




# Creation, destruction, and COVID-19: Heeding the call of country, bringing things into balance

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## Abstract

On Gumbaynggirr Country (mid-north coast New South Wales, Australia), an act of violence against the sacredness of life and Country resulted in Wirriiga, the Two Sisters, making the sea. When the waters rose, the people made their way back to their homeland by following a gut-string bridge made by Dunggiirr, the Koala Brothers. While the people were on the bridge, mischievous Baalijin, the eastern quoll, threatened to chop it down and made waves that nearly washed them off. Baalijin challenges complacency and forces change, and on that understanding in this article we consider what it means to be living this present time of instability and changes wrought by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19); ours is a perspective grounded in story and Gumbaynggirr Law/Lore. We write as Yandaarra, a research collective guided by the Old Fellas (ancestors) and led by Aunty Shaa Smith, storyholder for Gumbaynggirr Country, and her daughter Neeyan Smith, a young Gumbaynggirr woman. Learning from a Gumbaynggirr-led understanding of COVID-19—as one manifestation of Baalijin and relationships fallen out of balance—re-situates the pandemic in wider and longer histories of colonisation and destructive patterns of existence and broken agreements. Those learnings prompt us to call for Juungambala—work involved in setting things right as a way to heal. Let Baalijin and COVID-19 be the wake-up call that forces the change that Country (and we) need.

## KEYWORDS

Aboriginal Law/Lore, bushfires, climate change, Coronavirus (COVID-19), Indigenous knowledge, more-than-human geographies

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

An act of violence against the sacredness of life and Country resulted in the Two Sisters, Wirriiga, making the sea. The land became flooded, and the people who were far out to the east were cut off from their homeland. They took refuge on a hilltop and asked Dunggiirr, the Koala Brothers, if they could use their gut-strings to make a

bridge back to their homeland. The Dunggiirr Brothers were clever and agreed to make a bridge for the people.

Once the people were on the bridge making their way back, mischievous Baalijin, the eastern quoll, filled them with fear by threatening to chop down the bridge. He made waves that threatened to wash the people off and drown them. Baalijin was brother-in-law to the Dunggiirr Brothers. They joked around together, but this time he

was taking things too far. The people were already going through a big change, facing a rising sea and a changing world, and Baalijin went on stirring things up, shaking things up even more (Figure 1).

Baalijin is a mischief maker, and he challenges complacency and forces change. He is destruction and creation. Sometimes, he takes things too far, pushing the boundaries of what is perceived and believed. This year, major bushfires and now coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) have triggered fear and suffering, forcing just such a shift in boundaries and putting many in danger. On Gumbaynggirr Country, this is Baalijin, whose disruptive energy, like the Dreaming, belongs not just in the past but to all times. We are living this creation story now, of things gone drastically out of balance and being called to walk on the bridge together through big change.

In this article, we share some of our thinking as we walk in this story together, particularly in terms of what it might mean as we walk in the midst of COVID-19. We are Aunty Shaa Smith, storyholder for Gumbaynggirr Country, her daughter Neeyan Smith, a young Gumbaynggirr woman and future Elder, and three non-Gumbaynggirr academics, Lara Daley, Sarah Wright, and Paul Hodge. We come together as Yandaarra, a research collective guided by Country, the Old Fellas (ancestors), Elders, and Aunty Shaa. Yandaarra means to shift camp in Gumbaynggirr. It is both what we are called and what we are doing as we walk this re-creation story from our different places as Elders, Custodians, and guests of Country learning to come into proper relationship with Country, each other, and ourselves. For Aunty Shaa and Neeyan, this learning is part of living their custodial responsibilities, sharing knowledge and inviting people into new consciousness at a time when radical change is necessary. For Lara, Sarah, and Paul, coming into relationship means learning our responsibilities and becoming *gunganbu*, people who belong together well. As Yandaarra, we aim to speak back to colonising histories and presents<sup>1</sup> of research (Smith, Smith, Wright, Hodge, & Daley, 2019, 2020)

Gumbaynggirr Country is situated on the mid-north coast of eastern Australia. It spans from the Clarence River in the north to the Nambucca River in the south, the Pacific Ocean in the east, and the Great Dividing Range in the west. Gumbaynggirr Country is the homeland of the Gumbaynggirr people; it is what guides and nourishes us. Country is the creative intelligence that binds beings together; it is rich in relations and connections. Country is family. It is the winds, songs, sea, land, and spirits. It is plants and animals, medicine, and food. Country is our dreams, stories, and belongings. We are part of Country ourselves, as we are created by and with it. We are a part of Country's continual emergence.

