

Innovation in Praxis

# Creating the Middle Space:

## A Story of Three Metaphors

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### Abstract

Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala, Gunyanara and the surrounding Homelands in North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia are the home to Yolŋu people and have been for time immemorial. For Yolŋu, metaphor is powerful and living. Metaphors have been used in this region to theorise and apply Yolŋu knowledge systems. It is a way that Yolŋu have communicated a sophisticated meaning making process to explain Yolŋu concepts and ways of being, knowing, and doing. This paper tells the story of three metaphors and how they have created the space for Yolŋu knowledge systems and ways of working to emerge in the context of our work. These place-based metaphors are not static concepts but living theories and practices. They have helped us to forge middle spaces and

move closer to shared understandings with tools that the community see as relevant and meaningful. They acknowledge who we are and what we want to influence. They require Yolŋu to lead and, importantly, they are orientated towards the *right* action.

## Keywords

metaphor, middle spaces, systems change, knowledge systems

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## How We Have Written this Article Together

When we met to co-develop this paper, we wanted to articulate and share the importance of *gurrutu* (relationship) as this is the foundation of our ways of working. We have intentionally created space to discuss, negotiate meaning and consolidate shared priorities in the work that we have done together and in the writing of this story. Therefore, we decided to write this paper as a collective *we*. With heartfelt acknowledgement of those who have been on the journey with us (including Yalmay Yunupiŋu, Djalinda Yunupiŋu, Andrea Kingston, Eve Millar, Lisa Walker, Sarah Rogers and many others), we write this as a set of reflections from Rarrtjiwuy, Claire and Fiona. We offer this story as an imperfect *work in progress* with the hope that it resonates with others seeking to create middle spaces together.

## Setting the Scene

The setting for our story is North East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala, Gunyaŋara and the surrounding Homelands are the home to Yolŋu people and have been for time immemorial. For many years, Yolŋu have worked to set their agenda and create change whilst navigating Western frameworks, policies, and practices as well as Yolŋu governance. This includes the unprecedented and famous Yirrkala bark petitions, Nāku Dhāruk, created in 1963 at Yirrkala and presented to the Australian Government in opposition to bauxite mining in Yolŋu Homelands. It includes pioneering efforts to develop and embed bicultural and bilingual learning within the education system, even when English was being imposed as the mandatory language. The Homelands movement in the 1970 was another case of Yolŋu leading the way in self-determination and actively having control of their lives.

Djalkiri Foundation (Djalkiri) was created in this context, with a focus on creating space and continuing Yolŋu-led vision, ideas and djäma (purposeful work). As the Manapanami (the term for connector rather than CEO), Yolŋu woman, Rarrtjiwuy Melanie Herdman led the work with the community to set up Djalkiri. Djalkiri is a Yolŋu led organisation committed to creating space by providing support, guidance, and advocacy for Yolŋu to support them to lead empowered lives and make meaningful contributions to their communities. There was also the Western element of setting up an organisation, going into the space of a western mindset—ensuring the organisation was viable and sustainable to do the work. As the Manapanami, Rarrtjiwuy plays a critical role in making sure Djalkiri focuses on community priorities and that the control of the organisation is in the hands of Yolŋu.

Growing up around strong leaders, Rarrtjiwuy wanted to create a space of conversation to contribute and support towards the vision of ŋalapaḷ (elders) and leaders across her communities and Homelands. In this space she questioned how do “we” as young Yolŋu show our ŋalapaḷ (elders) that we are here to support their vision and to continue the djäma (work) guided by them. For her, the Djalkiri Foundation has represented a way to lead meaningful action by challenging systems, working alongside communities, and disrupting the deficit discourse that fails to see the strengths of communities.

Claire Rafferty, Girriḍaŋ'thunami (Co-design Lead), Djalkiri Foundation, has close ties to the community and taught in the region for many years. She first came to the community as a practicum teacher and, after completing her studies, she returned and worked between Yirrkala Bilingual School and Laynhapuy Homelands Schools. During her time working closely with Yolŋu, she witnessed inspiring models of education in the region and how transformational this was when Yolŋu led and included their own knowledge systems in learning. She was interested in exploring this further and wanted to analyse the conditions that made community-based learning possible, so she worked alongside many community members (including Rarrtjiwuy) to complete her PhD. The thesis titled *Relationships Matter: Yolŋu Models of Community-Centred Education* (Rafferty, 2022) highlights the importance of gurrutu and collaboration, work that is often overlooked and misunderstood. Rarrtjiwuy and Claire had long term connections as gurrutu (kinship system), and through this relationship she began working at Djalkiri Foundation from the beginning. Together they have taken this opportunity to put the PhD, which was a collaborative effort with the community, into practice.

