

*In May 2018, Kluge-Ruhe Curatorial Intern and UVA undergraduate student Callie Collins (3rd Year Spanish/Anthropology) traveled to the remote Aboriginal community of Milingimbi to undertake an internship at the Milingimbi Art and Culture center. Milingimbi Art and Culture is an organization dedicated to fostering the production of art and its expression of Yolngu culture and traditions. The art center provides a space for Yolngu artists to make a living through creating their art, and allows their voice to be heard worldwide through collaboration with other organizations such as the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia. Collins's internship was made possible through the support of the Mellon Indigenous Arts Program, the UVA Office of Global Internships, and Milingimbi Art and Culture.*

I looked up from my book, smiling, and then I was confused. The women were clapping and singing, all looking at me, and Ruth danced playfully over to me with outstretched hands, grasping a beautiful yellow and white necklace woven from *gungga* and *balgurr*. I had been sitting in the back listening to them discuss their upcoming weaving trip, enjoying the endless banter that had become a daily comfort to me. Ruth placed the necklace down over my head with a giggle, and I beamed. Lily was the first to speak, "You know here in Yurrwi we are not friends, we're family. You came here and we brought you into our family. You were just the right person to come here and learn about Yurrwi and our stories and our culture. We know you will take our stories back with you and share them, keep them close to your heart." I was at a loss for words. I nodded and bit back tears as the other women expressed their agreement, and Ruth smiled down at me. That was my last day in Milingimbi - my last hour. I hadn't been sure how the Yolngu felt about me being there working with them, and all of the sudden it was abundantly clear. And it made leaving feel like I was ripping my heart out. I clutched my necklace close to my heart for every hour of my nearly three-day trip home, far sadder than I had imagined I would be.

Rewind two weeks, and you'll find a nervous, sweaty girl stepping off a propeller plane 10,000 miles away from a home she had never really left before. I came in with some good advice, some solid goals, and as few expectations as possible, because there was no way I could have any truly accurate ones. That first day as I was exploring with my host and MAC director Chris, I met Ruth Nalmakarra, who became my Gathu (niece) two days later and watched over me throughout my two weeks on the island. I took everything and everyone in as best I could, trying not to be a dork, and repeating every name a few times to myself with each meeting.

The next day was my first official workday at the art center, and I was very glad I came in with few expectations. I rode a bike down the road from Chris and Rosie's house to an empty art center on the beach early in the morning, only to find it teeming with artists and workers within the hour. I found myself a little lost. Chris told me to just get acclimated that day and maybe try to do a little research on the book of works I brought, but where was I supposed to begin? And then I remembered some advice given to me prior to the trip - *just sitting and spending time with them will go a long way*. So I grabbed a chair, and sat on the edge of a circle of women working on their weaving. They were all speaking in their different respective dialects, of which I understood three words at that time (*maynmak* - good, *yo* - yes, *yaka* - no), so I sat quietly and watched them work. After a few minutes, a woman named Helen started turning to me every once in a while and translated a few things she thought I might be interested to hear, and soon a few other women just started telling me things - what they were working on, how they were doing it, what they were weaving with. I was just getting a little more comfortable

when Chris came in and asked if they needed more supplies. A few shouted their approval and moved out, and Chris turned to me and asked if I wanted to go out bush.

The next thing I knew I was on my own with a few women I had just met, stomping my way through a rugged terrain where tons of tiny little plants had the primary agenda of spearing me. Our goal was to collect *gungga*, pandanus used for weaving, and *balgurr*, a type of bark used to make bush string. I found myself sticking close to Zelda, whose sister was an artist in residence at the Kluge-Ruhe eight months before. “You want to try this one?” I turned to find her pointing at a pandanus plant and nodding at the tools in my hand. I clumsily climbed over a fallen tree and some brush to her. Immediately after yanking down my first bunch of pandanus leaves to harvest, I was ten inches away from a brown, hairy spider bigger than my outstretched hand. Now I am no stranger to wildlife having grown up in the country, but this was way out of my comfort zone. Zelda casually said “Oh, he’s a big one!” and shooed him away so I could tug the leaves down (after about twelve unsuccessful tries). I was *really* far from home.

