

Collaborative cultural production: Generative processes of participation in textual creation

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Abstract

This paper has developed from original Doctoral research into the communication of the city of Newcastle's cultural identity through and throughout theatrical and film productions which feature the city. "At 10.27 am on Thursday, 28 December, 1989, the City of Newcastle was devastated by a ML 5.6 (Richter magnitude) earthquake. This was one of the most serious natural disasters in Australia's history" (Newcastle City Council, 2006). The Newcastle earthquake propagated a raft of mediated content and the purposeful production of related cultural texts. The play Aftershocks was "conceived by the Workers Cultural Action Committee as a community arts project in response to the 1989 Newcastle earthquake" (Brown & The Workers Cultural Action Committee, 2001, p. vii). This narrative material was also re-appropriated and became the chronicle foundation for the 1998 film Aftershocks (directed by Geoff Burton). Both texts maintain communicative currency as performance or pedagogic resources that continue to perpetuate perceptions of the city.

In this paper, cultural production activities involved in the making of the play Aftershocks are examined within the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu's habitus to explain how meanings pertaining to the city's culture have been generated through innovative creative practices. Richard Jenkins (2005, p. 353) describes habitus as:

... the framework within which humans improvise their way through life, a facilitatory capacity that allows locally specific learned practices and the classificatory architecture of knowledge and cognition to adjust to the demands, possibilities and impossibilities of actual settings and contexts, in such a way that meaningful, mutually sensible responses emerge and can be acted on.

Habitus is a sociological platform that underpins what may be classed as professional production work and simultaneously encompasses the ordinariness of everyday sense-making activities. In the following discussion, the unique conditions that enabled communicative collaboration so that everyday residents could also participate in the construction of this distinct text are explored.

How can creativity and communication be fostered within diverse social and cultural contexts?

You can't cement a text in concrete ... it's got to move and grow and there's [sic] different creative teams dealing with it in every manifestation and I recognize that, because you can't stabilize things in that way. But there's this human element ... (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication, 29 October 29 1999)

Introduction

This paper analyses some of the cultural production processes involved in the making of various incarnations of *Aftershocks*, to understand how communicative agents connected with its textual construction contribute to the representation of Newcastle's habitus, and subsequent perceptions about the city's identity. The discussion includes important background information regarding the life-changing experiences of *Aftershocks*' protagonists, to explain how the authorship of the text developed through collaborative community relationships, some of which existed prior to the story-making practices, while others emerged through the "space of possibilities" (Bourdieu, 1996) the text's conception and design accommodated. Considering the dispositional activities that influenced *Aftershocks*' creative assembly from its inception highlights the pivotal role that habitus, praxis and capital acquisition have played in the shaping of *Aftershocks*, and the role they continue to play in the ongoing "anticipated knowledge of [its] probable reception" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 197).

The following data has been drawn from inter-textual sources (scripts, reviews, newspaper articles and other published and online materials) and is combined with excerpts from the author's original interviewee transcripts to "reconstruct (no doubt a little artificially) the logic of the labour of writing [involved in the production of *Aftershocks*, within the] structural constraints of the field[s]" it materialised in (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 197, original emphasis). The analysis tracks the production of *Aftershocks* from its seed as a collection of localised, ordinary, and anecdotal mini-narratives (albeit instigated by an extraordinary geo-scientific event—an earthquake!) through to production-driven research interviews; scripting workshops; eventual theatre performances; a television docudrama; a contemporary dramatic play; and as a secondary and tertiary education resource.

