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Thinking Can  
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'An extraordinary  
invitation into the world  
of the Dreaming.'  
Melissa Lucashenko



## The Porcupine, the Paleo-mind and the Grand Design

Sometimes I wonder if echidnas ever suffer from the same delusion that many humans have, that their species is the intelligent centre of the universe. They are smart enough: their prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain used for complex reasoning and decision making, is the biggest in relation to body size of any mammal. Fifty per cent of the echidna brain is used for some of the hardest kinds of thinking. In humans, it is not even thirty per cent.

In acknowledging this, I am paying my respects to the sentient totemic entities all over Australia where these echidnas follow the songlines of their creation: maps of

story carrying knowledge along the lines of energy that manifest as Law in the mind and land as one, webbed throughout the traditional lands of the First Peoples.

You might join me in paying respects to the people and other beings everywhere who keep the Law of the Land:

The Elders and traditional custodians of all the places where this book is written and read.

The Ancestors, the old people from every People now living on this continent and its islands.

Our non-human kin, including the various spiky species around the world, the porcupines and hedgehogs who snuffle in the earth for ants and then do God knows what when we're not looking.

I don't know why Stephen Hawking and others have worried about super-intelligent beings from other planets coming here and using their advanced knowledge to do to the world what industrial civilisation has already done. Beings of higher intelligence are already here, always have been. They just haven't used their intelligence to destroy anything yet. Maybe they will, if they tire of the incompetence of domesticated humans.

All humans evolved within complex, land-based cultures over deep time to develop a brain with the capacity for over 100 trillion neural connections, of which we now only use a tiny fraction. Most of us have been displaced from those cultures of origin, a global diaspora of refugees severed not only from land, but from the sheer genius

that comes from belonging in symbiotic relation to it. In Aboriginal Australia, our Elders tell us stories, ancient narratives to show us that *if you don't move with the land, the land will move you*. There is nothing permanent about settlements and the civilisations that spawn them. Maybe the reason all the powerful instruments pointed at the sky have not yet been able to detect high-tech alien civilisations is that these unsustainable societies don't last long enough to leave a cosmic trace. An unsettling thought.

Perhaps we need to revisit the brilliant thought paths of our Palaeolithic Ancestors and recover enough cognitive function to correct the impossible messes civilisation has created, before the echidnas decide to sack us all and take over as the custodial species of this planet.

The stories that define our thinking today describe an eternal battle between good and evil springing from an originating act of sin. But these terms are just metaphors for something more difficult to explain, a relatively recent demand that simplicity and order be imposed upon the complexity of creation, a demand sprouting from an ancient seed of narcissism that has flourished due to a new imbalance in human societies.

There is a pattern to the universe and everything in it, and there are knowledge systems and traditions that follow this pattern to maintain balance, to keep the temptations of narcissism in check. But recent traditions have emerged that break down creation systems like a virus,

infecting complex patterns with artificial simplicity, exercising a civilising control over what some see as chaos. The Sumerians started it. The Romans perfected it. The Anglosphere inherited it. The world is now mired in it.

The war between good and evil is in reality an imposition of stupidity and simplicity over wisdom and complexity.



A collection of pages filled with marks representing speech sounds is a complicated way of communicating, particularly when you want to convey a practical sense of the pattern of creation that might shed light on current crises the world is facing. Complicated, not complex. They are two very different things. Viewing the world through a lens of simplicity always seems to make things more complicated, but simultaneously less complex.

For an Indigenous Australian coming from an intensely interdependent and interpersonal oral culture, writing speech-sound symbols for strangers to read makes things even more complicated. That is exacerbated when the audience is preoccupied with notions of authenticity and the writer's standing as a member of a cultural minority that has lost the right to define itself. The ability to write fluently in the language of the occupying power seems to contradict an Indigenous author's membership of a community that is not supposed to be able to write about itself at all. So at this point I will need to explain who I am

and how I came to be writing this.

