

# **Regenerative Learning: Hearing Country and Music for Healing People, Place and Planet**

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## **Abstract**

In this chapter, Aboriginal knowledge and lived experiences form the heart of a transformative paradigm for healing people, place, ecosystems, and climate. Using cultural insights, we outline key concepts that form the basis of a healing framework for people that is capable of regenerating cultures, spirit, and Country. We show that reclaiming cultural knowledge is possible because the human spirit – one’s vibrancy or liveliness – has cared for this element of ourselves. The key is to listen deeply and attentively to the human spirit and the music of our places – held in the nature of all beings. As Aboriginal people, we are seasonal people, who respond to the living nature of our places as it communicates in reciprocal ways with us. For people who bear the sickness of cultural loss, the potential for reclaiming remains with us. This perspective marks a radical change in the way mainstream education understands the human capacity to relate to each other and to nature. It is a necessary change for climate action, and one that everyone is encouraged to take up.

## **Introduction**

Informed by Kimberley Aboriginal knowledge and lived experiences, in this chapter I – Kankawa – offer some thoughts on healing. With family, through kinship relationship with aunty Anne Poelina and friend, Sandra Wooltorton, we share lived experiences, and we reflect, learn, and write together. As academics we build upon insights arising from my musical healing and traditional Aboriginal knowledge, deep interdependence concepts developed through Poelina’s works (O’Donnell, Poelina, Pelizzon, & Clark, 2020; Poelina, Wooltorton, et al., 2020; Redvers et al., 2020), and regenerative learning ideas recently sketched out (Wooltorton, Guenther, Poelina, et al., 2022). We bring these ideas together to enrich description of a regenerative worldview (Wahl, 2016) to address three major interconnected issues - climate change, ecosystem degradation and colonisation of Aboriginal socio-cultures and lands. In our particular context, the notion of regeneration can heal individuals, communities and Country<sup>1</sup>. This regenerative worldview is relational, aiming for transformation from survival to relationship (Graham, 2008), allowing for recognition of Kimberley Aboriginal nationhood and worldview. The purpose of this chapter is to sketch the worldview, rather than to show how cultural music therapy works. That will be a future paper.

Concepts implicit in this regenerative worldview are instrumental in responding to climate change because healing allows for re-awakening a relational world to which humans are

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<sup>1</sup> When we use the capitalized term: Country we refer to a broader, Kimberley Aboriginal use of the English concept of country. Our Kimberley Aboriginal use refers to a relational, animate socio-ecosystem.

intrinsic (but not central). The worldview reveals understandings that are inclusive of more than human worlds<sup>2</sup> and underpinned by other than Western experiential worlds (Abram, 1996; Mueller, 2017). From such a viewpoint, we can see with clear eyes the creeping, destructive sickness that is climate change. We need to restore our relationships with each other and all other species, in order to heal and regenerate the living, vibrant spirit<sup>3</sup> of our people, our places, and therefore our planet. In this way, we might come to understand that climate change is also metaphor, in that losing one's spirit is damaging the planet. From this perspective, regeneration means to refresh knowledge systems and earth-based cultures that the people of those places no longer practice and celebrate.

Within this healing framework, this chapter collectively foregrounds Kankawa's insights on healing through music and Country. Kankawa is a world-famous gospel blues musician and is a Walmajarri-Bunuba Elder and traditional owner. Over her lifetime she has accumulated substantial Aboriginal knowledge of culture and place-relationship; experienced the tragedies of colonisation; and juxtaposed these to the love and healing potential of music. This chapter highlights Kankawa's insights in an academic context, to reveal the depth of her cultural music therapy insights, particularly in relation to climate change. These insights highlight the beauty, culture, and significance of Kimberley Aboriginal Country, foreground the context of invasive extractive colonisation, and bring forward Aboriginal-led regenerative potential for learning and change through music and hearing Country through Aboriginal voice.