In 2024, we connected with Fiona McKenzie. Fiona is the Founder of Orange Compass, a for-purpose systems change consultancy, and has a background in human geography. Knowing she had been supporting change makers in deep co-design and collaboration, we thought she might be able to take up the role of a thought partner who could walk alongside us. Since then, Fiona and the Orange Compass team (Lisa Walker, Sarah Rogers and Eve Millar) have been supporting the Djalkiri team in our efforts to develop innovative and unique approaches that

are aligned to Yolŋu ways of being, knowing and doing while at the same time meeting (and often challenging) Western (Balanda system) constructs of success. For Fiona, this *bridging work* has been a two-way learning journey, with new learning and insights occurring every day that she has worked with the Djalkiri team.

## Gurruṯu: Working in Relationship

Djalkiri's work is relational and based on gurruṯu—the kinship system that links all Yolŋu people with each other and with everything in the universe. Gurruṯu is “the foundation of the Yolngu social system and system of governance” (Morphy, 2008, p.122), comprised of complex kinship networks that connect groups and individuals and also include the “more-than-human” (Bawaka Country et al., 2016, p. 460; see also Rafferty, 2022). Often the word “gurruṯu” is translated in English to mean “kinship”, however, it is more than that. Gurruṯu is inclusive of multiple relationships between people, place, animals; it is through gurruṯu that Yolŋu make meaning.

Gurruṯu is the foundation of our work at Djalkiri. Gurruṯu clearly defines relationships and responsibilities to each other. We believe that each of us becomes stronger when we understand our roles and contributions in our workplaces, families, and communities. It is important to recognise that we are never working alone, rather we need to work collaboratively to strengthen Yolŋu priorities.

To help embody the interconnectedness of gurruṯu, and to enable ourselves and those we partner with to reflect on their role, responsibilities, and to be accountable, we have developed a range of tools that support critical reflexivity and the deeper examining of positionality across different layers of the system. Gurruṯu is for Yolŋu. It is an invitation for non-Yolŋu to recognise and embody the work of relationality, and to acknowledge the threads of connections between people, place, and knowledge systems. We believe that by accepting the invitation to centre relationships, new understandings can be unlocked, inclusive and accountable action can be taken, and commitment to change can occur. As Verran and Christie (2011) explain, we need to make an effort to show ourselves how to work in good faith with respect to the disparate epistemic (or knowledge) practice involved. In the intercultural context we work in, recognising different knowledge systems is critical. Gurruṯu is an invitation to centre relationships in our work, and metaphor can help shape how Yolŋu and Western knowledges and ways of working can co-exist.

## Metaphor: A Way to Recognise Knowledge Systems

Metaphors have helped to bring understanding and clarity to this shared work and we use the story of metaphor co-creation to capture our work in the middle space. For Yolŋu, metaphor is powerful and living. Metaphors have been used in this region to theorise and apply Yolŋu knowledge systems. It is a way that

Yolŋu have communicated a sophisticated meaning making process to explain Yolŋu concepts and ways of being, knowing, and doing. “Leaching the Poison” is a powerful paper written by Yolŋu community leaders and Elders including Djalkiri Board members to explain the importance of getting processes and relationships right—and to face history in order to co-create (Marika et al., 2009).

This article tells the story of three metaphors and how they created the space for Yolŋu knowledge systems and ways of working to emerge in the context of our work. These place-based metaphors acknowledge who we are and what we want to influence; this requires that Yolŋu lead this approach but importantly, they are orientated towards the *right* action. In writing about metaphor, we have struggled to convey the *aliveness* and *wholeness* of metaphor. These metaphors are not static concepts but living theories and practices. We recognised that we each were bringing deeply diverse worldviews (McKenzie & Seneque, 2024) and the metaphors have helped us to find shared understandings and create tools that the community see as relevant and meaningful.

Through our active engagement with community three metaphors emerged:

WÄRRKARR – Onion Lily (*crinum angustifolium*) - how to be in relationship

MUNYDUTJ – Green Plum (*buchanania obovate*) - how to be in partnership

BULMUYUK – A fire that has gone out - How to reflect on the system

Each metaphor and the frameworks that emerged from them were carefully co-created with the support of our Elders and knowledge holders to help frame and support systems change at multiple levels, from the individual through to wider government institutions and social change. We continue to keep evolving the frameworks as we work alongside community.