Cultural products in a range of communicative contexts

In 2010, it is doubtful that most of those involved in the original play production of *Aftershocks* would have anticipated the multiple uses the text would be put to, or foreseen its future functionality as an element of disparate field participations (media discourse, academic research, dramatic performances) and hence, ongoing cultural productions:¹

Conceived by the Workers Cultural Action Committee as a community arts project in response to the 1989 Newcastle earthquake, *Aftershocks* has been a set of taped interviews, a stage play, a touring production, fragments of radio, the subject of popular and academic writing, and a feature film. (Brown & The Workers Cultural Action Committee, 2001, p. vii)

In its conception phase, the initial impetus for the narrative to develop as it did came from those citizens directly involved in the earthquake of 28 December 1989. While the earthquake, which occurred at 10.28am that day, was, in a relative sense, of a minor magnitude, registering 5.6 on the Richter scale, it was the first in Australian history to

¹ Paul Makeham, an original cast member and researcher on the project published a chapter, "Community stories: *Aftershocks*' and verbatim theatre" (in Kelly, V. (Ed.). (1998). *Our Australian theatre in the 1990s*). An interview with Makeham about his early involvement in *Aftershocks* appears in a 2005 publication (Stinson, M. & Wall, D. (2005). *Dramactive*. Sydney: McGraw-Hill). The *Aftershocks* film can be ordered online through Ronin Films—an 'Educational Video & DVD Sales' distributor. A hyperlink to Carrodus' Study Guide is included on the site: <http://www.roninfilms.com.au/video/1886377/0/1832052.html>

record a loss of life with 13 people falling victim to it. Eleven of those died at the nationally iconic Newcastle Workers Club. In addition there were also approximately 160 people injured. A number of ordinary working-class people had endured what was for them unprecedented hardship and suffering of both a physical and/or psychological nature. For those Workers Club-focused residents for whom the site held very personalised meanings, their place of work and recreation had been destroyed, requiring immense psychological and physical adjustments. One of them, “[Lyn] Brown had been a club employee since the age of 19” (Joyce, 1998, p. 16); another had “been there two and a half years, [and] knew everybody who was killed there that day, workers and customers” (Turnbull cited in Harford, 1995, p. 13). Following the earthquake, what appeared to be disinterest on the part of institutional bodies to address local needs, was an extra hardship to overcoming the catastrophic events of late 1989:

Sluggishness by governments and insurance companies, insurance rorts, lack of funding for emergency reconstruction, dislocation from homes or workplaces and grief all hit home. There was a desire for closure in Newcastle—for the story of the earthquake to end. (Brown & The Workers Cultural Action Committee, 2001, p. viii)

Creative activity as a democratic response to perceived powerlessness

Significantly, within the framework of perceived bureaucratic complacency, anecdotal conversations about the earthquake’s effects, as well as its affects, began to gain potency. As Pennells (1998, p. 5) points out, “more than a third of the city had taken out an insurance claim or legal action and a coronial inquiry had just taken place”.

In this context, in 1990, the ideologically motivated Workers Cultural Action Committee (WCAC) responded to hearing about ordinary stories of local people whose daily living had been adversely affected by the earthquake in a number of ways:

The committee itself, as a collective, had thought after December 28, 1989, that it would be a good idea to have some sort of response to the earthquake in Newcastle cultural terms because its brief was along the lines of art work and projects, so . . . we thought it would be a good idea if other people in the community wanted to, do a project about the earthquake—specifically as it related to workers, members and their families. So that’s where it started. Some people were concerned about wider perceptions of Newcastle in the quake and wanted to be heard that way. Other people just wanted it [their story] to be heard amongst the club community. (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication)

The team behind the *Aftershocks* project started as a “voluntary sub-committee of Newcastle Trades Hall Council in 1974” with a mandate to make artwork and create dialogue through “collaborative arts projects” facilitating “strategic ventures between unions, working people and the broader community” (Workers Cultural Action Committee website, 2004). The Workers Cultural Action Committee is affiliated with several local organisations and individuals (Trades Hall, Newcastle Workers Club, University of Newcastle, individual artists) comprising a “network concerned with cultural development among Newcastle workers and their families” (Brown, 2001, p. viii). As the WCAC’s title suggests, one of the key characteristics of the group’s field position, within the parameters of Newcastle’s labour history relationships, has been to offer a forum for working-class locals to be heard, through artistic expression embodying ideological underpinnings. From a sociological standpoint, the activities of the Workers Cultural Action Committee demonstrate that “social essence is the set of

those social attributes and attributions produced by the act of institution as a solemn act of categorization which tends to produce what it designates” (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 121).