## About the Authors

### *Kankawa*

My given name is Kankawa, and my skin name is Nagarra. I am affiliated with the Bunuba, Gooniyandi and the Walmajarri tribal people. My kinship relationships that include Aunty Anne Poelina, means that my stability comes from these affiliations. I get my strength from my languages and culture, through kinship systems that construct my connection to Country. The combination of these elements gives me strength, so that I stand on solid ground, where I am immovable. I am a strong Aboriginal woman, grounded in my journey, drawing on the combination of my strengths.

My interest and motivation in this topic, *healing through music*, has emerged from my personal healing from spiritual transformation experience. This experience has the support of others who have engaged music to facilitate individual spiritual transformation. For instance, I have sat with someone who has this quality in their own music and witnessed the impact of their music on others particularly regarding the way they feel transported by it to the memory of the past, and to the real self within them.

As an eminent international blues artist, Aboriginal community leader, and Australian language and culture expert, I use music to lift people's spirit and help them to connect with the universal spirit of Country.

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<sup>2</sup> 'More than human' includes humans, 'other than human' excludes humans.

<sup>3</sup> By spirit, we mean a being's vibrancy, liveliness, or animate energy. We do not advocate a particular religious meaning, although this may seem to overlap with our intent.

*Anne Poelina and Sandra Wooltorton*

Anne is a Nyikina Warrwa woman of the Martuwarra Fitzoy River, in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. She is a strong cultural woman who is Chairperson of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, and Professor of Indigenous Studies at Nulungu Research Institute, Broome. Sandra is a multi-generational Australian woman of mainly Anglo-Celtic heritage who has spent much of her life in the Kimberley, although she was born and raised on Noongar Country in southwest Western Australia. She is a professor with Nulungu Research Institute, Broome.

In this paper, we often switch from the use of me/my or I, Kankawa's voice, to the use of 'we' to indicate a collaborative and/or more theoretical voice. Kankawa's knowledge and perspective is the core of this paper. Where this is unclear, we simply write Kankawa at the start of the paragraph or section. We wish to stress that we are of the one heart when Kankawa speaks for us as co-writers. With Kankawa's leadership, this paper was written together.

## **Literature Review and Methodology**

My insights and lived experiences ground my truth. Living in an Aboriginal cultural environment, Country shapes my values, and these concepts are now well documented.

For example, Country is alive (Milgin, Nardea, Grey, Laborde, & Jackson, 2020; Redvers et al., 2020), Rivers hold living waters<sup>4</sup> (RiverOfLife, Taylor, & Poelina, 2021; Wooltorton, Collard, & Horwitz, 2019) and Country is communicative and responsive (Poelina, Wooltorton, et al., 2020). It is important to acknowledge the transformative paradigm that holds these concepts together. First, what is a paradigm?

A paradigm provides a tool to identify one's own worldview or, in research terminology, identify one's paradigm: a metaphysical construct associated with specific philosophical assumptions that describes one's worldview (Mertens, 2007, p. 215).

That is, a paradigm is a collection of assumptions that define or produce who we are and how we recognise our identity, relationship and responsibility to everyone and everything around us. A transformative paradigm is process-based, beginning with critiques of power and privilege to highlight issues of injustice. We foreground issues of continuing colonisation, particularly extractive colonisation, in highlighting a Kimberley Aboriginal effort to speak up for Country and culture. We use this to bring forward healing concepts that combine traditional knowledge and musical experience, accessible across the Kimberley and in fact, the world. These healing concepts are suitable for everyone. In the first instance, we refer to Aboriginal people traumatised by generations of colonial oppression, violence and forms of abuse. In the second instance, we consider the impact of these healing concepts on lifeways elsewhere, particularly for climate justice.

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<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, we acknowledge the living ancestral qualities of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River, which flows freely across eight Aboriginal nations in the Kimberley. As we go to press there is much political ado due to non-Aboriginal proposals for extractive development, which lack Aboriginal free, prior and informed consent. For example, see Poelina (2021).