## Story of Wärrkarr (onion lily)

### The Emergence of the Metaphor

As discussed, our work requires us to be in relationship with others. To help guide us in the workplace and community, we felt we needed a way to deepen relationships in professional contexts in a way that could better reflect *gurrutu*. To help drive conversations about what it takes to be in relationship, we developed (in collaboration with the community) the *Ḍilimungu Gakal'* Framework (or values framework). This framework is built on the metaphor of *wärrkarr*. *Wärrkarr* is the onion lily and is a seasonal indicator that signals the right time to hunt certain bush foods. The *wärrkarr* metaphor is about relationship and collaboration. It recognises that generative relationships are critical to meaningful engagement. The *wärrkarr* cycle is about regrowth. We know that connecting, relating, and working together is an evolving process that

requires commitment, trust and reflection. The wärrkarr encourages the importance of continued learning, sense making and our connection to each other. When the wärrkarr is burnt to the ground during work (the intentional use of fire that supports regrowth) we are reminded of the opportunities for new growth and regeneration.

We use the wärrkarr metaphor to encourage us to reflect on the ways we show up for each other and how this impacts those around us. Self-reflection has the potential to be self-indulgent, however the ability to critically reflect is required to correct bias (Fricker, 2007; Mezirow, 2003). To address the complexities in adult life, critically reflecting on underlying assumptions and power dynamics that frame practice and influence our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions is essential (Brookfield, 2009). In the middle spaces we work in, we believe it is necessary to critically engage with the bias and assumptions as these impact the way we relate to people and place. The wärrkarr provides a framework for this.

## Ongoing Co-creation

The wärrkarr framework is for both Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu. We worked alongside ŋalapaŋ (elders) and knowledge holders to capture the deeper meaning of the framework. We created a video script in Dhaŋu (a Yolŋu clan language), as this is the language that Rarrtjiwuy speaks. We worked with the Grow Love Project (a media company) and Brenna Quinlan who helped us to create a video animation and bring this to life in a way that would tell the story of the wärrkarr. The process of editing the script with ŋalapaŋ and other language speakers and experts took time as language work needs intentional and careful consideration, and ongoing discussions and negotiations. For example, while the animation was in Dhaŋu we worked with community members to record them saying each gakaŋ' (ways of working). However, all of these young people spoke different languages and therefore each gakaŋ' needed to be translated into their own languages so that it made sense to them.

This process was an outcome in itself as it prioritised Yolŋu languages. It is also an example of the multilingual nature of our work. Instead of the default approach of communicating from English and then translating into Yolŋu matha, we began with Yolŋu matha and Yolŋu concepts. It showcased an alternative and challenged the *easy path* of working in English or attempting a translation of English concepts. The dominance and *normalisation* of English as a mode of communication in our region is a bias that often goes unaddressed and reinforces an unbalanced power structure. It also reduces the meaning of concepts and impacts engagement.

## The Metaphor in Practice

Today, the wärrkarr (Dilimungu Gakaŋ' Framework) is used in almost every partnership and engagement we have. It has become a starting place to talk

about respect and reciprocity. We have also used it to aid individuals to critically reflect on their ways of being. Importantly, it reminds us to practise these gakał'—working through and embracing the messy space, working through challenges and barriers, reminding and resetting the way we show up in these spaces. The English version below helps to show the types of conversations this encourages around creating and holding the complexity of middle spaces

