

“We’ll both belong to the place”: Developing cultural awareness through receptivity and recognition

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Brisbane-based filmmaker and visual artist Teone Reinthal’s professional background arises from various creative fields, including professional music, theatre, ABC TV, advertising and graphic design. Teone received the Griffith Award for Academic Excellence in 2006 & 2007, and has produced an extensive collection of paintings and sculptures, many of which include commissioned works in private collections in Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America, China, Holland, Germany and Papua New Guinea. Teone has twice received professional development grants from Arts Queensland to research and produce *BELONGINGS* (a multi-disciplinary visual arts project raising stories about identity and heritage/2005) and *GOSSAMER ROADS*—documenting the Salaam Project, profiling the rich traditions of Muslim women artists living in Brisbane, 2008.

Abstract

As a filmmaker commissioned to produce community narrative films, I frequently work in partnership with Indigenous communities.

The following essay is based on philosophical perspectives gathered from encounters with Indigenous elders and community leaders during several years of intensive Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness studies and creative collaboration.

In accordance with, and with respect for an Indigenous cultural frame of reference, the majority of the included citations are drawn from speeches and interviews conducted with Indigenous elders and cultural educators during the course of film production field research.

The scholarly purpose for this paper is to punctuate the trajectory of ongoing grounded theory research, reporting on key, cultural aspects of production field research in a linear, and largely non-critical reflection, purely as a means of advancing the understanding of intercultural relations in the process of developing an autoethnography of theoretical contextualisation.

Preface

The opportunity to humbly acknowledge the traditional people of Australia is paramount to my task of appropriately commencing this essay. I gratefully cite the work and dedication of the following professors of Australian culture, custodians of traditional methods of learning, activists and pioneers for the sustainable future of Indigenous people everywhere.

- Anthony Gordon
- Owen McAvoy
- John Roberts
- Mary Graham
- Ada Simpson

- Patsy Nagas
- Elverina Johnson
- Aunty Flo Watson
- George Currie
- Martin Watego
- Rupert Reuben
- Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Bauman
- Brad Currie

This paper was inspired by the work of two extraordinary Australian women. In 1997 I attended a women's retreat in Tathra on the south coast of New South Wales. It was at this gathering that I was handed a paper titled *Dadirri: Listening to one another*, which contained some of the most provocative writing I have ever read. *Dadirri*, written by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Bauman of the Ngangiwumirr language group, captured my whole attention.

The second motivation arose from a series of compelling comments made by Kombumerri elder and Indigenous cultural awareness educator, Mary Graham, in a range of lectures and interviews given between 2006 and 2008. My first exposure to Mary Graham's wisdom was arranged by my mentor, Kunganji elder, Aunty Flo Watson, who encouraged me to develop Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness in preparation for collaborative work I was undertaking as an arts officer and filmmaker working with Indigenous people in North West Brisbane in 2006.

Since that time I have been immersed in creative partnerships with Indigenous people, their communities and organisations. These collaborations have culminated in the production of numerous community development films; produced either as documentaries, or performed narrative dramas. This paper engages with, and responds to cultural awareness considerations made by several contributing speakers during the course of my production field research, and my paper's function is simply to signpost a point of entry to the critical issues, urging deeper investigation of intercultural definitions and theories.

Our people are used to the struggle and the long waiting. We still wait for the white man to understand us better. We ourselves have spent many years learning about the white man's ways; we have learnt to speak the white man's language; we have listened to what he had to say. This learning and listening should go both ways. We are hoping people will come closer. We keep on longing for the things that we have always hoped for, respect and understanding. (Ungunmerr Bauman, 1988)

Introduction

Culturally, I identify with my mother's people. My mother is a Norfolk Islander, raised in a microcosmic society defined by the blended features of Polynesian and British heritage. Historically, the islanders' inter-dependence as a geographically delineated community was determined by an ability to survive and flourish in the isolation of their Pacific locations (Pitcairn and Norfolk Islands).

The all-pervading sense of “place” and “belonging” that exists in my mother’s clan has infused my identity and assisted in my cultural learning with Indigenous Australians. These “belonging” qualities have established a philosophical framework for developing greater receptivity to traditional community social structures, as well as fostering a capacity for recognition of the multi-layered meanings frequently centred within cultural teaching stories. The touchstone of that recognition revealed itself to be an effective listening skill. The interrelational ethics of small, traditional communities, whilst founded upon diverse cultural practices and ideological frameworks, share significantly similar values.