Our task begins with recognising complexity, particularly the complex ‘big picture’ task of transforming understandings about human/multispecies relationship with Country and River, and their healing qualities (Poelina, 2021). This is consistent with the Nagoya Protocol article 8J, to “respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of Indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles” (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2011). It is these qualities that colonisation systematically attacks, always due to narrowly defined economic development ideas of Country and water (Strakosch, 2015). Colonisation has always ignored, and continues to overlook, the wealth, beauty and integrity of Aboriginal wisdom held in Country, and the deep relationships of care and love of, for and by Country celebrated by Aboriginal people since time immemorial. This cultural knowledge is now more important than ever, illustrated by the need for a healing framework for Aboriginal people, climate change and species loss (Milgin et al., 2020; O'Donnell et al., 2020).

Our research methodology uses a dialogical approach of response-ability, or the ability to respond to Country (Bawaka Country et al., 2019). Country is alive. We acknowledge the living, responsive nature of Country and the depth of the relationship Aboriginal people have with Country (for example, Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Graham, 2008). It means we listen with great depth and respect to each other. The production of this paper has been through a deep dialogue, to explore Kimberley insights for healing and regeneration.

## **Kimberley Lived Experiences**

Kimberley Aboriginal cultural concepts inform our understanding of a regenerative worldview. Traditional knowledge and its worldview hold keys to Kimberley Aboriginal stability and futures. Preventing any basic means of stability means disaster. This includes practices that disconnect people from each other and their cultural base – such as continuing colonisation including extractive colonisation. Through the past 150 years of colonisation in the Kimberley we witness the cost of high rates of people dying and the genocide of nations (Georgatos, 2013). This tragedy is of international significance as the knowledge is healing knowledge that the world needs right now. Colonisation is attacking knowledge for regeneration that our world needs.

### *Kankawa*

Aboriginal languages, metaphors and places encapsulate traditional knowledge. These encode concepts that are often difficult to translate. For instance, a Walmatjarri word is *rinyi*, which does not translate into English, so we will call it ‘mystery language’. Everyone needs to understand *rinyi*, meaning survival. It means we pay very close attention to the sounds around us. For example, we listen for the cricket who will warn us with a long shrill. We learn very early to be observational to see and ‘listen’ to what is around you. Listen deeply, always listen to the *rinyi* and engage deeply with your leaders and relationships around you. (Otherwise, you might ‘die’, so to speak!) Climate change is like *rinyi*. It is a mystery language speaking to your body, your spirit, your heart, the whole of you. *Rinyi* can mean

‘save me’. It means, ‘I am crying out – I am dying. Save me’. It means there are connections that we need to restore physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Country is alive, communicative and responsive. It has a *pirlirr*, a spirit. This means that relationally, we connect to our Country. For example, when I walk my Country or sit under a shady paperbark tree on the creek, I hear all sorts of stories from the paperbark tree. I am a poet, and I will compose a poem to the paperbark tree. For example, I hear a particular rustling of the leaves. It is telling me a message, to be calm and settle down, and take healing from what I see and hear around me. *Pirlirr* is spirit people have, and Country has too. Spirit has many meanings. For instance, there are people who do not like travelling to Perth when sick because they leave their *pirlirr* – their body, mind, and all of their being, behind. *Pirlirr* can be lost to Country, for example when mining and removal or relocating of its natural inhabitants. If a traditional owner gives permission for this, his or her *pirlirr* can leave too, and the person can die because it is just an empty shell as the *pirlirr* has gone.

This relationship with Country – *pirlirr* – means you will – and must – treat Country with respect because of its communicative nature. If our environment is telling us something by its changes, it means Country is communicating with us to STOP doing what is destructive. Examples of these changes are seasonality influenced. For example, as we write this paper, the Kimberley bauhinia tree and several wattle trees are flowering months ahead of the pattern they have followed for millennia. This will have a serious impact on those species that are dependent upon this annual flowering event. The web of species dependent on those trees include native bees and butterflies. The risk is they may arrive at the normal time and miss their food supply. To me, Country is saying ‘do not do that anymore’. Country says, ‘I will look after you and you must look after me’.