### Key insights

On Gumbaynggirr Country, Baalijin the mischief maker, like COVID-19, disrupts business as usual, bringing destruction. Yet there is also creation when change is forced upon us. In the story of Wirriiga, the Two Sisters, and of the Dungiirr, Koala Brothers, and Gurruuja, the whale, and Baalijin, we are reminded—we re-member—that the Law/Lore is there to hold us to account. Gumbaynggirr Country holds stories about when agreements are broken and about how to respond to the changes that happen. In the story, Gurruuja guides the response to Juungambala in order to set things right, guiding the way with love as new agreements are honoured. Let Baalijin and COVID-19 be the wake-up call.

In sharing a Gumbaynggirr-led understanding of COVID-19 with you, we offer a place-based perspective on living this present time of change and instability that is grounded in story and its Law/Lore. Gumbaynggirr Dreaming does not comprise pretty stories to make everyone feel good or enable us to stay in a place of ignorance. There is Law here. When radical changes occur, the Law comes in. We need the Law/Lore to create balance and to call Baalijin to account. Gumbaynggirr stories speak both to how to keep in balance relationships between people and the environment and to what to do when the balance is disrupted; they show how to Juungambala—set things right.

In sharing in this way, we join other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander thinkers and collectives (Bawaka et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Ngurra et al., 2019; Martin & Mirraopoa, 2003; Patrick, 2015; Yunkaporta, 2019), and Indigenous people more broadly (Cajete, 2000; Larsen & Johnson, 2017; Stewart-Harawira, 2005). Like them, we highlight the need to learn from stories and Law/Lore of place and, most importantly, to change thinking and behaviour based on what we learn. Baalijin is not a metaphor, he is not a trinket to enjoy; but rather he is a being with agency, knowledge, and Law/Lore (see Watts, 2013; Todd, 2016, for discussion of this point). Our stories help form the basis of our belongings with Country and of Aboriginal sovereignties.

In writing this piece together, we contribute to efforts in geography to centre Indigenous ways of knowing and being in geographical knowledge and communication (Bawaka et al., 2016; Porter, Hurst, & Grandinetti, 2020; Wilson, 2015). The ways in which we communicate in this article come from a place of yarning (Hughes &

**FIGURE 1** Baalijin making mischief, with the bridge in the background (Aunty Shaa Smith)



Barlo, 2020), a centring of Country and its learning, rather than from the protocols typical of a top-down academic format. We write in this way, we yarn, as a measure of respect for Gumbaynggirr stories, people, knowledges, and Country and to join others who have begun to rebalance academic discourse back away from its tendency to elevate Western ways of knowing and doing that marginalise Indigenous voices (Hughes & Barlo, 2020; Hunt, 2014; Kovach, 2010; Rigney, 1999; Simpson, 2014; Smith, 2013).

We invite you to join us in the story-place, on Dunggiiir's gut-string bridge, so we can walk the changes wrought by COVID-19 together and understand what we are living in terms of relationships fallen out of balance. People are fearful of all the destruction that is happening, and yet we can come to understand that our story is part of the creation time that is happening now; the continual emergence of Country. By living this story about being on the bridge and about Baalijin taking things too far, we can listen more deeply to the wisdom of place and the many more-than-human agencies and co-becomings who

want to engage with us. In the story-place, we can hear the call of Country to heed Maangun, the Law/Lore, to bring things into balance and set things right together (Figure 2).

## 2 | RELATIONSHIPS FALLEN OUT OF BALANCE

As we walk along Dunggiiir's gut-string bridge, we are walking within drastic change. Under our feet are the gut-strings of the Koala Brothers; around us is water where there used to be land. A fundamental Law/Lore has been broken. Waves rise. A shark comes; we have never seen one before. This is a time of great change and danger, and many yearn for security and safety, as if things could go back to how they were before. But Baalijin continues shaking things up, stirring up the ocean (and us!), making people vulnerable, making them afraid, and pushing things out of control. Baalijin takes things too far. The Dunggiiir Brothers want to drown him; things have gotten out of hand.