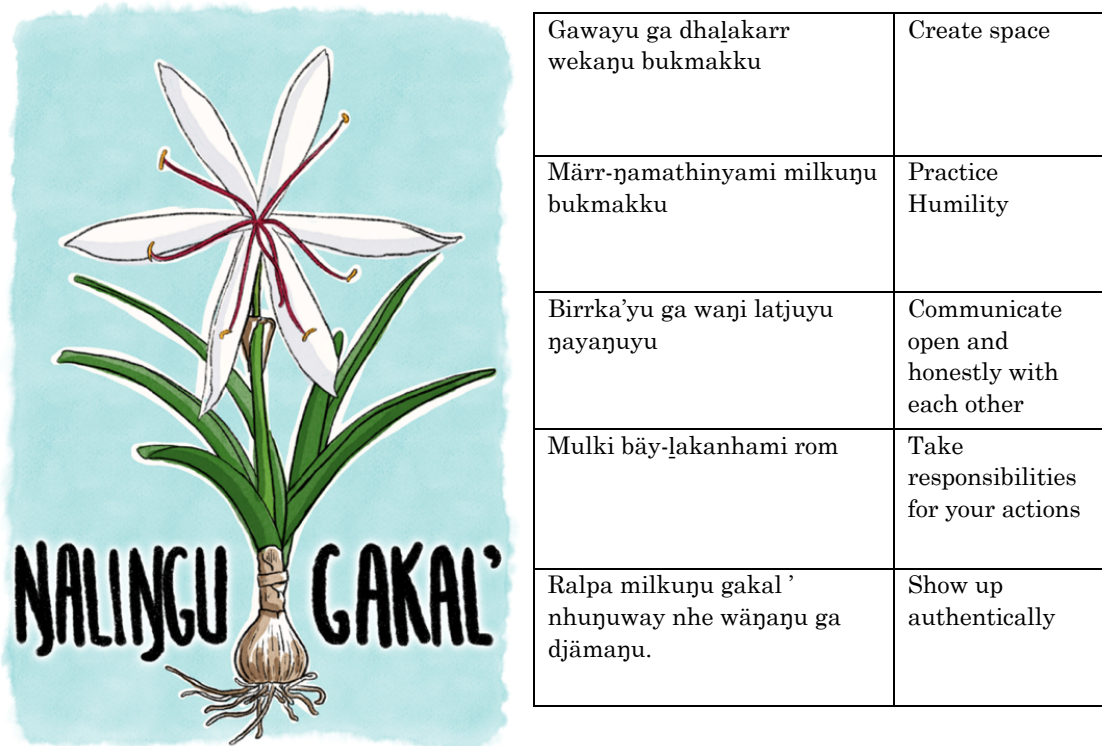


Figure 1: Dilimungu Gakał' Framework – with Wärrkarr (onion lily) illustration and ways of working in Yolŋu matha and English.

## A Story of the Munydutj

### The Emergence of the Metaphor

Djalkiri has been working to develop community-based approaches to both generating and understanding social impact that are meaningful for community and reflect Yolŋu ways of being, knowing, and doing. One way Djalkiri has been progressing this work is to explore both Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu framing of systems change and finding ways to integrate both by creating frameworks that are inclusive and will resonate with the community.

In the case of the munydutj (green plum) we met several times online and in-person to try to find ways to think differently about how to measure the work we do. With the insights of our Đurruyirr'yunami (Board Members), mentors and ŋalapał (elders), Yalmay Yunupuyŋu and Djailinda Yunupuyŋu, we eventually landed on the concept of the munydutj. This emerged in our conversations about

change and how Djalkiri might evaluate impact in ways that make sense and are meaningful for Yolŋu. It was during our time together in dialogue that our ŋalapaŋ suggested exploring the metaphor of the developmental stages of the munydjutj; a possible framing for talking with community members about how change and learning will happen. They explained why it was a suitable metaphor for the Yolŋu context as munydjutj grow everywhere and everyone in the community knows its different stages of development and how to collect the fruit. Additionally, it is a non-judgemental depiction of ongoing cycles of flowering to ripeness and regrowth, rather than simple stages of linear progress, reflecting the growth, development and re-growth of people, relationships and systems. Lastly, it represents a shared and *surface* level of Yolŋu knowledge that is unlikely to present any tension. Yolŋu need to lead these processes and conversations especially when Yolŋu knowledge is included, as there are layers of complexities regarding surface layers and deeper layers of knowledge that non-Yolŋu will not understand. It cannot be assumed that these metaphors and processes can be taken and applied in other contexts without Yolŋu being actively engaged with implementing and being accountable to their communities.

## Ongoing Co-creation

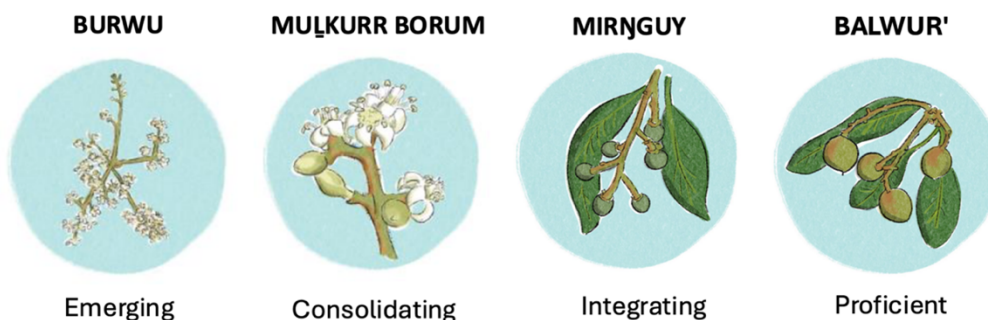
Once the idea of the Munydjutj emerged, we began to unpack and test the applicability of the metaphor as way of measuring meaningful learning. When we introduced the munydjutj in a range of workshops Yolŋu immediately engaged with this way of learning and measuring. It was through this metaphor that we could begin to develop a new community-based framework that started with Yolŋu knowledge systems—noting while we use the term unique, we also do not mean new—we were building upon decades of work by the ŋalapaŋ and community.