### **Kimberley Issues**

There are overlapping issues in the Kimberley that endanger cultural knowledge and its significance for Aboriginal lives and landscapes. These issues seriously impact Aboriginal young people, as is evidenced by the high suicide rate (Fogliani, 2019; Hope, 2008). For example, extractive colonisation continues without social licence (Poelina, Brueckner, & McDuffie, 2020) and there are threats to mine, frack and over-extract water in the Martuwarra Fitzroy River (Poelina, Taylor, & Perdrisat, 2019). As another example of an overlapping issue, Elders are not able to pass on cultural knowledge to younger generations to the extent required for the transmission of traditional knowledge. This is due to violent colonial histories (Georgatos, 2013), historical pressures such as culture bans (Jebb, 2002) and still today, school attendance which is exclusive of culture transfer, work requirements and financial restrictions (Guenther, 2013). Knowledge systems have suffered greatly, along with Country. These issues mean that Aboriginal knowledge holders cannot take sufficient cultural action such as singing or dancing to heal Country and people. This is necessary to heal climate change symptoms. These issues connect to other impacts such as youth suicide, poor health and education, employment on the wellbeing Aboriginal people experience. They are circular, in the sense that if this knowledge of respect and care of people, culture and Country were widespread, ongoing colonisation would cease and cultural governance

systems would be respected, relearned and applied (Poelina et al., 2019; RiverOfLife et al., 2021).

### **Healing: Kimberley Insights. Kankawa**

Although endangered, it is important to recognise that our knowledge systems are not *lost* because the human and Country spirit – *pirlirr* – has cared for this element of ourselves. Healing is not only about the people in our Aboriginal nations. It is about everyone reaching out to all others who are located in the place. It is about society and systems such as schools, choosing to introduce ethics of care that value rivers, valleys, beaches, traditional cultures and people, particularly those damaged by losing knowledge systems and values (Dodson, 2019; Liddle & Dodson, 2018; Wilson, 1997).

Healing is about restoring the roots of humanity, to resume relationships with places, trees and animals. This way, people can stop being destructive. The ambient sickness needs healing. This sickness can manifest in alcohol, drugs, or other negative outcomes that diminishes the spirit of our youth in our remote communities. The sickness spreads to the point where it takes a lot of hard work to bring back this connection of mind, body and spirit. We are talking about spiritual wellbeing, giving regard to the sickness from the loss of one's *pirlirr*, and the sense of one's connection to the *pirlirr* of Country.

The healing framework can be frightening for people who have lost their spirit. We must look for these people, and we must find them because they are our future. We must recognise and honour them, because their spirit is still here. Many of these individuals have not lost the importance of social and cultural knowledge. People need healing. We are both social and relational. We feel whole wellness when we have a constructive relationship with ourselves and with Country. If we do not love ourselves, then we cannot relate to our fellow species and beings in a genuine positive reciprocal relationship. Music offers this healing.

Country is interactive and responsive with other people and cultures, so that stories, song and dance from one language group links relationally with another. In the Kimberley, neighbours can protect nation's stories for generations. They can – and do – hold stories for nations whose people do not recognise their cultural identity due to colonial or developmental pressures of different kinds.

Everything is relationship – everything connects. We have cultural relations who are trees, animals and fish. For example, the bloodwood tree is my grandfather as it has a skin group, Tjampiyirnti. The barramundi is my mother or uncle, depending up on the barramundi gender. Just as Country has response-ability, in that it can respond to an individual, the individual has response-ability so they can be ready to receive what Country has to offer. That is, deep within us all is a spirit by which we can receive and share knowledge. Our cultural deep listening fully ingrains this spirit. For example, when I hear nature, I hear music in nature. I constantly hear the music of nature. I never drown it out with the noise of a car or a plane. I intentionally keep the music of nature in the foreground of my attention.