**FIGURE 2** Walking the dreaming today on Dunggiiir's gut-string bridge (Aunty Shaa Smith)

In the story and in this time (for the story is of this time), relationships have indeed fallen out of balance. COVID-19 is Baalijin shaking things up even further when people are already feeling vulnerable after summer bushfires that burnt through vast amounts of Country in 2019–2020. On Gumbaynggirr Country, these bushfires contributed to further loss of habitat for vulnerable species in New South Wales, such as Dungguirr, koala. The fires severely damaged and disrupted multiple more-than-human communities of soil, plants, insects, animals, and people. At a time when these communities are fragile, the destruction has continued in other ways. Logging has threatened more Country in the Nambucca State forest (Gumbaynggirr Conservation Group, 2020; Koorimail, 2020) as well as in other parts of New South Wales, among them the Comboyne State Forest on Birpai lands (Sati, 2020).

These events are not separate. They are connected as part of a much bigger story of change and destruction that began with colonisation and continues today. For over 200 years, Gumbaynggirr Country has been going through the great change that results from violence against the sacredness of life. Like the Two Sisters, Wirriiga, making the sea, today we are dealing with drastic change. Changing weather, major bushfires, and COVID-19 are only the most recent manifestations of Baalijin's energy in excess, of vital relationships falling further out of balance.

This Gumbaynggirr-led perspective resonates with other Indigenous thinking that points to the underlying structures and violence of current events (Coulthard, 2014; Kauanui, 2016; Snelgrove, Dhmoon, & Corntassel, 2014; Whyte, 2018; Wolfe, 2006). Indigenous thinking expands how COVID-19 can be understood, showing how deeply entangled the destructive relations of resource extraction, unfettered growth, and human exceptionalism are with histories and presents of colonisation. What dominant society names "unprecedented times" (Rallah-Baker, 2020) are part of Australia's collective amnesia. For settler-colonial Australia, "the past," as Rose (2004, p. 18) describes, is a label for "that which [settler states] wish to finish and forget, or from which we wish to differentiate ourselves and to absolve ourselves of responsibility."

For hundreds of years, Gumbaynggirr people have been living the reality of shape-shifting colonialism such as "ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration" (Whyte, 2018, p. 226; see also Callison, 2014). However, it is only now, as Davis and Todd (2017) argue, that the full "seismic shock" of colonial invasion is beginning to reach others living on stolen lands. So although these are

certainly intensifying times of change and instability, for the Aboriginal people and their more-than-human relations, this has happened before and is ongoing.

As Potawatami scholar and activist Whyte (2018, p. 5) writes:

Indigenous peoples challenge linear narratives of dreadful futures of climate destabilization with their own accounts of history that highlight the reality of constant change and emphasize colonialism's role in environmental change.

As before, those most marginalised bear the greatest brunt; you can see this pattern throughout the world. People of colour, Indigenous people, and people living in poverty are hit the hardest and suffer most in their health, with their safety, and in their livelihoods. Yet as Lucashenko (2020) recently pointed out as she wrote about COVID-19, there is always more to the Aboriginal story than suffering. Gumbaynggirr people and Country are still strong. The Aboriginal people have thousands of years of experiencing major environmental change, right from the last ice age, and have hundreds of years surviving imperial and colonial violence, attempts at genocide, and massive and consequential environmental changes (see also Davis & Todd, 2017; Risling Baldy, 2014; Stewart-Harawira, 2005; Whyte, 2018). Here, Gumbaynggirr Custodians Aunty Shaa and Neeyan offer some of our/their insight, speaking from our/their knowledge (not for it—as Yunkaporta (2019) points out), centring Baalijin and Dungguirr, the Koala Brothers, as we share and encourage all to heed their teachings. Indigenous peoples have already contended with great change and continue to nourish strong relationships with human and more-than-human kin in spite of massive upheavals to Indigenous political and legal systems.