Paradoxically, it could be argued the WCAC’s position as an organisation committed to supporting the subordinate working-class of Newcastle reconstitutes the defence narrative aspect of Newcastle’s identity, at the same time as it seeks to address disempowerment issues on behalf of the city’s residents. These particular social-cultural conditionings illustrate that

[s]ubjects in and of a field are shaped, constrained and disposed towards thoughts and actions through their immersion in, and their incorporation of, the (explicit and implicit) rules, procedures, rituals, mechanisms, capital and values of the field. (Schirato & Webb, 2003, p. 545)

So while the WCAC’s primary charter had been to facilitate sociologically-driven artistic production within the Newcastle community, the group’s habitus continued to instill notions of regionalised oppression. The ongoing practices of the Workers Cultural Action Committee may, in effect, remind Novocastrians and outsiders that Newcastle working-class people are dominated institutionally, potentially endowing them with a “sense of incompetence, failure or cultural unworthiness” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 386).

Frustrated by official constraints outside of their control, some disenfranchised citizens made decisions to participate in the *Aftershocks* project. These citizens were keen to make known some of the invisible events connected with the earthquake which could have been “misinterpreted by the mainstream media” (Phillips cited in Pennells, 1998, p. 5). In Bourdieu’s terms, it could be argued that those people whose motivations for telling their stories were community-minded yet philosophically-grounded adapted to their “conditions of existence” and developed a “defense against them” (1984, p. 395). This concept was evident in Scriptwriter Paul Brown’s discussion of the production intent when he explained that “in devising *Aftershocks* we wanted to devise a story about a struggle not yet won, rather than any romantic conclusion about community spirit conquering all” (Brown, 1995, p. 451).

Communicating culture ordinarily in extraordinary circumstances

We got funding . . . and we got it very enthusiastically actually. Once the whole thing started and we got the a-ok, then I asked those people [the Workers Club constituents] to form, I formed a steering committee so they had control over it. They were telling me who to talk to—in terms of stories. So there was always this committee of people who were effected, who steered the whole thing, and they’d tell me who to go to talk to and who they’d like to tell their story. And then I’d arrange all that according to them because that was my job. It wasn’t a case of the committee thinking up an idea . . . “we want to do a play about the earthquake”, because, that would just be for us, and it’s not our project. (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication)

The above explanation of some of the shared relationships involved in the initial development of the *Aftershocks* story shows that, throughout various production stages, the Arts Administrator had a highly-developed sense of their own professional position, an awareness of their habitus, and an appreciation of the dispositions of other project participants. As Greenwood and Levin (2005, p. 51) argue:

Practitioners of *techné* do engage with local stakeholders, power holders, and other experts, often being contracted by those in power to attempt to achieve positive social changes. Their

relationship to the subjects of their work is often close and collaborative, but they are first and foremost professional experts who do things “for”, not “with”, the local stakeholders. [original emphasis]

Despite the various position-takings involved in the storytellers’ intentions, there was strong belief that, at this stage of the narrative development, “the workers at the club were really doing this for each other . . . others got a really developing sense of wanting Newcastle as a whole to know” (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication). The stories being told at this stage revealed individual distinctions between *Aftershocks*’ participants, indicative of their personal habitus:

Habitus designates the system of durable and transposable *dispositions* through which we perceive, judge, and act in the world. These unconscious schemata are acquired through lasting exposure to particular social conditions and conditionings, via the internalization of external constraints and possibilities. This means that they are shared by people subjected to similar experiences even as each person has a unique individual variant of the common matrix. [original emphasis] (Wacquant, 1998, p. 221)

This habitus, and the stories that each person was disposed to tell as a result of holding it, became the basis for the genesis of the stage play, which was to evolve as a piece of verbatim theatre.