We began working through four phases of the Munydjutj, including borwu (new flower buds), mulkurr borum (initial fruit bud), mirŋguy (unripe fruit), and balwur' (ripe fruit). When we took these concepts out to community to test further, we applied it to individual's understanding of hunting guku (honey). People reflected on what they knew about hunting guku such as the different types of trees, the tools required, seasonal indicators, and elaborated further to include manikay (songlines), miny'tji (clan art and design) and bungul (ceremony), the difference between Yirritja and Dhuwa guku; the deeper layers of knowledge. By starting with a Yolŋu concept and applying it to munydjutj, the process becomes clear and Yolŋu knowledge was validated. It created a safe space for Yolŋu to recognise the different layers of learning and knowledge and how this could be mapped to a framework. The space was created to support and move from the known to the unknown, and demonstrated how knowledge can be at different stages as the munydjutj metaphor explains. It also gave an opportunity to weave knowledges together and supported Yolŋu to recognise their own learning journey and metaphors connected to their bāpurru (clan).

## The Metaphor in Practice

Since its creation, we have taken the Munydutj Framework and expanded its use and application. We have also expanded it to become a reflection tool and a rubric for shared accountability.

During 2024, we began working with the Australian Government’s “Stronger Places Stronger People (SPSP) Initiative.” To encourage shared accountability with government partners, we created a *partnership rubric*. Essentially, it was a tool for collaboration and for collectively engaging in critical reflection about roles, actions, and accountability. The rubric weaved together priorities and ways of knowing for Yolŋu, with existing elements of the SPSP Initiative. We were hoping to work with them to develop a deeper partnership based on accountability and action. Drawing on the metaphor of the munydutj to think about phases of readiness and growth, the rubric described the development of the partnership for each partner (Djalkiri as well as the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments). This was driven by a need to better understand and map how the SPSP partners would take a role in supporting local priorities and communities. It was also driven by the challenging question “how can all partners work collectively to ensure that it is not another government agenda that fails to positively impact outcomes?” Importantly, co-creating the descriptions of what each phase might mean in practice was a key part of the work. While the munydutj phases provided a starting point, bringing each phase to life required practical examples of *what this looks like* for each partner. This anchoring in practical action was essential to the rubric. For us, this was another way to step into the middle space together in an attempt to develop shared understandings and find common ground.



*Figure 2: Munydutj Indicator*

The munydutj is an applied framework with a Yolŋu theoretical foundation that can be used in a variety of contexts for individual reflection and adult learning. We have applied the indicators in learning and leadership workshops with Yolŋu participants in range in of contexts. We have used the indicator to engage in the co-design and mapping of multiple skills and knowledges. We have

found that Yolŋu participants are engaging with confidence with this tool and are willing to identify where they are and the learning journey they might need to go on. This framework focusses on strength and moves away from the deficit lens that is often used in these contexts. Deficit discourse has been described by Fogarty et al. (2018) as the:

discourse that represents people or groups in terms of deficiency—absence, lack or failure. It particularly denotes discourse that narrowly situates responsibility for problems with the affected individuals or communities, overlooking the larger socio-economic structures in which they are embedded. It is implicated with race-based stereotypes. (p. vii)

By showing strength-based indicators connected to knowledge and skills, we are attempting to challenge embedded bias that only Western knowledge is valid.

## A Story of Bulmuyuk

### The Emergence of the Metaphor

Bulmuyuk means “a fire that has gone out.” For example, if a fire has gone out it has become “bulmuyuk”. This metaphor emerged when we met with community to discuss a regional forum on community priorities and ways of working. To ensure that we were creating an inclusive middle space we spent a lot of time talking and unpacking as we worked with organisations, groups and individuals. The metaphor of bulmuyuk was introduced by an elder who asked “how do we as Yolŋu know when we are in control of the solutions for our communities, knowing that there are some things like Balanda (western) policies and changing government agendas that are bulmuyuk? How do we understand Balanda decisions processes and have equal input into making change?”. It was during this conversation that he shared the metaphor of bulmuyuk—he was saying that there are unknown spaces that we need to understand. There was a clear sense that bulmuyuk existed at different layers, and we need to understand some of the deeper systems and challenges that are influencing community priorities and outcomes.