In my own world I know myself as my community knows me: a boy who belongs to the Apalech clan from Western Cape York, a Wik Mungkan speaker with ties to many language groups on this continent, including adoptive ties. Some adoptive ties are informal, such as those I have in New South Wales and Western Australia, but my customary adoption two decades ago into Apalech is under Aboriginal Law, which is strict and inalienable. This Law prevents me from identifying with Nungar/Koori/Scottish affiliations by descent and demands that I take on exclusively the names and roles and genealogies required of Apalech clan membership. I honour this no matter what, even though I know most people don't understand it and it makes me look silly: while people in the south tell me I look Indian or Aboriginal or Arab or Latino, when I stand beside my very dark-skinned adoptive father I look like Nicole Kidman.

My life story is not redemptive or inspiring in any way and I don't like sharing it. It shames and traumatises me, and I need to protect myself as well as others who have been thrown about in the cyclones of this messy colonial history. But people insist on knowing about it before reading my work, for some reason, so here is the condensed version.

I was born in Melbourne but relocated north as an infant, then grew up in a dozen different remote or rural communities all over Queensland, from Benaraby to

Mount Isa. After a challenging and often horrific period of schooling, I was eventually unleashed on the world as an angry young male, in a flurry of flying fists and cultural dysphoria. Combine the worst parts of the films *Once Were Warriors*, *Conan the Barbarian* and *Goodfellas* and you'll get a fair idea of what went on. As a child I was not a happy camper, but taking control of my life as a legal adult did not improve my disposition, and for that I blame nobody but myself.

Finding and reconnecting with my 'tribe' down south did not live up to the fantasy of homecoming I had imagined for so long, and this left me feeling quite devastated and alone. But it wasn't all bad. I was lucky enough to pick up a lot of fragmentary land-based and cultural knowledge on my life's journey up to that point. In the 1990s I worked as a teacher, running Aboriginal student support programs in schools where I taught drama and languages, making my didgeridoos and spears and clapsticks and dancing corroboree and hunting kangaroos and performing the exotica of my culture that I'd learnt over the years. But it was all disconnected and hollow, just fragments and window-dressing. I cringe when I think about it.

Although in the middle of all this mess I somehow managed to study, get married and have two beautiful children, my life had been so defined by patterns of violence and substance abuse that I was not even a real person—just a bundle of extreme reactions and rage. In

my late twenties I found myself in the far north, a rogue without family or purpose. I had lived too long with the label ‘part-Aboriginal’ or ‘touch of the tar’ and was ridiculed for it in the institutions where I worked or studied. I wasn’t coping well with the endless cycles of interrogation about my identity. ‘You’re not white, what nationality are you? Aboriginal? Nah, you look white. What per cent Aboriginal are you? Well, we’ve all got a bit in us. Most white Australians could get an Aboriginality certificate if they did a blood test and a family tree.’

Up north, the racist abuse I encountered pushed me over the edge. I went off the rails completely and it was nearly the end of me. One terrible night Dad Kenlock and Mum Hersie found me in a moment of self-inflicted peril and saved my life. They had lost their youngest son the year before—he was my age when he met with the same peril—and they decided to raise me as their own. I’ve belonged to them ever since.

So this family became the centre of my life and I orbited around it, living longer on Cape York than in any other place I’d lived before, and taking family members with me to stay down south when I went away to work in different temporary jobs. This gave them access to quality education and services that were not available in our home community. There was no substantial work available there either, so Dad Kenlock told me to go out and use my knowledge to ‘fight for Aboriginal rights and culture’.

I travelled out periodically from my home base to work with Indigenous groups and communities all over Australia, while my own poor kids and their mother, and my extended family, endured my long absences. I gained more knowledge but it was at a price. I needed to work and study hard so I could support my children and extended family dependents, but I also needed to live and grow in my culture. Those are big things. Nobody can do both without damaging their most important relationships. The attempt eventually cost me my marriage. I missed a lot of funerals and birthdays and became a cautionary tale in my community: 'Too much work and education, no good, you finish up like brother Ty.'