Collaborative cultural production

From its inception, the circumstances of *Aftershocks*’ growth and the substance of its material, were directly centered on its classification as a cooperative blending of community stories. Because of these conceptual and cultural demands, it was decided that the most adequate formulation for the treatment of the personal accounts was to design them in a verbatim performance mode. “One of the things that witness-based work can do is remind people that their own stories, and the stories of people in their own world, are anything but untouchable” (Millar cited in Marchand, 2008, p. 5). Because of its testimonial style, verbatim performance is often referred to as “documentary-on-stage” (Burchall, 1995, p. 20; Wynhausen, 1993, p. 38), with the process of its construction also contributing to perceptions of storytelling truths. “Although mediated by a complex process of recording, transcription, editing and performance, the authenticity of these accounts remains relatively uncompromised” (Makeham, 1998, p. 168). According to Paget (1987, p. 317), verbatim theatre is a genre style “firmly predicated on the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with ‘ordinary’ people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things”.

Aftershocks’ specialised co-authoring has been the subject of much media discourse about the text, most of which presents the verbatim process in a positive light:

Unpaid volunteers including committee members, trade unionists, club workers and management, started interviewing survivors. More than 250,000 words of transcript from 50 hours of tape were handed over to writer Paul Brown who turned it into a play using a string of stories and conversations as its narrative. (Pennells, 1998, p. 5)

The script is a distillation of more than 300 hours of taped accounts from survivors. (Carroll, 1995, p. 7)

Brown and eight researchers compiled hundreds of hours of taped interviews. (Burchall, 1995, p. 20)

Paget (2002, p. 35) explains that, within docudrama styles, “writers and producers often claim ‘voluminous research’ as an article of faith in their pursuit of the authentic” and this has been so, as demonstrated above, in terms of the cultural intermediaries who reported on the play’s development.

Aftershocks’ genre categorisation as a product of verbatim methods was something that its institutional funding support was based on but this was not the only reason for the style being adopted. As the Arts Administrator for the Workers Cultural Action Committee venture explained:

Even before Paul [Brown, the playwright] came onto the scene . . . we went out and talked to people who worked in the Workers Club, ‘cause the Workers Club was where [most] people died. And they were our constituency in terms of our constitution and charter, if you like. So, we talked to those people, various people around, who worked in the club, and that was my first job, to go and talk to people and say, “Do you want anything done about this? How do you feel about this? Would you like a cultural project about this?”—not even saying “play”, and the response overwhelming [sic] was “yes”. (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication)

Once the decision was taken to proceed, it is clear that practices of administrative exclusion inclined some *Aftershocks* contributors towards allowing their experiences to enter the public realm, with a view to the stories presenting an otherwise unrepresented perspective on the earthquake’s community impacts. Disenchantment with local authorities was a catalyst for some people to participate, as was a distrust of the media’s ability to accurately or appropriately report content that was in the community’s interest. “John Constable [was not] named in any of the contemporary reports and articles about the quake published in the *Newcastle Herald*” (Phillips, 1998, p. 198)². However, within the field of *Aftershocks’* production context itself, some exclusionary practices amongst the storytellers (which, interestingly, eventually featured in the narrative content of *Aftershocks*) also occurred:

I was a researcher on it [the *Aftershocks* original project] as well as the Arts Organizer. For instance a guy I interviewed had never got to tell his story before because he was outside Newcastle when it happened and he was flying back. And one of the first things that I’ll never forget, when I interviewed him, one of the first things he said to me was, “I haven’t talked about this before”. And I realized then how there was this exclusion thing going on. People felt that [they] didn’t really have that big a right to talk if they weren’t there. So it was quite a cathartic thing for him I think when he first talked, and he actually broke down when he told us in the interview. (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication)

I was working away in Western Australia temporarily for 3 months . . . Qantas bent over backwards for me. I had excess bags, and they didn’t charge me. And I got back here Saturday morning because the jet, the plane leaving Perth broke down on the tarmac . . . People raise their eyebrows I know that. “What the stuff’s he got to do with it? He wasn’t here!” But they said it added another dimension to it. (ES, personal communication, October 14, 1999)

