Performative liveness in *doing* Yolŋu Aboriginal language

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In this piece, Waymamba Gaykamaŋu, a Gupapuyŋu Aboriginal elder from East Arnhem Land in northern Australia, and her collaborators Yasunori Hayashi and Michaela Spencer seek ways in which dhäruk (generally translated as speech), and English language (which has emerged as a lingua franca in northern Australia following colonisation), can 'go on together' (Verran, 2001). The struggle of this work provides some useful insights around how a taken-for-granted knowledge of language could be re-articulated in mainstream Australia. Situating the concept of marŋgi—Yolŋu ways of 'knowing' their world—at the centre of our story, helps make visible two sets of epistemic tensions emerging from resource production work with Yolŋu Aboriginal language authorities and Western academics.

Enacting ancestral reality with *dhäruk*

When ancestral beings traversed the land and sea of, now known as, East Arnhem Land, a distinct *dhäruk* was invested in the land and given to Yolŋu people—the descendants of the ancestral beings—to look after and preserve the differences among them. Such *dhäruk* has been immemorially inherited through both matrilines and patrilines with which Yolŋu individuals come into our world (Waṉambi, Bulkanhawuy, & Hayashi, 2020). It is enacted in both everyday and ceremonial life as vibrating vocal sounds fold together with bodily movements of tongue, lips, and teeth. Calling out *karrkarrkarrkarr*, at the finale of the cleansing ceremony on the beach, we Gupapuyŋu people, (as distinct from other Yolŋu groups) become diving duck and dry our wings with lifting our arms. Our bodies and bones are very sacred; when passing away, we become the bones of our ancestral lands, which we call *ŋaraka* meaning both backbones and land (see

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Gurruwiwi, 2008). My nephew, Gawura Waṉambi (2021) makes this clear in the context of Australian colonial history; as he describes the Union Jack Flag piercing the land of Australia on Botany Bay, as actually spearing us, the backbones of Australian First Nation's people. Our body—made through the investments of the ancestral beings—(re)presents our ancestral lands; our body is the land, and so is our *dhäruk*. Dancing, crying and mourning with our *dhäruk*, we are passing our ancestral knowledge to emerging generations, we are manifesting the collective ownership and guardianship of our land and seascapes (Djirrimbilpilwuy Garawirrtja in Williams & Fidock, 1981).

Story 1

In November 2020, the Yolŋu Studies Centre (YSC) at Charles Darwin University launched a new resource book titled *Gupapuyŋu goḏu-mayali'mirri dhäruk ga dhäwu mala (Gupapuyŋu words and stories with inner meanings)* (Gaykamaŋu & Hayashi, 2020). Working in collaboration with Yasunori Hayashi, in making this book I collated more than 200 body-part related compound words accompanied by short narratives in my *dhäruk*. Every Friday morning for the last year, we gathered at the YSC and added compound words and examples of sentences along with English translations. We had frequent Yolŋu visitors who joined us for cups of tea, and in learning about the project, they often left us with new word entries. In the early stages of the project, as I worked with Yasunori, we talked a lot about the meaning-making that happens with Yolŋu body-part compound words. He was initially confused with how familiar and direct, idiomatic translations such as *bäka-bakmarama* (calf – break, break shin-bone) and *goŋ-waṯaŋu* (hand – owner, possessor) do not convey appropriate meaning: the former means 'to respond' and the latter 'a person who has authority in funeral'. However, not every word attaching to a body part, for instance '*bitjun'* with *märr (emotional state)* and '*yikiny'* with *yaŋara (lower leg)* has its independent meaning, such needs to be compounded with a body part to make its meaning. Then he started to become intrigued with learning different ways of using body parts in language as we started exploring *doing* Yolŋu meaning-making together. This was sometimes a challenge. One morning, he was persistent with the meaning of the English translation of a word defined in a dictionary; despite me assuredly confirming that the word did not carry its

independent meaning after repeatedly pronouncing the word with my tongue, lips, soft palate and listening the sound with my ears. Then I told Yasunori 'no, this needs to be pronounced together with *buku* (head), so it makes sense.' *Dhäruk* as a manifestation of the people-place is significantly different from what 'language' means in English as a disembodied sociotechnology.