But what I gained was important. I lived out bush for much of this period and formed close bonds with a lot of Elders and knowledge-keepers across Australia, who taught me more about the old Law, the Law of the land. I worked with Aboriginal languages, schools, ecosystems, research projects, wood carvings, philanthropic groups and songlines.

In my travels I saw that it was our ways, not our things, that grounded us and sustained us. So I began to find words and images to express those Indigenous patterns of thinking, being and doing that are usually invisible and obscured by a focus on exotic items and performances. I started translating those ideas into English print so others could understand them and our own people could assert

them, completing master's and doctoral degrees and publishing papers as I went. I started writing articles from this point of view when I recently moved to Melbourne, spending some time living and working on my born-Country. I was asked to write a book about the articles I wrote in that period, and so here we are. I'm writing this just down the road from the place where I was born, while struggling to adjust to city life and clean up the messes I've made over the last five decades.

Like I said, this is not an inspirational tale of redemption or triumph over adversity. I'm not a success story or role model or expert or anything like that. I am still a reactive and abrasive boy who is terrified of the world, although this is moderated now by a core of calm and intelligence my family has worked hard to develop in me. This is the thing that keeps me breathing, along with a network of relations and cultural affiliations all over the continent that I have obligations to, demanding I move in the world with respect and care. Or try to: I don't always succeed. But there are many people who care for me and defend me no matter what, and when I travel around there is always a bed, a yarn and a feed waiting for me. My woman, my children and my community hold me up and watch my back, as I watch theirs. I know who I am, where I belong and what I call myself, and it is enough.

When I'm away from my community, though, there are people who want to sort me into unfamiliar categories and

I often don't get to decide what to call myself. I frequently have to call myself *Bama* because senior people in the south have insisted on it. Never mind that I know that word just means 'man', and I say it with a *p* rather than a *B*. Or that in my community the only cultural situation where a person would actually call themselves *pama* is if they were looking to start a fight by proclaiming their exceptional manhood. '*Ngay pama!* I'm a man!' Or that, in fact, I'm uninitiated, which means that at the age of forty-seven I still only have the cultural knowledge and status of a fourteen-year-old boy. A swimming pool was built on the initiation ground back home, so those rites of passage don't happen anymore. But when in Rome I try to do as the Romans do, so *Bama* it is, in most introductions requiring me to break my identity into digestible chunks.



Speaking of Rome, it must be acknowledged that there is nothing new about imperial cultures imposing classifications on Indigenous people. The Romans classified the Gauls in three groups this way: the toga-wearing Gauls (basically Romans with moustaches), then the short-haired (semi-civilised) Gauls, then the long-haired (barbarian) Gauls. Although I have spent a lot of my life in Australia as a long-haired Gaul, I have to question my right to claim that now. If I am honest with myself I need to acknowledge that I can't remember the last time I ate turtle outside of a

funeral feast, as a way of living rather than a remembrance of people and times lost. My feet, hands and belly have become soft and I use the term ‘neo-liberalism’ far more often than I use the word *miintin* (turtle). I may think to myself, ‘Oh, it’s the season to dig turtle eggs and yams now and the wild pigs feasting on those things will have really good fat. I should go for sugarbag (wild honey) now too.’ But I’m standing on a train commuting to work in Melbourne because I don’t have the patience and discipline to languish in a work-for-the-dole program in a remote community, waiting to chase pigs at the weekend. I have to admit I’m something of a short-haired Gaul.

But think about it: which Gaul would a Roman talk to when seeking Indigenous Knowledge solutions to the crises of civilisation? Of course, the Romans did no such thing, which may help explain why their system collapsed after only a thousand years or so, but if they had, which Gauls would have offered the solutions they needed? The long-haired Gauls might have shown them how to manage the grasslands and horse herds in perpetuity, but without knowledge of the demands of empire—the grain dole or land entitlements for veterans—their advice would have been interesting, but inapplicable. The toga-wearing Gauls would be the right people to ask about the true nature of outsourced tax collection in the provinces (although you might have had to torture them a bit first), but they benefited so much from kickbacks and rewards for suppressing

their own culture that they would have contributed little by way of Indigenous Knowledge solutions.

