. Far away from any creek."

Ken begins to sing. A low, beautiful song, similar to Native American songs, three beats higher and four lower, almost a call and response, but one singer. He sings and watches me, points to a round water hole, dry now, reddish plants in the yellow spinifex. "Old man here, this tree," he says. "Women come across from there, want to take him away, want to get married. But old man want to stay here. Women all around this water hole. He struck by lightning." Ken points at how the two trunks divide, an old lightning strike. "But old man, he never leave." Then Ken sings the song again, and encourages me to try.

I stumble over the words. "Just try to get the tune," John says, and I try my best to sing with the men. The open landscape, the incomprehensible sweep of time, these men who have something none of the rest of us have, a continuous tie to songs, to stories, to art, to law, to a country and a path all going back at least 40,000 years. No other humans can claim this. It's difficult to believe that anything can pass down unchanged, though, for a thousand generations. Is that really possible? I also have trouble disengaging my modern critical mind. They've shared this song because it's "women's business" and therefore not as sacred. All the stories have been warnings to women. Don't lose your baby, don't keep anything from your husband. I think I'm wanting too much.

We drive on next to a hill of dark, exposed rock called "black hair", where dreamtime ancestors passed through, coming all the way from the Port Augusta area, on the way to where Darwin is now - thousands of miles, naming everything along the way, every hill and rock, every bush, every tree, every rock hole and watercourse, remembered still.

And there is a story, but it's a story I can't hear. Part of me wishes they would tell it, because I'm afraid otherwise it may be lost, and what if it is an ancient story? With roads, cars, alcohol, genocide, the destruction of a land and a group of peoples, I'm afraid it will all go away. I doubt anyone walks a full songline or dreaming track any more. I doubt they travel a thousand miles or even walk the full extent of their section of a dreaming, to their boundaries. John's told me he doesn't, and that no one he knows does. As Herman Malbunka, another Aboriginal elder, has told me, "It's tough to walk that songline now." I don't believe the songs can remain intact if they're not walked. The story is in the landscape.

"We should do a longer trip," John says. "All the way from Port Augusta. This just the middle of the dreaming. We should start at the beginning." We'd have to get permission from all the families for 2,000 miles, and John says there are gaps, some places where the families haven't passed down the stories. He knows the trip is probably impossible, but he wants to do it anyway, before it's too late.