We asked for (and were granted) permission to work with bulmuyuk as a metaphor. In our conversations, we realised there were parallels with the well-known *iceberg model*. However, we felt the concept of bulmuyuk better reflected the idea of a dynamic and constantly changing context where many actors, interconnections and interventions are often in the dark, in the unknown. Drawing upon the layers of the well-known *iceberg model*, we adapted it to create a *Bulmuyuk* activity that asked participants to:

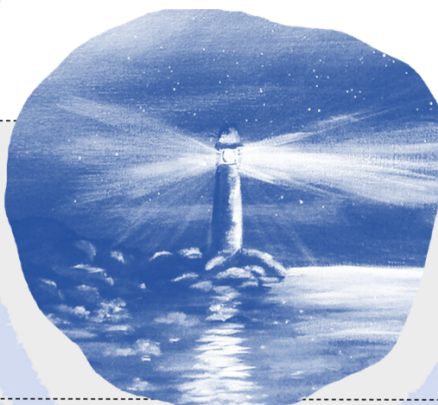
“Think about a lighthouse and how the light shines on one area at a time. There are areas that are hidden or might be seen briefly and then go back into the dark. We need to understand systems and stories to gain a deeper sense of what’s important, including root causes. In this activity, we will take the lighthouse and think about:

- What feels important to ‘make visible’ and shine a light on?
- What sits underneath in the dark?
- How do we take accountability and keep the light on?”

## The Metaphor in Practice

In May 2025, Djalkiri hosted a Community Forum that was attended by over 70 participants from 26 different organisations from across the Gove Peninsula. The first day was a Yolŋu forum and the second day include organisational representatives. Importantly, the Forum included a mix of Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu participants. The majority of non-Yolŋu did not speak Yolŋu matha and for most Yolŋu, English is a second language. By using this metaphor, we could create a middle space where all participants could engage confidently and equally on challenges and opportunities in the region. The concept of bulmuyuk was used to help participants map the visible and invisible. As facilitators, we set the scene, describing how the lighthouse light moves around, shining in different places and there are places in the dark that we cannot see. The purpose of this activity was to shine a light on the hidden attitudes, beliefs, and power holding behaviours and patterns in place. We created a simple handout which we modified from a Presencing Institute iceberg framework (Presencing Institute, 2022).

### Bulmuyuk ga Baḍayala



*What's been happening?*

**What are we noticing about what's changing over time?**

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*What's holding these patterns in place?*

**What do you think helps to shape current behaviours & patterns?**

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*What's deeply embedded and hardest to identify - or most deeply in the dark?*

**What existing attitudes and beliefs are holding these structures in place?**



Modified from a Presencing Institute 'iceberg' worksheet. Bulmuyuk is Yolŋu for being in the dark or, literally, a fire that has recently gone out.

*Figure 3: Bulmuyuk ga Baḍayala: Lighthouse activity - mapping the dark.*

This metaphor provided a middle space for diverse organisations and individuals to discover shared understanding and agendas about the Gove Peninsula and surrounding Homelands. In the Community Forum, it became the framing for deep dives into eight themes that participants chose to group themselves around and *unpack* further in small group dialogue. Many people spoke to us afterwards about the level of energy in the room and the degree of deeper conversation at a regional level that is rarely prioritised. It was reinforced that when the conditions are carefully built to bring people together in dialogue, deeper discussion and engagement that creates space for Yolŋu voices can occur. Having brought two bodies of knowledge together in the framework, we were relieved to see it validated by both Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu in the room. For this framework to be practical and support community-led priorities, we continue to have discussions on how to unpack and articulate these challenges together. Through the process of *bulmuyuk* we can start to move beyond what is visible into the deeper layers of complexity to understand some of the reasons things are as they are. This process starts to bring out areas of shared accountability and levers for change, recognising that we are all part of the system. There is a temptation to label challenges as easily *solvable*, and the responsibility for addressing those challenges is placed on the community rather than understanding the interconnected systemic factors and policy agendas that are contributing to the *bulmuyuk*.

## The Middle Space

In reflecting on the Munydjutj (green plum), Wärrkarr (onion lily), and *Bulmuyuk* (a fire gone out), we acknowledge that we are building tools and frameworks that have essentially emerged from the community and the powerful tradition of metaphor in the Yolŋu context. We also know that metaphor is much more than a story. It is the act of co-creating knowledge and engaging in critical reflection.