The short-haired Gauls, on the other hand, carried enough fragmentary Indigenous Knowledge and struggled enough within the harsh realities of transitional Romanisation to be able to offer some hybridised insight — some innovative sustainability tips to the doomed empire occupying their lands and hearts and minds.

Of course, simplistic categories that rank occupied Peoples by degree of domestication do not reflect the complex realities of contemporary Indigenous communities, identities and knowledge. They certainly do not work in Australia.

Our complex history as Australian First Peoples does not align with most criteria demanded for authentication and recognition by colonists. The Indigenous ‘self’ that has been designed by outsiders to render programs of self-determination safe does not reflect our reality. Even our organisation into discrete ‘nations’ (to negotiate the structures of Native Title that facilitate mineral extraction) does not reflect the complexity of our identities and knowledges. We all once had multiple languages and affiliations, meeting regularly with different groups for trade, joining in marriage and customary adoption across those groups, including some groups from Asia and New Guinea. I know for many people there are elements of those laws and customs still in place, and I am one of those people.

But I also know that the horrific process of European occupation resulted in the removal of most of us from our communities of origin, many to reserves and institutions far from home as part of forcible assimilation programs. Biological genocide was attempted through large-scale efforts to 'breed out' dark skin, with the infamous Stolen Generations representing only one part of this policy. For many women, marrying or submitting to settler males so that their children might pass for white was the only way to survive this Apocalypse, while waiting for a safer time to return home.

So the recently imposed 'authenticity' requirement of declaring an uninterrupted cultural tradition back to the dawn of time is a difficult concession for most of us to make, when the reality is that we are affiliated with multiple groups and also have disrupted affiliations. For many people, these traumatic relations are unsafe to talk about, while for others there are reclaimed connections that are too precarious to declare.

How might we identify and utilise the various sets of Indigenous Knowledge scattered throughout this kaleidoscope of identities? Not by simplistic categorisation, that's for sure. Through the lens of simplicity, historical contexts of interrelatedness and upheaval are sidelined, and the authenticity of Indigenous Knowledge and identity is determined by an illusion of parochial isolation, another fragment of primitive exotica to examine, tag and display.

There are zealous gatekeepers on both sides, policing, suppressing. Most of the knowledge that gets through this process is reduced to basic content, artefacts, resources and data, divided into foreign categories, to be stored and plundered as needed. Our knowledge is only valued if it is fossilised, while our evolving customs and thought patterns are viewed with distaste and scepticism.

I can't participate in this one-sided dialogue between the occupiers and the occupied. For a start I'm not *manth thaayan*: someone who can speak for cultural knowledge. I'm a younger sibling, so that role is not available to me in our custom. I can speak *from* the knowledge, but not *for* it or about all the details. However, I can talk about the processes and patterns I know from my cultural practice, developed within my affiliations with my home community and other Aboriginal communities across this continent, including Nyongar, Mardi, Nungar and Koori Peoples.

Our knowledge endures because everybody carries a part of it, no matter how fragmentary. If you want to see the pattern of creation you talk to everybody and listen carefully. Authentic knowledge processes are easy to verify if you are familiar with that pattern—each part reflects the design of the whole system. If the pattern is present, the knowledge is true, whether the speaker is wearing a grass skirt or a business suit or a school uniform.

So I turn the lens around.

I'm not reporting on Indigenous Knowledge systems

for a global audience's perspective. I'm examining global systems from an Indigenous Knowledge perspective. The symbols that follow help to express this core concept as a hand gesture:



A reader might understand the physical gesture as a living text by mimicking this image, with the left hand sideways with closed fingers, representing a page or screen, print-based knowledge in general, and the right hand with fingers spread out like a rock art stencil, representing the oral cultures and knowledge of First Peoples. The gesture involves placing the splayed hand in front of the eyes, providing the lens through which to view the closed hand.