Everybody has response-ability to Country and other human and non-human residents. This is about kinship and family, regarding our connection to others within a community. And yet

in the Kimberley for the last decade or so, government has been trying to close remote communities (Kagi, 2014). I presume government wants to clear Aboriginal people off their land – as they have been doing since colonisation began – so that government can enable big developers to destroy our Country by fracking, water extraction for growing cotton and multiple forms of mining (Poelina, Brueckner, et al., 2020; RiverOfLife Martuwarra, McDuffie, & Poelina, 2020). This has exacerbated issues such as difficulties in cultural transfer and suicide of Aboriginal young people mentioned above, and we need it to stop.

### **Aboriginal Concepts for Music Therapy. Kankawa**

Combined, Aboriginal concepts such as living Country with *pirlirr* and deep practical interdependence such as *rinyi* enable a re-awakening of a relational world, forming a basis by which to learn and live. When we live on land, connected to seasons, language and Country, we hear music when we hear the sounds of nature. Our relationships, our connectedness formed through thousands of years of memory, and life forms that are already here all around us, will reveal the music of the land, the music of the birds, the music in the stillness of a remote billabong, the music in the leaves. I make music out of that. Anything that is of natural origin connects us immediately as it is something we relate to, for example wood makes a psychological connection, such as my wooden guitar.

This is why going back to Country regularly is so important. It is to take young people and whole families out to where everyone relationally connects – not only to each other but also to place. This is because modern technology such as metals, computers and phones have created a vacuum, where the meaningful connection no longer remains. For this reason, we need to remove the phone, leave Facebook behind, and live with Country and people for a week or more at a time. However, because of the nature of modern life, modern logistics are now required to get people back on Country. Therefore, we need funds to establish alternative pathways where our young people develop the physical, social and spiritual capacity to reconnect with family and create new ways to relate to Country and maintain culture in these modern times.

### **Relevance to Mainstream Society**

From this regenerative perspective, the challenge for mainstream consumer society, particularly decision-makers, is to realise the madness of consumption-based industry. We are all indigenous to somewhere, and we all have the same capacity to connect with our Aboriginality (Kimmerer, 2013). This is the essence of the call of all generations – to return to who we really are. Through all our ups and downs over the 200 years of colonial Australian history, many of us – of all backgrounds – are damaged in some way. There are different healing journeys many of us need to make, and the underlying concepts in many ways are the same. Open dialogue and deep listening to Country and each other, are the core of this healing journey.

### **Open Dialogue and Deep Listening are the Core of Healing. Kankawa**

Governments have a long history of harsh abuse of my family. For example, in the 1970's settlement was created on Country we can no longer move around freely on. Modern day pressures of schools and work commitments reduce time available to spend on Country. Within this context, we can still create a sense of oneness and unity that is required to build and maintain a strong collective spirit.

Individuals need to put in time and effort to master the art of really listening to people, deeply. As well, it means listening to nature, to the land about them, to observe, and to listen to Kimberley Aboriginal people who are knowledge holders. We can tell stories around the campfire, and some of the birds such as the night owl will tell us whether a step is right or whether there is danger afoot. Take time to hear whatever the owl is telling you. Is it telling you to sit down and feel the sand, and touch whatever is around you, to enable Country and nature to hear and respond? Listen to the cricket or the mudlark; hear the river as the river flows along its path. You will hear music, and all sorts of meanings in song will come to you. The healing impact of these concepts in communities could be as follows if fully applied.

#### *Schooling and Learning: Kankawa, Anne and Sandra*

Schools with a cultural focus and regenerative worldview ground their teaching, learning and organisation by listening more closely to Elders and other cultural knowledge keepers. Children need to learn their cultural heritage according to seasons and times. Schools need to work with children according to traditional knowledge holders. The school needs to operate in a deeply culturally respectful way.

It is good for school decision-making to comprise several Elders and Aboriginal Education Workers familiar with Country, so they can advise and guide principals and teachers. At the beginning of each term, cultural meetings can introduce each term and seasons. Cultural teachers need to map out the whole term, according to the seasonal calendar. Our young people can learn through a holistic curriculum and Indigenous pedagogy that combine cultural values, ethics and knowledge with learning contemporary technical skills. Songs and music come off the land, as do art, painting, poetry and reading in an Aboriginal language context.