This particular interviewee had a strong background in industrial relations, trade union negotiations and a strong socialist disposition. Additionally, he had been employed as a waterfront worker and was “in Fremantle at the time of the quake, and we were loading a ship” (Character E, Act 2, Scene 14, p. 31). He also had held a position as a former Newcastle Workers Club Board Director. Despite his spatial dislocation at the time of

² John Constable was employed as a cleaner at the Newcastle Workers Club and was on duty at the time the earthquake struck. He took part in a number of rescues including that of his supervisor Lyn Brown.

the earthquake, and his perceived marginalised status as a worthwhile contributor to the early *Aftershocks* research, ES' personalised histories of fighting the cause (through his industrialised habitus) held him in good stead to add another dimension of socio-cultural depth to the project's narrative. This potential was recognised during the research process, when the WCAC Arts Administrator "interviewed ES, whom she knew from Trades Hall committees", perpetuating an "established relationship" (Brown & The Workers Cultural Action Committee, 2001, p. xiii) founded on collectivist principals of inclusion.³ "I really think he felt he didn't have the right to speak about it" (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication).

Additionally, throughout the author's interview with this person, his politically-motivated and community-focused ethos was also exposed when he stated:

Well I've asked why he [John Constable] didn't get a medal. I've asked how you go about him being recognized. And the person I asked, who is a Member of Parliament, has just conveniently forgotten. If any person wants to get it, he should get it—one who deserves to get it, not wants, deserves to. And he does—not some of the people who came in later. (ES, personal communication)

It appears as though a large part of ES' dispositional drive had been (and continues to be) predicated on actions and dialogue enabling social equity issues to be questioned. In this regard, his inclinations draw "attention to the extent to which actions can become un-reflexive practices, and even deeply embedded habitual behaviours, without ever losing their strategic properties" (Peterson, 2005, p. 131). These personal traits were also apparent in the response ES gave when the author posed a question asking how important it was for the Newcastle community's earthquake experiences to be shared in the first place:

Well, modern media today doesn't get to the real core issues, and what I mean by that is that they don't talk about the real people, they gloss . . . Where you tell the truth about a story, is to me more important, and that style [of *Aftershocks*' preparation and process] that method to me, will deliver a clearer picture to the public than . . . all that other Hollywood and television today . . . which is what—5 seconds of your life? (ES, personal communication)

ES' lack of confidence in the mainstream media to produce appropriate community-interest, rather than industry-induced content, aligns with Bourdieu's ideas about the "decentering of sense and meaning in TV journalism" where "media language sets up oppositions: for example: rich/poor, bourgeois/the masses—notions which go to the heart of the worker movement" (Grenfell, 2004, p. 94). Importantly, in relation to the author's own research imperative, ES' personal opinions, expressed within the context of the WCAC's research and production activities, and eventually encoded within *Aftershocks*' textual representation, also embody defence narratives pertinent to the way Newcastle may be perceived. In a more generalised sense, the scepticism surrounding the likely potential for inaccurate media representations of the city to prevail has also predisposed Novocastrians to participate in acts promoting public unity, reinforcing perceptions of a city that collectively stands together.

³ In the author's interview with the WCAC Arts Administrator they revealed that they had 'dragged [ES] into being a spokesperson a lot' and 'he'd done a lot of public speaking for the project, so he was more practiced . . . We went to an Oral History Association of Australia Conference together, he, Paul [Brown] and I' (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication). ES's acquisition of extended cultural capital fits with Zevenbergen, Edwards and Skinner's explanation of how one may attain symbolic capital: 'agents take on board the culture, or the habitus of the field, and as they amass more capital they become more powerful, gaining more control and legitimacy, so becoming empowered to speak for others' (2002).

A key dynamic of the WCAC's production intent was to enable ordinary Newcastle people to speak of their experiences and to do so within a relatively safe environment they were naturally accustomed to "Agency is always the result of a coming together of the habitus and the specific cultural fields and contexts in which agents 'find themselves', in both senses of the expression" (Schirato & Webb, 2003, pp. 540-541).