This is the basic perspective we will use in this book. To avoid losing it in a void of print, I have built every chapter on oral culture exchanges: a series of yarns with diverse people who all make me feel uncomfortable. I yarn with those people because they extend my thinking more than those who simply know what I know. Some of them I'll name, but many would rather not be captured in print and pinned down to a particular moment of thought,

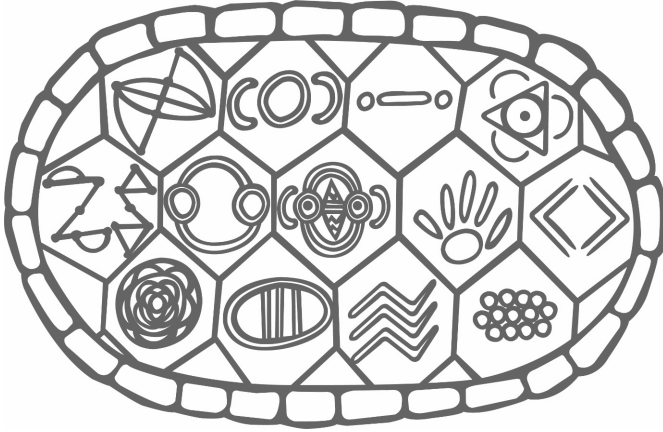
preferring to dwell privately in the generative cultural practice of yarning. Yarns are like conversations but take a traditional form we have always used to create and transmit knowledge.

For each chapter, I carved the logic sequences and ideas arising from these yarns into traditional objects before I translated them into print. I have done this to prevent my oral culture perspective from becoming fragmented and warped as I write.

For example, for this introduction I spent a couple of seasons making bark shields with my brother-in-law Hayden Kelleher and a Worimi artist called Adam Ridgeway. Adam and I yarned through all my concerns about writing this book and how I would need to protect myself. We cut bark from red gum trees in the right season when the sap was running and the wombats were moving about and the lyrebirds were mating. We shaped the bark on the fire and attached handles to make thick shields. Adam used some of these for an art exhibition where he made creation patterns from light reflected off broken mirror shards stuck onto the shields. He also drew on his iPad the hand symbols I just showed you. So the ideas of this written introduction are in the shields. I simply hold those objects and translate into print parts of the knowledge I see there.

This is my method, and I call it *umpan* because that is our word for cutting, carving and making—it is also

the word now used for writing. My method for writing incorporates images and story attached to place and relationships, expressed first through cultural and social activity. My table of contents is visual, and it looks like this:



Each chapter will include some ‘sand talk’, invoking an Aboriginal custom of drawing images on the ground to convey knowledge. I can’t share a lot of the symbolic knowledge because it is either restricted (by age, birth order, gender, mastery levels) or appropriate only for a specific place or group—for example, while Brolga Lore might be relevant for me as an Apalech clan member or for others with the same totem, it is not generalisable for all readers. So the knowledge I will share in the sand-talk section in each chapter will be entry-level. It may reference some stories, but won’t tell them completely. However, I will tell parts of a big story, a meta-story that connects and extends all over Australia through massive songlines in the

earth and sky, a Star Dreaming that Juma Fejo from the Larrakia People wants to share with all Peoples. It goes everywhere that turtles go—and there are turtles all over the world, even in desert country, so it connects everybody.

Juma and I—us-two—have been working with this knowledge and connecting up those stories across the continent since 2012, the year a lot of people thought the world would end because of some weird interpretation of the Mayan calendar. I will include some parts of Juma's Star Dreaming in each chapter to help with deeper understandings of the concepts. There are six of these images, three at each end of the turtle shell, which will be accompanied by a yarn. The seven other images are of my own design, created over a number of years before commencing my doctoral studies because I was worried about my academic knowledge overtaking my cultural knowledge. I needed to produce something in my own way first that was a greater work than a thesis. I have shared these ideas with people in many different places to help them come into Aboriginal ways of thinking and knowing, as a framework for the understandings needed in the co-creation of sustainable systems.