After that day I quickly began to feel comfortable in my new environment - surrounding oneself with Yolngu women is magically helpful in that. On the third day I was ‘adopted’ by a woman named Frances Rrikili, and earned a plethora of new relatives, and a Yolngu name (which was officially settled on about a week later, after much deliberation), *Manangurra Wamutjan Garrawurra*. They said I was the “honey bee girl”, as my given name came from the Dhuwa honey bee.

Yet there were many moments that that comfort was stripped away quite easily. I spent a large portion of my working hours sitting with Yolngu artists asking them questions about each piece in the book of our collection at the Kluge-Ruhe, trying to decipher each figure, where the pieces came from, what story they were telling. Sometimes I got a wealth of information if I picked just the right question, other times I was met with very succinct answers even if I prodded. Further still I was met with a sudden discomfort, if I asked about a painting this particular artist didn’t have the authority to speak on, or even look at. I quickly realized just how serious this business was. I had understood early on in my job at the Kluge-Ruhe that in Yolngu culture some things were sacred or restricted by age or gender or clan, but some of the reactions I got from questions, or stories I heard about consequences of breaking these sacred rules were eye-opening to say the least. It wasn’t quite “culture shock”, but I got another strong realization that I was *here*, at the heart of everything I had seen in books and videos and the like over the past year. I still don’t know if I fully believe it.

One simple problem proved to be much more grating and difficult than I had imagined - the language barrier. I struggled with that to the very last day. Learning languages is a passion of mine, and though learning a dialect of the Yolngu Matha in two weeks was one of my non-expectations (outside of acquiring a very small vocabulary), I struggled with my complete and utter incompetence in it. I struggled even with the simple task of understanding them speaking English, which was a source of much embarrassment and frustration. I am ashamed to say there were times when, after the third or fourth repetition of a word or phrase, I simply nodded even though I was still clueless. I was just too embarrassed to keep asking... I’ve never felt more profoundly dumb. Even more frustrating was the task of keeping all kinds of names, places, people, people’s relatives and relations, stories, names for stories, and more, straight. One day someone would refer to something and say “But you remember that, we talked about it when I told you that story yesterday”, and I would frantically search my brain only to come up empty-handed. Why couldn’t I compartmentalize these things I was learning more easily? Did I not spend a year working with information about these peoples and their art? Maybe I just wasn’t

made for it. In those moments I had to excuse myself to take a short walk outside and take some deep breaths, or sit for a moment and watch the women weave, and remind myself that it wasn't supposed to be easy.

Chris made me feel better with some kind words after a particularly rough day of work. He said he was impressed with how patient and gentle I was with the Yolngu, and that because of that they were really fond of me and I was getting a lot of great information. I looked up, confused. I felt like I had been barely scratching the surface of the information I was supposed to be getting, and I didn't really realize that they were fond of me. I had made a few friends, but other than that I felt like most of them didn't have many feelings in general about my being there. I thought about it the next day, and realized I had been patient - usually things as small as noises that break my concentration annoy me to no end, but such had not been the case in my time on Milingimbi. Additionally, other than a few moments of frustration with myself, I hadn't had any negative interactions with anyone. I was steadily building very positive relationships, and noticed that as people I spoke with trusted me more and more with information as time went on. And I noticed away from work as well I was more patient and relaxed than I had ever been - the slower and more deliberate pace of Yolngu society and life in general had melted away my very "American" habit of going through everything at 1,000 miles per hour, and getting frustrated if I went one mile per hour under that.

My wonderings of how the Yolngu felt about me, and whether I had succeeded in what I had set out to do were silenced on that last day. I left not feeling like I was leaving a job, but a little separate life I had begun to create - even Chris and Rosie felt like siblings to me by the end of my two weeks there. I never expected any of those feelings. Chris came up with a funny and incredibly accurate quote for me to mull over about my being in Milingimbi, and travelling for the first time: "Going abroad in a place like this is like eating turtle meat for the first time - it looks like pork, but tastes like fish." Though I never got the opportunity to try turtle, and I'm not sure I would have jumped on it like I did going to Milingimbi, the comparison was perfect. As I was climbing onto the plane that would take me on the first leg of my journey home, Chris shouted something else to me that should go into a movie. "Hey Callie!" he brought a fist to his chest, "Keep it all right here, okay?". I clutched my necklace and nodded. My heart was full beyond words.