We do not romanticise the middle space. Humans are complex. Knowledge systems and sensemaking systems are complex. Meeting in the middle is a way to articulate the diverse understandings and ideas from the work, based on our own perspectives and world views. The metaphors themselves are not the end product. They are enablers of reflection and of getting closer to shared understanding (though we may never reach full sharing) as a collective, not just as individuals. By using metaphor we can attempt to collectively hold stories that require accountability back to the group. They become stories and ways of working that belong to the whole and need to be held within, and not taken out of, context.

As others have discovered, holding the middle space is not easy and *thinking together* does not always work out the way we anticipated (Isaacs, 1999; Srivastava, 2025). There are often tensions and misunderstandings as we try to make some kind of collective sense of the different ways of understanding the world. Many Yolŋu have been very engaged with the development and

application of these metaphors as they are specific to place. In our experience, local approaches that emerge from place often don't progress to a stage where there is sustained engagement and ongoing learning. We need to remain cognisant that a disconnect between theory and practise can occur in the middle space. It is one thing to understand and acknowledge the metaphor and another to apply it in context, especially when those in the middle space have very different worldviews and values. We found that some non-Yolŋu struggled more than others to engage in the co-creation of meaning, and find ourselves wondering if this is due to Western traditions of getting the *content right* and abstracting it to be *broadly applicable*, rather than engaging in the messiness of negotiated sensemaking in a deeply embedded relational context.

We have also hypothesised that perhaps meaning making is still not seen as the work, and that the messy middle space is seen as a fleeting state before the real work happens. But it is here in the middle space where relationships are being developed and reinforced, and trust is either being strengthened or eroded. Perhaps some Yolŋu (we are not generalising to say all) are more comfortable in the messy middle because relationships are the fabric of life for many people, and many are moving between very different work and home lives.

We have also observed an ingrained preference of many, not least in government roles, to work with *answers* rather than grapple with questions. Our fear is that, in this context, the tools and frameworks we have developed become seen as completed or static artefacts and recipes that can be extracted for other uses and agendas. Or, are themselves seen as too abstract or difficult because they involve a process of conversation and meaning making rather than a quick solution or answer.

Perhaps we are holding too many fears, but we feel the need to emphasise these metaphors and frameworks not as content but as invitations to *step into the middle space* and actively engage with the messiness and uncertainty of negotiated meaning. Our wish is for these metaphors to enable everyone to feel both explorer and expert at the same time. We want people to remember that context is critical—and that metaphors are not for extraction but rather embeddedness.

We are deeply grateful to the non-Yolŋu who have genuinely sought to stand in the middle space with us. This is where change happens and hope is possible. However, perhaps the hardest conversations have been with those that seek to engage and who feel they are *stepping into the middle space*—but do not seem to arrive with the same sense of reciprocity or shared accountability. Time and again, we have seen Yolŋu grasp the intent of the work, and step in to engage and make meaning. We have seen Yolŋu take and adapt the Wärrkarr and Munydjutj and then present it back with confidence to elders and supervisors. In contrast, we have been in workshops and meetings with non-Yolŋu professionals who read our work, nod in agreement, and wait for the next agenda item to be addressed.

## What Allowed us to Step in Together?

In writing this article, we realised that part of the story required reflection about how we have been able to work together in this way. Each of us bring vastly different experiences and exposures. We could bring that learning with us as we negotiated the middle space together. Through conversations, we discovered some common threads that we offer below:

- **Growing up in small rural and remote communities** – while in deeply different contexts, we have each lived part of our lives in rural and remote Australia, in small country communities, where relationships are intergenerational and collective memory is embedded. We know the power and responsibility of being deeply connected by place and purpose. These are not shaped by transient jobs or postings, but by deeper roles that are taken up and held in community, where you do not have the luxury of walking away if things do not work. Rather, you have to stay in relationship and work things through.
- **Shared values and trust** – Claire and Rarrtjiwuy could recall some of their earliest conversations, decades ago, where they were seeking to understand each other's values. There was something in the alignment of purpose and valuing of respect and reciprocity, that led them to a lifelong connection based on *gurrutu* and deep trust that has enabled working and moving through the good times and the hard. This became a safe space for supporting each other, exploring difficult questions and being vulnerable. When we've experienced or seen clashes in ways of being that do not align with our own values, we've become a place for each other to sense check, reset and keep going (or to remove ourselves and put our energy into what we believe will make a difference).
- **Guide not guru** – the way we see ourselves is not as *experts* or *leaders* but rather, lifelong learners. We see our role as supporting, guiding, and helping build the capability of ourselves, our peers, and the communities in which we work. We value how we can role model, demonstrate, and engage behind the scenes to help others figure out for themselves how to make meaning and have agency in their lives. It is perhaps the idea of being *an enabler* that has freed us up from feeling we have to know the answers to everything. We seek to support the collective rather than advance the individual cause. We each are prepared to swim in the unknown and welcome discoveries of new knowledge and learning, even when that means we get told there are things that we don't know. We all found we had *done*