I have been to many conferences and talks about Indigenous Knowledge and sustainability, and have read numerous papers on the topic. Most carry the same simplistic message: First Peoples have been here for x-thousand years, they know how to live in balance with

this place and we should learn from them to find solutions to sustainability issues today. (I often wonder whom ‘we’ refers to in this statement.) They then offer some isolated examples of sustainable practices pre-colonisation, and that’s it. The audience is left wondering, ‘Yes, but how? What insight does this offer today, for the problems we are experiencing now?’

These questions remain unanswered because Indigenous participants are usually offering formulaic self-narratives and cultural artefacts as a window for outsiders to see into a carefully curated version of their past, and the view is one-way. We’re not sharing what we see when we look back through that window. There’s a welcome ceremony at the start and a dance at the end, and everybody goes home happy but none the wiser.

We rarely see global sustainability issues addressed using Indigenous perspectives and thought processes. We don’t see econometrics models being designed using Indigenous pattern-thinking. Instead we are shown a dot painting and implored to make sure we include Indigenous employment in our plans to double a city’s population ‘sustainably’ within a couple of decades. Any discussion of Indigenous Knowledge systems is always a polite acknowledgment of connection to the land rather than true engagement. It is always about the *what*, and never about the *how*.

I want to reverse that phenomenon. I want to use an Indigenous pattern-thinking process to critique

contemporary systems, and to impart an impression of the pattern of creation itself. I want to avoid the ubiquitous Indigenous literary genre of self-narrative and auto-biography, though I will include some anecdotes and yarns when examples are needed. What I say will still be subjective and fragmentary, of course, and five minutes after it is written it will already be out of date—a problem common to all printed texts. The real knowledge will keep moving in lands and Peoples, and I'll move on with it. You'll move on too. Already, you might take away the hand gesture shown earlier, add your own shades of meaning, share it and grow something from that pattern that could never be imagined on a page. I need to pass these concepts on so I can leave them behind and grow into the next stage of knowledge. Failing to pass it all on means I'm carrying it around like a stone and stifling my growth, as well as the regeneration of the systems I live in. I'm getting tired of being a middle-aged boy in my culture.

This book is just a translation of a fragment of a shadow, frozen in time. I make no claims to absolute truth or authority. I change gears from academic to campfire voice from moment to moment. Things may seem unstructured; I allow the logic to follow the complex patterns I'm trying to describe, which don't reflect the usual cause-effect relations of print-based thought. Words may be capitalised that are not usually capitalised, and this changes in different contexts when they have different shades of meaning. One

of the exciting things about the English language is that it is a trade creole, so it changes shape wherever it goes. I will be honouring this quality by taking her for a spin to see how she goes around some tight bends.

This will be a challenge because English inevitably places settler worldviews at the centre of every concept, obscuring true understanding. For example, explaining Aboriginal notions of time is an exercise in futility as you can only describe it as ‘non-linear’ in English, which immediately slams a big line right across your synapses. You don’t register the ‘non’—only the ‘linear’: that is the way you process that word, the shape it takes in your mind. Worst of all, it’s only describing the concept by saying what it is not, rather than what it is. We don’t have a word for non-linear in our languages because nobody would consider travelling, thinking or talking in a straight line in the first place. The winding path is just how a path is, and therefore it needs no name.

One man tried going in a straight line many thousands of years ago and was called *wamba* (crazy) and punished by being thrown up into the sky. This is a very old story, one of many stories that tell us how we must travel and think in free-ranging patterns, warning us against charging ahead in crazy ways. So it will be stories, imagery and yarns that will make the English work in this book, with meaning being made in the meandering paths between the words, not the isolated words themselves.

There are many English words to describe our First Peoples and, since none of them is entirely appropriate or accurate, I randomly cycle through most of them, each of which is somebody's preferred term and somebody else's offensive label. Before European occupation we just called ourselves People in our own languages, but because I'm not speaking for any single language group, I use many of the inadequate English terms when I need to refer to us collectively. I use many other terms that I don't particularly like, such as 'Dreaming' (which is a mistranslation and misinterpretation) because a lot of the old people I respect, and who have passed knowledge on to me, use these words. It's not my place to disrespect them by rejecting their vocabulary choices. I know and they know what they mean, so we might as well just use those labels. In any case, it is almost impossible to speak in English without them, unless you want to say, 'supra-rational interdimensional ontology endogenous to custodial ritual complexes' every five minutes. So Dreaming it is.