Hence, the overarching goal in my paper seeks to encourage others preparing to work in partnership with Indigenous people and communities to develop their own inherent capacities for effective listening as a vital foundation for increasing receptivity to, and recognition of, cultural wisdom.

As a multidisciplinary visual and performing artist, frequently working interculturally and in collaboration with Indigenous communities, my emerging qualitative research framed as grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is located in the academic field of visual culture (Plate, 2002; Kaplan, 2007), yet transits through a range of social frameworks and discourses, including disability studies (Davis, 2002; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Toombs, 1995), identity theory (Pollock, 1995; Cerulo, 1997; Huddy, 2001) and cultural studies (Geertz, 1973; Bhabha, 1994).

Methodologically, this qualitative research informs an autoethnography of practice-led creative processes and intercultural elements arising from the textual analysis of a substantial collection of published films produced between 2005 and 2010. The principal theme of the artworks explores intercultural dimensions of marginalised identity. As a thalidomide-affected person, I have an adaptive ontology of disability. The following essay draws from film production partnerships with a number of Indigenous people and communities, produced between 2005 and 2010.

This paper makes no attempt to speak for, or on behalf of, Indigenous people, nor does it seek to “essentialise” or homogenise cultural meaning. The task here is simply to examine several powerful public statements made by Indigenous elders, Mary Graham (2006), George Currie (2009), Owen McAvoy (2006), John Roberts (2007), Ada Simpson (2007), Elverina Johnson (2008) and Brad Currie (2010), typically gathered from interviews conducted with them, and to consider their words as inspirational examples of cultural integrity.

Part A Receptivity

Structure and orientation

“We’ll both belong to the place” is a discussion that best proceeds from the cultural orientations that follow in selected interview segments filmed in partnership with several Indigenous elders and community leaders. In stabilising the structure of the paper, however, it’s important to make several preliminary comments that help to anchor my intent.

I acknowledge there are many ethical considerations and conceptual structures embedded in the disparate philosophies derived from non-Indigenous people working with Indigenous people and a large body of complex analysis and detailed critical theory

relevant to the discussion (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Hooks, 1994); however, the emerging organic narrative or autoethnographic (Deck, 1990) framing of this paper also reveals its primary function as an adjunctive production commentary to a range of films produced over a period of several years.

My visual culture (Plate, 2002) research arises from experimental forms of studio “practice as social action” (Kaplan, 2007), which at a theoretical level may be seen as an investigation of liminal spaces between cultural studies, disability studies and identity theory (Plate, 2002). Investigations of these interrelations become far more compelling when illuminated by distinctions made by cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha:

It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the inter-subjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed “in-between”, or in excess of, the sum of the “parts” of difference [usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.?(Bhabha, 1994, p. 15).

In constructing this paper, I realise that many seasoned academics and scholars have already generated much valuable discussion and literature on the issues raised herein. The absence of critical engagement with their academic discourse on issues such as decolonisation and colonial sovereignty (Bradfield, 2003) occurs because of this paper’s intention; its primary focus is to reflect upon cultural lessons directly received from the Indigenous authorities cited within the paper. This is clearly a beginning place, with recognition that the pursuit of much broader theoretical understanding of the issues must naturally follow in the course of my intercultural studies, to critically inform the emerging ideas.

As a philosophical engagement with organic narrative, however, the emphasis here is placed upon personal encounters wherein the filmmaking process was invited, commissioned or supported by Indigenous people and communities to collaborate on projects promoting positive perspectives, appropriately featuring cultural practices, and highlighting milestones of self-determination and community care.

My decision to contain the scope of the paper is also compatible with the method of producing Indigenous-specific films, whereby the incorporation of images and sounds is only collected from landscapes within the countries of the people with whom I am collaborating. Going “*beyond*” would effectively break the production rapport, corrupt the project narrative, and erode trust in my ability to maintain cultural respect. I elect therefore to speak of what I have been allowed to film, to reflect upon the shared wisdom so generously contributed to my cultural awareness field studies, and respectfully close the gate behind me before I venture (theoretically) “*beyond*”.