Children need to be in tune with who they are and who their relatives and kinsfolk are including non-human species. They need to know how their ancestors have taken care of the land for tens of thousands of years and now it is their turn to be good cultural land and river keepers themselves. Aboriginal language speaking is vital for children and their parents. We must speak our Aboriginal languages proudly to our children at every opportunity. In schools, qualified Aboriginal language teachers are the right people to model and teach first languages. Languages encode concepts and frame knowledge, which is essential learning for our future generations. We teach kinship in the Aboriginal language context, and all schooling needs to be bilingual, so children learn to be strong, fluent, and competent in each world. Language teaching in the cultural context, includes learning through music, plays and the lyrics of song.

## **Paradigm Transformation – Realities and Opportunities**

There are issues connected with paradigm transformation, from our point of view. One embedded complexity is that Western education systems imprison teachers and principals within systemic biases and stereotypes about power, privilege, and rights. These same systems advise teaching staff that Aboriginal children need teaching and testing in English, as if this all that matters. Of course, English is important, but there is much more to children's lives than top-down systems, which demand compliance from children, teachers, principals, and parents alike. In these Western systems, there is little room for knowledge expansion and deep learning. (Guenther & Osborne, 2020; Lowe et al., 2019; Wooltorton, Guenther, Wilks, & Dwyer, 2022)

*Kankawa and Anne.* Another complexity is that moving us from our Country has taken our people away from our basic relationships. Some community members now do not understand the significance of maintaining cultural relationships, and the value of cultural healing systems in solving problems for humanity and communities alike. (RiverOfLife Martuwarra et al., 2020) Climate change and ecosystem damage, social harm and low morale has diminished the wellbeing of many Aboriginal people. We need to recognise that basic healing principles can reconnect us all to Country, kin, and each other.

*Sandra, Anne and Kankawa.* Finally, many or most Australians, particularly those of other-than-Aboriginal heritage, have also been removed from our basic relationships with kin and Country. We all need to connect with Country through Aboriginal leadership and wisdom, for the sake of our children, families, communities, and planet. (Wooltorton, Guenther, Poelina, et al., 2022)

## Conclusion

A transformative paradigm aims to create movement for change – from survival (which is a struggle) to relationship (that is, knowing who you are through your deep hearing out of your *pirrlirr*.) That is, you are related to your own environment through knowing the deeper bond and kinship you have with it. Everything in the Kimberley is interconnected through relationship, and this includes people's relationship with animal, fish and plant species, and climate. The transformative paradigm we speak of in this chapter considers Aboriginal cultural knowledge to be the heart of a regenerative worldview. This worldview considers all these factors to be integral. We cannot heal one without healing all together, simultaneously.

All our systems such as care of old people, medical systems, and other care systems, need regeneration through a healing framework of strong cultural guidelines and programs. This is to allow Aboriginal community members to have the time, space, and guidance to reframe themselves, regarding their sense of wellbeing and knowledge of who they are and their cultural roles and obligations. We need to create opportunities to heal our families through feeling the energy of the land. Building young people's relationship with Country develops a natural sense of obligation to care through learning reciprocal response-ability: that we can respond to land, and it will respond to us. In our modern world, many people wrongly think that the world owes them a living, however strong cultural people understand that it is a joy, a responsibility, and an obligation to care for Country and kin.

This chapter has considered healing solutions Aboriginal people use, to reduce the pain and distress from escalating invasive threats from mining, fracking and water stealing industries. Aboriginal people are trying to keep cultures strong in a pervasive colonial context. Strengthening and in most cases returning to traditional knowledge systems, reinforces relationships with kin and Country. These systems offer hope for everyone, as everybody is Indigenous to somewhere. We can all begin a regenerative journey of learning, recovery, and restoration for deep spiritual healing. It is important to realise that healing people through deep dialogue with people and place is also healing Country and climate. Our investment in cultural and spiritual healing is to learn to decolonise ourselves, along with our people and our places. This is a healing framework, at the heart of a regenerative worldview. It is transformative in nature, through reconnecting all elements of the system with Country and each other.

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