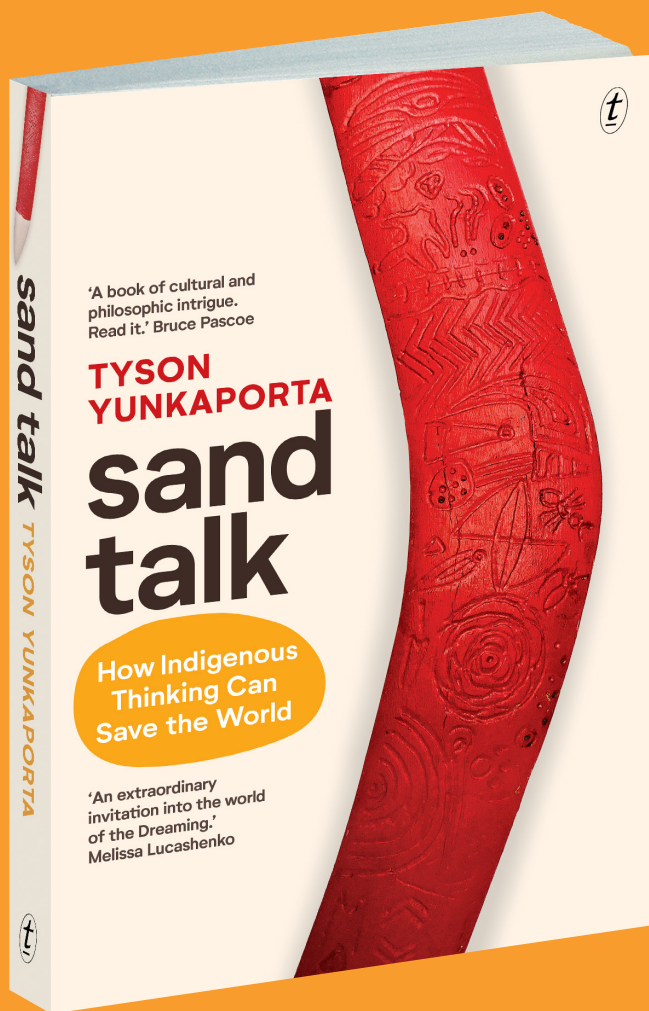
I discuss some beginner's knowledge about Aboriginal cosmology, then look for patterns, and then implications for sustainability, in a free-range ramble that should never be taken at face value. I write to provoke thought rather than represent fact, in a kind of dialogical and reflective process with the reader. For this I often use the dual first person. It is a common pronoun in Indigenous languages but not present in English; that's why I translate it as 'us-two', my

fingers typing those letters while my mouth is saying *ngal*.

Solutions to complex problems take many dissimilar minds and points of view to design, so we have to do that together, linking up with as many other us-twos as we can to form networks of dynamic interaction. I'm not offering expert answers, only different questions and ways of looking at things. While I'm good at stimulating connective thinking, I'm certainly no authority on any of the ideas in this book and my point of view is marginal, even in my own community. But there is fertile ground at the margins.

The hope is this: that from this liminal point of view us-two might be able to see some things that have been missed, glimpse an aspect of the pattern of creation and run a few thought experiments to see where that pattern takes us. It worked for Einstein, who seldom set foot in a lab but simply said, 'If this, then this, then this,' creating simulations in a Dreaming space to produce proofs and solutions of startling complexity and accuracy. In this space, even what he thought of as his greatest mistake later turned out to be his greatest discovery. It can't be that hard. If we get stuck, we'll ask the echidnas for help.

We need to begin with the first questions that always form a barrier to approaching this knowledge. Who are the real Indigenous People? Who among them carry the real Indigenous Knowledge and what aspects of that knowledge are relevant in grappling with the design of sustainable systems today?



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