Therefore, the following considerations seek to interpret and respond to selected lessons, examining the ideas in relation to perceived non-Indigenous identity constructs such as “technology-as-culture”, engaging with the intercultural themes that emerged in the discussions, and explore notions of “place” and “displacement” relative to the community ethos of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

As a final orientation to the paper, I would describe “receptivity” and “recognition”, according to my own understanding, as human values in action. *Receptivity*, herein expressed as an open, willing, and conscious state of attentive listening, demonstrates respectful acknowledgement of a speaker’s authority to speak and their cultural right to be fully heard. The matter of authorisation, or the “recognised” power and permission

to speak, is a “socio-cultural” issue of importance and one that I learned from the traditional family values of my own upbringing; a code of culture where younger generations were expected to exercise attentive listening when elders spoke, where younger generations automatically left the room when adults indicated the desire to speak about “grown up” business, where younger generations earned the privilege of being heard by elders as a measure of developing maturity and the demonstration of social responsibility.

This code of authorisation caused younger generations to revere the wisdom of aunts, uncles and grandparents, to cherish their attention, to follow guidance and deeply appreciate one’s elders. The invitation to speak and to participate in adult communication, when it came, was acknowledgement of one’s own emerging status and maturity, a rite of passage into adulthood. To speak “*out of place*”, was to incur the irritation of parents and older siblings who would reprimand us until we learned the code of authorisation. Not only did this cultural code occur in the fabric of my mother’s island community family, it is a code of behaviour that harkens back to an age where people still used such courtesies as “please” and “thank you”. It is a social code, deeply rooted in the awareness of one’s cultural sense of “place”. The ability to demonstrate appropriate cultural “receptivity” earns trust.

Part two of the paper, *Recognition*, describes key methods of my practice, highlighting several components of an emerging production ethos, showing examples of the creative mirrors developed to incorporate and reflect back important aspects of the cultural guidelines set out by elders during the preliminary chapters (*receptive stage*) of my orientation with each community.

There is that notion among Aboriginal people everywhere about being very careful what you pass on to people. There’s not that notion that history has made us, so therefore any information and knowledge that you have about volatile, or unhappy or tragic things are generally handled very carefully, because there’s this awareness that when you’re passing on this information, you don’t know, actually, how young people receive it until they are older, they don’t know themselves how they are receiving it. A whole lot of other factors come into it, how the children themselves have been brought up, you know, what kind of situation they’re in, what other kinds of impacts, how they learn and so on, you have to be really careful how you pass those things on (Graham, personal communication, April 2006).

The paper’s second section, *Recognition*, also raises some challenging questions about place and displacement, with a brief discussion of “ideosyncratic behaviours” (Twyman, 1982), perceived as emerging by-products of increasingly dysfunctional fixations with digital media technology (Currie, 2010). The questions merely serve to flag unexplored pathways for deeper investigation, and draw attention to the far-reaching implications of *technology-as-culture* for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies.

Indigenous world view

In a 2006 interview, cultural educator and Indigenous studies lecturer Mary Graham made an observation that “*white fellers*” may yet come to discover their own sense of place, replete with recognition for custodial ethic and belonging. This was an exciting comment that tossed down an intriguing gauntlet to all curious, non-Indigenous dreamers:

You hear elderly Aboriginal people say that white fellers haven't got a Dreaming, and all that really means is that they don't realise that they have a Dreaming, and it hasn't occurred to them yet, and I've heard that quite often. So when they do, then they'll have a truly, deeply, fundamental sense of themselves, in a deeper Dreaming sense and then we'll have something to talk about, then we can really communicate, because both peoples will have truly belonged to the place, in-sync, you know . . . we'll both belong to the place. (Graham, personal communication, April 2006)

Graham's lectures on the Indigenous world-view offer a tremendous depth of knowledge of global history and politics, enabling her to present a contextualised, theoretical articulation of the Dreaming for non-Indigenous people. The Dreaming is extremely difficult to explain; each tribal clan or nation has its own definitions bound to a variety of protocols preventing outsiders from discussing the cultural business of others. As she explains, there are many layers of meaning embedded within traditional cultural stories, and a powerful sense of responsibility for how the stories are handed down; there are always many and deeply poignant social lessons to be learned, not only from Dreaming stories, but from the personal histories of Indigenous people, which frequently contain miseries and tragedies resulting from harsh governances and the social controls administered by religious institutions and non-Indigenous politicians (Graham, 2006).

Such careful consideration for determining the right way for information to be shared, and decisions made within traditional communities, is echoed in comments made by Community Cultural Development Officer and Mununjali elder, George Currie.