The WCAC said: "anyone who wants to give a brief account of what actually happened in the earthquake could they see such and such". They [the interviewers] made certain times, and supposedly most people talked for half an hour, an hour, or 10 minutes or whatever. Four and a half hours later—I finally finished telling what I had to say about the earthquake. (laughs). (JC, personal communication, 15 October 1999)

Even though initially there was a relatively open system for the story research to take place, "it did involve anybody who wanted to be involved. I mean some people didn't want to be involved at all. They couldn't stand the thought of reliving it" (JO, personal communication, 5 November 1999). At the outset, the Workers Cultural Action Committee made certain stipulations as to the conditions under which the storytelling would transpire. Essentially, the members from the Workers Cultural Action Committee conducted their own interpretive research which according to Deetz (2001, p. 23):

... appears motivated to save or record a life form with its complexity and creativity before it is lost ... The concern with community is often connected with the maintenance of a traditional sense of shared values and common practices.

Harnessing creative output through leadership in collaborative processes

In keeping with the WCAC's concerns to respect the sensitivities of those people who were willing to let their story be known, it was decided that a "one-to-one relationship [would be] established between interviewer and interviewee ... all the interviews in some way depended on the dynamic produced by [familiar] relationships" (Brown & The Workers Cultural Action Committee, 2001, p. xiii). Commenting on some of his own research practices, Bourdieu spoke of the beneficial outcomes of personal interviewing, arguing, "it is the uncovering of immanent structures contained in the contingent statements of a discrete interaction that alone allows one to grasp the essential of each [person's] idiosyncrasy and all the singular complexity of [their] actions and reactions ... (1999, p. 618)

Not only did I set up a steering committee, I got together a team of researchers to go and do the interviews. And I chose those people that understood the theory and practice of community theatre and community cultural development, so they were all ... had all even done Honours or whatever in it—in the drama department, and had practical experience. (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication)

While the interview relationships generally involved understandings of a shared community agenda and a social benevolence, from the WCAC's position, they also combined the specialised habitus of individuals skilled in the practices of communicative critique. These operational contingencies had direct bearings on the information the storytellers felt comfortable disclosing. When asked by the author about how much the WCAC researcher guided him throughout the original *Aftershocks* interview process, one interviewee replied: "She allowed me to ramble on through it, because as now, as then, it was emotional for me ... she had set questions but it [the dialogue exchange] just expanded on each one" (ES, personal communication).

Consequently, the conversational intimacy established throughout the interview stages of *Aftershocks*' development continued to enhance the production work to follow, eventually complementing the textual effectiveness of the final script.

With the nature of this particular type of project, it's not one person like a producer or a creative team, a director, writer deciding "we want to get this up in performance and then tape it to go on the street and then it can go to Melbourne, and then it can be licensed out, and then we'll go to film". It was never in a small group of hands . . . and that's been the incredible thing, the challenge about it. (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication)

The prospect of *Aftershocks* developing as a noteworthy cultural artifact beyond the scope of its initial production was promising but from this point the Workers Cultural Action Committee guided the project toward acquiring professional expertise.

We were meeting [writers] who had expertise in community and cultural development, art and reading life etc. We wanted someone who was experienced in community cultural development, performance projects . . . it couldn't have just been a playwright per se. (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication)

In consultation with some representatives from state and federal funding bodies, arts funding bodies, [we said] "we're looking for a writer with all these things, who would you recommend?" And then we got a big list, and we approached them . . . He had a really strong CV of understanding the principles of that kind of work rather than the more traditional, common sense or mythical understanding of a writer who just . . . thinks something themselves and writes it by themselves. He was very strongly aware of community participation and control, in the process, which is what we wanted. (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication)