When relationships are in balance, Baalijin's energy is important and necessary. Baalijin holds the Law/Lore of questioning the status quo so that when people become complacent, he forces change; he triggers the Law to come in and restore the balance. When things get out of hand on the bridge and move into a place of blatant destruction, the Dungguirr Koala Brothers want to drown Baalijin. Today, as we live this story again in the present, we have entered into blatant destruction, and relationships are falling out of balance. The Dungguirr Brothers, who hold the clever energy and call us to nurture creative potential, are not being heard. When the Koala Brothers are not heard, there is not enough of that other clever energy of Dungguirr that holds the Law/Lore because the voices of Country and its custodians are not being heeded (Figure 3).



**FIGURE 3** The Dunggiirr Brothers using their gut-strings to make the bridge (Aunty Shaa Smith)

### 3 | DESTRUCTION AND CREATION

While Baalijin's energy is in excess, it opens the field for both destruction and creation. This story is not only of destruction; it is a re-creation story. We are in that creation now.

In the story, the sea comes up, and Country is forever changed. There is sea Country now; there are new beings, new relationships, new stories, and new songs. There is a crumbling of what was, but there is potential for creation to come through. Like the rainbow serpent, the serpent changes land as she moves across country, singing the clans and the languages into existence (Burarrwanga et al., 2019, 2013). In a sense, she is destroying what was as she creates the new. This transformation too happens within us, deep in ourselves, so we are not standing outside, observing what is happening; we are a part of it; it is transforming us.

Guided by Gumbaynggirr wisdom, COVID-19 has forced us in Yandaarra to stop and to question our purpose more deeply. COVID-19, a virus, a more-than-human agent that literally lives inside us, moves through, creating disruption, fear, and suffering. Yet we have also been invited to slow down and to listen. COVID-19, like Baalijin, highlights the extent to which our lives are out of sync with the rhythms of Country and exposes the illusion that humans can control Country or live in separation from the web of relationships that nourishes and sustains life. A report from the United Nations

(UN) finds this too, calling for a “one health” approach that unites human, animal, and environmental health (United Nations Environment Programme and International Livestock Research Institute, 2020). In the story, Dunggiirr, the Koala Brothers, save the people with their guts, their innards, that they throw across the rising sea. It is Dunggiirr who is teaching, guiding, and saving, not the other way around.

The story also reminds us there are consequences for breaking the laws that hold relationships in balance. As Aunty Shaa says:

COVID shows how disconnected the whole system has become from Country. We are living in a big illusion if we think that people are the ones in power, that they can be in control. Country is beyond the control of humans as we just experienced with the bushfires. The fires and COVID are forcing people to think beyond control. This is forcing people to realise that it's not how Country works. We are not the ones with power. People are in that feeling of vulnerability now.

Vulnerability is an important state for transformation. It pushes the boundaries of what is perceived and believed and enables us to let go of destructive patterns so that we can step into a field of creation (compare with Seawright, 2014). With destruction and creation, a shifting can occur; this does not happen without rumbles.

COVID-19 disrupts business as usual. It brings into clarity the many ways that the dominant system is unsustainable and fails to support the wellbeing of people and our Mother Earth. Meanwhile, it is humans who are going through all the rumbles and grumbles of this change. COVID cleaves to existing inequalities, further highlighting its entanglements with ongoing colonisation.

Destruction and creation; creation and destruction. Unfortunately, there are many instances where the shift that happens within times of change is not towards balance but away from it. The opportunities we are presented with, to re-think, re-live, and remember, are being passed over and instead greater imbalance is created. Throughout the world, there are so many examples of this trend. Many governments are amassing authoritarian powers that they will likely seek to make permanent, are fast-tracking environmentally destructive projects, and are advancing highly socially restrictive agendas. In the Philippines, President Duterte has pushed through an antiterror law, allowing the Philippine government to detain suspected terrorists without charges for up to

24 days. In Australia, representatives of gas companies sit on the COVID Commission Advisory Board looking to expand gas expansion and their profits, including within Aboriginal communities. In the United States, a raft of government policies have been slated, nominally in response to COVID-19, that include detaining citizens, deporting immigrants, and banning abortions.