Story 2

One Friday morning, a group of us sat around the large meeting table in the YSC. There was I, and two other Yolŋu elders, as well as two non-Indigenous academics. One of these other academics was Yasunori, who was working very hard. His job was listening to ancestral narratives and the sound of pre-recorded ancestral songlines sung by the other elders, then typing transcriptions and translations. Through his keyboard strokes *dhäruk* transcription and *English* translation of those narrations and songlines were instantly projected on a large LCD screen for the other academic to incorporate them into a virtual reality program. Following the ancestral footprints of the songlines, his keyboard strokes went on with careful consultation about what (not) to be transcribed and translated until the other academic enquired, 'How can this English translation be much shorter than its original transcription? Can you please translate each word displayed on the screen?' In response, one of the elders said to him, "You're asking us to tell the meaning of that word. Can you pronounce it? Say the word, just say it, then the meaning will come out. It needs to be pronounced. That's how it is." The discussion was tense for a little while, as the other scholar struggled and finally said "No, I can't say it, my tongue cannot roll properly". This conversation ended with the elders agreeing to extend the length of the English translation even while significant epistemic troubles were looming in the room. Such is a different metaphysics of language: how to do meaning-making with *dhäruk* and how to stabilise the meaning with *English*.

***Marŋgi* – how Yolŋu know our world**

These two stories highlight the moments where only the feeling of words on your tongue and how they sound in your ears can help with understanding and meaning-making with Yolŋu *dhäruk*. We've kept sensations and silences present as we re-tell these experiences as a way to upset taken-for-granted

understandings of language in mainstream Australia. Despite the tireless efforts by Aboriginal elders in showing faithful (re)production of everyday and ceremonial practices invested by ancestral beings, for more than two hundred years Western knowledge practice often focuses on *what* Aboriginal people know or knew, rather than on *how* we know. Here, I would like to offer a concept of '*marŋgi'*; an embodied state-of-being equipped with certain ongoing liveliness and performativity with which ancestral reality emerges in the present. It's not only in the ancestry bloodlines, *dhäruk* are to be found in hunting areas, funeral grounds, freshwater streams and seasonal winds. Collecting and cooking giant cockels with your kin in mangroves, and mourning at a funeral for your deceased kin in the dry season when the red flowers of kurrajong trees bloom; these significant participants in Yolŋu life enact the ancestral reality with *dhäruk*. Sensing the *dhäruk* being charcoaled, grieved and blossomed, it creeps up to our head and equips ourselves with skills required to enact the *dhäruk*. Wherever in East Arnhem Land you reach, both human and other-than-human are actively showing the reality right in front of you; therefore, Yolŋu are educating ourselves to be a part of land and seascapes in which our cultural institutions were ancestrally invested, so we are becoming as a whole (Burarrwanga et al., 2019).

Taking such *marŋgi* empiricism seriously, *dhäruk,* or languaging as a verb is distinct from the notion of language as a stabilised object captured in databases, books and lexicons. Mattering the sensations in the here-and-now, I needed to be very patient with Yasunori. I had to be insistent that the stable definition of our *dhäruk* as object, often lacks ongoing liveness and performativity. This was the same for the Elders who were patient with the scholar desperate to know what they knew rather than how they knew. Having said that though, bringing my ancestral knowledge from my homeland to the university is not impossible. It is, however, often a struggle as dominant practices in the Western academy are very solidified and hard to loosen up. Foregrounding *marŋgi* as an empirical concept, allows languaging as a verb to find a place to live where two different epistemics—*dhäruk* and *'language'*— can engage and traverse back and forth. Such a traverse will not promise a stablised relation, rather it will always be temporal and situational, the nature of collaborative work with *dhäruk* and English speakers only emerges in practice right in front of us, not somewhere

else. This is in no sense a limitation. Rather it is full of opportunity; disrupting established modes of theorising and freeing us from the 'stabilised relation' which English speakers assume to inhere in the nature of language itself (including Yolŋu *dhäruk*), and opens new theoretical and empirical possibilities within collective northern Australia life.

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