Paul Brown was employed as "Community Writer in Residence in late November 1990" (Brown & The Workers Cultural Action Committee 2001, p. ix). As Fowler argues, "within the huge field of symbolic goods, value is related to the time a product lasts or its felt durability, criteria which are intricately linked to the distinction of either producers or consumers" (Fowler, 1997, p. 161). As far as Paul Brown was concerned, symbolic value had been attributed to the newly employed *Aftershocks* scriptwriter through the cultural capital he had previously acquired working with sociologically-focused and regionally-based community groups⁴. Brown's credentials as a distinctive producer, established through his praxis, then impacted on the ways *Aftershocks*' planning and intended coding was proposed to funding bodies by other field participants,⁵ "A . . . grant application to the Literature Board of the Australia Council" stipulated "that the play he would write would not be a conventional one, but a piece of verbatim theatre" (Phillips, 1998, p. 208).

Consequently, the writer's prior "community theatre work in which local stories were the fundamental building blocks of the drama" (Brown & The Workers Cultural Action Committee 2001, p.xii) had a bearing on institutionalised decisions made about the economic viability of the project getting started, as well as opinions about the suitability of his position in its formulation. Furthermore, it was anticipated that Brown's dispositional sensitivities would show that he knew "in a non-logical intuitive way the

⁴ Brown "started out as a scientist in geo-chemistry", co-founded "Sydney's Death Defying Theatre . . . worked on documentaries, in community theatre (Coal Town, Murray River Story) and coordinated the campaign division of Greenpeace Australia" (Burchall, 1995, p. 20).

⁵ "Grants from the Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council, and the NSW Office of the Ministry for the Arts, provided the money for a professional production to be mounted" (Phillips, 1998, p. 209).

nature of emotions” and could therefore help to create “forms that [would] enable the true expression of these emotions”, producing through joint efforts an *Aftershocks* text embodying “objectified feeling” (Codd, 1988, p. 10). One of the strategies designed to evoke feeling was to implement original storytellers’ recollections that included what Wetherell, Taylor and Yates (2001, p. 242) refer to as “emotion metaphors”:

Emotion categories are not graspable merely as individual feelings or expressions, and nor is their discursive deployment reducible to a kind of detached, cognitive sense making. They are discursive phenomena and need to be studied as such, as part of how talk performs social actions. (2001, p. 242)

In the following scene from the play, a husband and wife (Workers’ Club maintenance worker and patron recreation activities coordinator respectively) describe the events when the earthquake struck:

ACT 1, SCENE 3:

CHARACTER FA: “And as I went to walk away, everything started to shake and shudder. I’ll never forget the noise. And the timbers and that coming down.”

CHARACTER BA: “The death of a building.”

CHARACTER FA: “It was like a building in pain, like screeching, and groaning . . . and then total silence, as everything just settled. It came slowly. It was . . . it was agonizing. It was a terrible feeling.”

(Brown & The Workers Cultural Action Committee 2001, p. 7)

These are direct examples from the text that provide strong evidence for the power of the language to communicate *Aftershocks*’ highly personal and experiential stories in ways that may accommodate collective recognition. “For a sense of place to emerge from a set of experiences, there needs to be a complex interplay of feeling and understanding which is then communicated” (Cameron, 2003, p. 4). Many reviews of *Aftershocks* emphasised the communicative potency of the play’s dialogue:

To invert the old cliché, it’s a case of a word creating a thousand pictures. The survivors’ statements are phlegmatic, understated, often ironic, funny, rarely sentimental but moving and disquieting. (Carroll, 1995, p. 7)

The language is all verbatim transcription; and what vigorous, vivid language. (Payne, 1993, p. 135)

When one of the *Aftershocks* storytellers was asked to comment on the way the story dialogue was compiled post-transcription, she stated: “it was very, very verbatim. It was very verbatim. It was exact what was said. And nothing was tempered [sic] with at all” (EG, personal communication, 17 January 17, 2000). Interestingly, this exchange between the author and the former Newcastle Workers Club employee revealed precisely how some of the narrative ingredients for the *Aftershocks* script may have revealed themselves (via recording analysis) and, generatively, gained entry into the text:

We added to the transcripts many of the sighs, laughs and other non-word sounds that accompanied the storytelling on tape. It is indeed the repetitions, convolutions, pauses, malapropisms, idiom, vocabulary and non-word sounds that make each character’s voice as distinctive as a fingerprint. (Brown & The Workers Cultural Action Committee 2001, p. xiv)

Ordinary language's capacity to communicate cultural experiences

Some of the idiosyncratic dialogue that has been encoded in the text includes a Workers' Club cleaner who took part in the rescues: "And I turn around and look back at the Club, and my jaw drops in unbelief you know. I can't believe what had happened" (Character JC, Act 1, Scene 5, p. 11); as well as a female bar attendant who assisted with first aid: "I was thrown from the beer panel, and I hit the fridge. I must have lost my footage and I fell to the floor . . ." (Character KI, Act 1, Scene 3, p. 5). This attention to the idiom aligns with Rosaldo's ethnographic approach to understanding "the cultural construction of the self and the emotions", where the researcher claimed that "cultural idioms provide the images in terms of which our subjectivities are formed" (1984, p. 100). Similarly, Burman and Parker (1993, p. 1) proclaim that "language contains the most basic categories that we use to understand ourselves; affecting the way we act as women or as men . . . and reproducing the way we define our cultural identity". In this regard, it may be argued that, by adhering to the ordinariness of the storytellers' idiolects, resonant connections between their social positions, their personalities, and their experiences were meaningfully applied.

It was . . . up to Brown, subject to the authenticity control of a steering committee of club workers and other unionists, to cull [the] mass of oral history and structure it into dramatic form. (Hoad, 1993, p. 82)

Much has been made of the scripting techniques' capacities to authentically embody the essence of the storytelling characters and their testimonies, and these were used extensively by Paul Brown. From the perspectives of the first-hand storytellers, Paul Brown's "track record in community consultation processes" (WCAC Arts Administrator, personal communication) and his ability to be "totally diligent and responsible and thoughtful in keeping the words of the original people without embellishing them in any way" (JO, personal communication) singled him out as a practitioner who brought to the production of *Aftershocks* a degree of artistic integrity and an appreciation of the social power of ordinary storytelling techniques. His habitus enabled him as an "interlocuter-compiler" to develop a "textual simulacrum of direct oral expressions" including "*popular speech and the devices of oral storytelling*" to create "what semioticians call a 'reality effect'" [original emphasis] (Beverley, 2000, p. 557). As Davis (2007, p. 108) articulates, "the strict verbatim form gives a sense of immediacy and authenticity". These proximal evaluations of narrative fidelity were concepts that were also endorsed by reviewer Guy Rundle when he suggested that the "economy" and "plain beauty of much of the expression" resulted in "well rendered representations of the accents and attitudes of a working town" (1995, p. 19). Brown's community qualifications, and the valuable experience his professional habitus could bring to the production process, therefore influenced the potential for the felt durability of *Aftershocks* to persist due to the shape it was likely to take and the relationships involved in its creative construction.

Conclusion

Using a combination of intertexts, interviewee data and the application of Bourdieu's theory of habitus, this paper has discussed communicative imperatives and production praxis at the centre of the WCAC's *Aftershocks* project. It has described some of the localised political motivations for ordinary stories of Newcastle earthquake experiences to be formalised within cooperative frameworks of community focus. These common

purpose objectives have given insight as to how working-class and socialist ideals may be embedded in creative activities designed to circumvent traditional power relationships. In considering the ideological intent of the production team, explanations have been given as to why the scriptwriter was chosen, how the storytelling information was gathered, and why the processes dictating the shape the text took as a performative genre developed. The important role that vernacular language has played in disseminating city detail in terms of Newcastle's socio-cultural heritage and industrial history and in offering vivid accounts of its residents' first-hand dilemmas has been explored, using actual play dialogue and review content to recapitulate. Moreover, the ideas discussed throughout this paper present further opportunities for both socio-political and creative activities centered on responses to environmental disasters to be examined.

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