On the other hand, slowing down has meant reconnection, a quietening. And in the quiet, voices are heard, voices that have long been loud and clear but long ignored. Baalijin has brought change. Many are finding that they have had more than enough of racism and inequality, as seen through the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States and around the world, including here in Australia, where large protests have taken place to protest Aboriginal deaths in custody and the ongoing systemic and violent racism that prevails in this country. Problems are coming into the light, becoming more obvious for people to see. Change is happening. People are acknowledging each other more, coming together more, to fight injustice. Bookshops have seen many readers turning to books by Aboriginal and Black authors to learn more about race and racism issues, to finally hear what many Black people have been saying for centuries.

So many are under extreme stress at this time, yet they still find time to manifest what they want to align themselves with, what they want to create; this is fighting and healing together, focusing on relationships, on what is dearest. During this time, Aunty Shaa has started healing relationships with plants, beings that hold sacred and vital intelligence and medicine. As Aunty Shaa reflects:

Another insight I've come into is that the plants and the Earth are opening a line of communication with me, the plant is open. I can now find that way of communicating to the plant and asking the plant about its medicine, the spirit and energy of the plant and how the plants use that spirit, how they use it for healing. I've come more into that communication.

The creation time is now. It is imbued with openings and possibilities. We need to continue this creation story, to arrive at the changed landscape as we come off the koala gut-string bridge and rebuild protocols and relationships and come together to create a new story through which we can heal people and Country and learn to belong well.

Many might want to, but it is not possible to go back to how we were before, before the Law/Lore was broken and the sea came in. We cannot go back to before

colonisation, and we cannot go back to before COVID-19. That time is long past, and yet, and here are both the beauty and the tragedy; they are with us still.

#### 4 | JUUNGAMBALA: HEEDING THE CALL OF COUNTRY, BRINGING THINGS INTO BALANCE

While the people were on the bridge, Baalijin continued his mischief by calling in the huge sea creature Gurruuja, the whale. However, Gurruuja could see the people were afraid and reassured them he was there to help them. Gurruuja carried in his huge heart much love and respect for all life, for all life is sacred. He started singing, and his song went straight into the hearts of the people, so they were then filled with the same love and respect.

The people felt encouraged and continued on to their drastically changed landscape. They knew they would need to listen to Country to hear the new songs and see the new dances. They would have new responsibilities and new relationships. They would need to make new agreements to be part of the continuation in the sacredness of all life, to set things right, Juungambala, and build again the Law/Lore belonging to peace (Figure 4).

Custodians and Country hold this Law/Lore, the Law/Lore of Country. Listening to Country, to Custodians, will help heal Country and ourselves, both the listened-to and the listener, if it moves towards balance.



**FIGURE 4** Gurruuja reassuring the people, guiding the way with love (Aunty Shaa Smith)

We need to reweave the threads that have been damaged and nurture the threads that hold us in relationship (Mitchell, 2020; Smith et al., 2020). We need to be brought back into the proper relationships of Country and the Law/Lore. In this time of great change, we need Indigenous Elders and Custodians, not because they have all the answers but because they have the tools to help guide us, Gumbaynggirr and non-Gumbaynggirr, as we set things right together.

Now all of us living on stolen lands, with/as Country, must listen, look, feel, and understand our place. We must go deeper into the symptoms of imbalance and restore fundamental connections with/as Country in order to set things right. For Gumbaynggirr people, there is a memory there. Guided by the Old Fellas (ancestors) and Country, Aunty Shaa and Neeyan are waking this memory, re-remembering, and helping people on Gumbaynggirr Country to wake up this memory in themselves, of how to live in balance from a place of connection, of wholeness. As Yandaarra, we understand re-remembering, as a putting together that “pushes past the intended severings of coloniality” (Grande & McCarty, 2018, p. 166). On Gumbaynggirr Country, we want to stop the destruction of Country, of us and our soul. Yet we must also attend to the boundaries and barriers in Country, things we should not do and places we should not go. There are also things that not everyone can know. Country is sacred. Baalijin also teaches us this. In the story, he disregarded limits and took things too far, and there were dire consequences for his actions.