*work* to better understand ourselves (we hope!) and always seek to bring our best version (flaws and all) of ourselves to the work. We engage in different practices of self-reflection with a commitment to ongoing learning, knowing we still have so much to discover. This meant that when we arrived together, it was with a sense of having found fellow travellers.

- **Ability to see and move between worlds** – There is something special in the ability to move across worlds—from the school room, boardroom, government building and NGO office through to navigating health, housing and education systems. We might be sitting under a tree in community in the morning, and conducting online meetings across Australia in the afternoon. Being able to adapt in how we show up, zoom out and see across systems, worlds and worldviews, as well as zoom in and hold relationships in diverse and difficult spaces is something that we have each learnt to do over time. It isn't easy, but we do it because it is how we can best serve the communities we support and hold space for the relationships that underpin our work. We can often see where the gaps are and where those entering new spaces and worlds might need more support. We try to intentionally create a space for collaboration across sectors and worldviews. This ability has been noticed and sought out by others, which further enables our work.
- **Seeing the world as dynamic, not static, where everything is interconnected** – perhaps it was growing up close to the nature, in North East Arnhem Land (Rarrtjiwuy) and on farms (Claire and Fiona) that taught us that no season is ever the same. There is no such luxury as trying the same thing every year. We see the world as dynamic, interconnected and ever changing, and so lean into adaptive stances, and embrace ambiguity without feeling the need for rigid, over-planned responses and certainty.
- **Relationships as reciprocal spaces** – the work of deep relating is never easy. It can be raw, confronting and sometimes, tempting to walk away. It would be easier to draw boundaries or give up but, for whatever reason, we are each willing to keep stepping into middle spaces in the hope that others will join us. This is not to say we are pushovers, but rather we seek and understand the power of working relationally, through respect and reciprocity. We see vulnerability as strength and each have experienced powerful working relationships, where supporting each other and being vulnerable proves to be the path to change and impact. We are

constantly assessing where it might be worth us creating relational or middle spaces.

None of this is to say that the three of us own or solely created these metaphors or this work. Nor do we suggest this is the only starting place. As mentioned above, our work does not arise from a blank canvas. It is deeply embedded in culture and Yolŋu living theory. Some of our biggest influences have been people, rather than books or papers. We are building upon decades of dialogue and work between many Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu over the years—including many Yolŋu that are no longer with us but whose vision and commitment for change live on, especially Mandawuy Yunupingu and Raymattja Marika, and extraordinarily dedicated people like Leon White and many more. We still refer to their writings to guide as we add a contemporary lens to the work (see for example Marika, 1999).

We also acknowledge here the work of others, including published in this *Journal*, such as John Stubley's (2023) paper on the creation of metaphors as part of a process of social poetry and imagination that brings into perception both current and future realities. We also acknowledge the seminal work on metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). However, in our context, we are working with metaphor less as a concept or tool of perception, and more as an invitation to co-creation and a meeting place of diverse worldviews.

## Lasting Questions

It is often assumed that knowledge is universal, however, there are many ways of understanding the world. It is time to find ways to engage in middle spaces outside the certainty of pre-defined paradigms, policies, and programs that have been imposed by Western systems.

Like the roots of a tree, we are working with metaphors as the veins of our connections and we know they run deep. We share our insights and attempts at creating middle spaces as an incomplete work in progress. Sometimes when we think we have understood or have the answers, more questions arise and bias and blind spots are uncovered; consequently, humility is required. We are continually curious about what is next and what there is to learn.

We will continue to build spaces for conversations, one where Yolŋu systems and ways of working are centred and embedded, starting from a place of strength rather than exclusion. While we hope we are making progress, we know that we have a long way to go. But through initiating these small steps towards meaningful change, guided by our communities, we hope to create a connected space to support meaning making for bukmaḱ (everyone).

## Conflict of Interest Statement

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## Ethics Statement

We confirm that all co-authors of our submitted article followed ethical principles in publishing.

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