Spurred on by these times we are living, by COVID, by destruction, and the creation story we are called to walk, Yandaarra is looking to Juungambala, to set things right, and to attend to more-than-human knowledges and sovereignties on Gumbaynggirr Country. More-than-human sovereignties are Indigenous-led and, rather than authoritarian and top down, emerge through more-than-humans' belongings, knowledges, and decision making that come about through relationships. As Yandaarra, we are attempting to do the work of re-weaving and re-remembering on different levels, on different scales, and through multiple formats. Our collective is collaborating with natural resource management organisations, particularly with the Jaliigirr Biodiversity Alliance and Bellinger Landcare, to shift environmental practice so that it might transform from a technocratic and human-dominated approach (humans acting to save a passive environment) to one that might nurture regenerative sovereignties of Juungambala. Such an approach recognises that learning/being/doing are all part of each other and seeks to better understand the ways that more-than-human agreement making can act a vital precondition for diverse belongings, and for caring as Country.

Together, we are putting this work into practice through bush regeneration and tree plantings, flora and fauna surveys, gathering bush tucker and sacred medicinal plants, art, story, dance, and song that are led by Gumbaynggirr Law/Lore and agreement making. We ask what agreements are needed within this work, how relationships are nourished through it, and what multidirectional sovereignties are negotiated.

Learning from a Gumbaynggirr-led understanding of COVID-19 as one manifestation of Baalijin and relationships fallen out of balance re-situates the pandemic in wider and longer histories of colonisation and destructive patterns of existence and broken agreements. In Australia at this time, in ways laid bare in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*,<sup>2</sup> there is a widely recognised need to deepen understandings of the multiple, more-than-human belongings and sovereignties that make up this continent. The *Uluru Statement* has called on Australians to understand sovereignty as a spiritual notion underpinned by deep ancestral relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with their Countries. Indeed, addressing the calls in the *Uluru Statement* requires change on multiple levels from Constitutional and legal reform to attending to the ways in which all Australians live their diverse belongings and attachments in everyday life. In such ways, Juungambala is partly about responding to COVID-19 but also is about the longer and ongoing destruction of colonisation. Juungambala is what we are doing and sharing, a re-remembering of living agreements made between the multiple agencies, beings, and belongings of Country; listening, learning, and respecting more-than-human kin, acknowledging the agreements that have been broken, and seeking to mend them. It also means that Aboriginal peoples' sovereignties and rights to self-determination are attended to, as we work towards the return of stolen lands and lives, in ways that honour agreements ignored and broken. And there must be consequences for breaking these agreements. As we move off the gut-string bridge and try to bring things into balance, on Gumbaynggirr Country, we need to think through and enact processes of decolonisation, Juungambala.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Baalijin eventually turns himself into stone. He is forever holding this Law/Lore, the Law/Lore of questioning and shaking things up. In the story, the Law has been broken, and huge changes are happening. We cannot lapse into feeling the guilt, fear, and sadness; and we cannot allow things to continue the same with the same colonising processes. The way we look after Country and each other

needs to come from relationships with it, from the way we care as Country guided by the Old Fellas and custodial Law/Lore.

Baalijin brings waves and frightens the people but he also brings in Gurruuja, the whale, the creature who was meant to bring fear but who instead helped guide the way with love. The way forward is with Law/Lore, with the songs and dances and stories that emerge from a rearranged landscape of COVID-19, destruction and creation. And so, our sharing with you of Baalijin and the destructive and creative energies he calls in is proper Law/Lore in and of Country; it is sacred and binding.

Gumbaynggirr Country holds stories about when agreements are broken and how to respond to the changes that happen. Colonisation has led to many broken agreements, led to much destruction. Now we must find a meeting place, a way to come together as Gumbaynggirr and non-Gumbaynggirr, human and more-than-human, to create healing, to live respectfully. We need to do this together. Gumbaynggirr stories hold Law/Lore. The story of the Koala Brothers, Dunggiirr, and the role of Baalijin, the eastern quoll, holds this agreement and shows the way. Let Baalijin and COVID-19 be the wake-up call that forces the change Country (and we) need. If we can get our act together, we can stop so much destruction. This needs to happen on all levels, at the personal, community, institutional, and structural (Smith et al., 2019). This is a way to walk this story together, in integrity with the Dreaming, in oneness.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> We speak of 'presents' to emphasise that colonisation is an ongoing reality in multiple and multi-temporal ways, including through research.

<sup>2</sup> <https://ulurustatement.org/>

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