When in-depth stuff needs to be spoken about, the people who are making decisions, the older fellers, that's [only] when they speak . . . when it's time to let everyone know . . . that's when they bring in the younger generations, so to speak . . . to have input. (Currie, personal communication, November 2008)

Both comments from Graham and Currie describe a tacit awareness of social responsibility operating within traditional communities, whereby elders and adults recognise the importance of "right timing, right people" in how information is shared. There is not an automatic assumption that such a framework of responsibility is generally shared by all Indigenous people; rather, it is interesting to reflect that the Kombumerri people and the Mununjali people both belong to the Yugambeh language group of tribes. The teaching stories of Graham and Currie are deeply thoughtful, sophisticated lessons in intercultural, community collaboration.

The tradition of the local mob was that when we went fishing, dolphins would help to herd fish, shoal the fish in, and when they did that, Aboriginal people would go out with nets, and it would be just like takeaway, basically, they would just take what they wanted, and take it up on the beach, sort things out, and then they would always pay . . . or give, or share their part of the catch with the dolphins, and they would be quite happy . . . [and] go away until the next time. But one day, there was a group, a family who was doing this, and they caught the fish, brought it up onto the beach, a whole lot, and sorting things out . . . (and for some unknown reason, it's never clear in the story), they decided simply not to share it. So they took the whole catch home, (whatever the reason was), and from that moment on, those dolphins, the people who were, y'know, that tribe of . . . that mob, dolphin mob, went away, actually. They just simply went away. There was no kind of punishment as such, they just simply went away and didn't come back. (Graham, personal communication, April 2006)

There are two distinctly different methods (film genres) used in the harvesting of field research; one production path produces community narrative documentaries, and my other function is to write, direct and teach narrative drama. The

documentaries have operated as foundational cultural awareness lessons, and the subsequent narrative dramas have allowed supported access in creative engagement with Indigenous youth. This arrangement has operated very effectively in accordance with the cultural guidelines outlined in the precursive documentary stream.

The opportunity to archive project development is an added feature of producing companion film components. The “*production bible*” method of constructing a consulted cultural guidance documentary, as a project formula, has enabled very satisfying outcomes for partnered projects. Needless to say, this method of receiving and then feeding back is also a structural floor plan for how this paper proceeds.

Observational documentary (as described from within an ethnographic genre) might well be described as a sponsored entry into the sanctified places of any defined culture, where the filmmaker seeks exposition from members of the tribe; chasing the most secret of rituals, collecting traditional songs of legendary achievements and angling for accounts of the harshest of days (MacDougall cited in Reinthal, 2008). As iconic as the Indigenous culture industry has been commercially developed to be, tribal elders generally maintain close and careful watch over the integrity and subsequent dissemination of spiritual teachings and traditional stories (including songs and dances) assessed as publicly appropriate, evaluated by the nature of audiences with which they are being shared, (Nagas, personal communication, September 2006).

Unfortunately, it is common practice for so many “*great, white hunters*” within mainstream media to “*barge in*” demanding admission into traditional ceremonies and cultural events, fetishising traditions as peak, mystical experiences to be collected, filmed, photographed and captured as currency (MacDougall, 1998, chapter 4). Upholding the core Indigenous values of respect, relationship and responsibility assists filmmakers and media producers when visiting Indigenous communities; these are the foundations of traditional culture, not only for Indigenous societies, but for all traditional social groups, (Watson, personal communication, 2007).

Cherbourg elder Ada Simpson wistfully reflects upon the widespread diminishment of respect for property in stark contrast to valued aspects of the disciplined order of belonging to a responsible community in her early life on the mission during the *Indigenous Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act of 1897-1967* (commonly referred to as “living under the Act”).

When we were growing up, we were always taught to respect our elders and to respect property, even though we didn't have a lot of things, but we still respected other people's property as well. But you don't see that any more, with all the graffiti and all the smashed windows, and houses, you don't see that any more. Mind you, I'm told it doesn't only happen here, it happens all over. That's a sad thing I believe. (Simpson, personal communication, April 2007)

Film and media production involving Indigenous communities can function appropriately with an adherence to Terri Janke's *Pathways and protocols*, the current Screen Australia guidelines for filmmakers working with Indigenous communities, (Janke, 2010). Additionally, perhaps the most fundamental element to crafting successfully partnered, intercultural film projects is to formulate project-specific guidelines based on the protocols and requirements of the community, developed in

consultation with the community's own cultural recommendations, relying on the advice and guidance of elders and community leaders.

Entering projects with the intention of listening well, and responding with respectful representation in the final edited film material, demonstrates deference to the community's own cultural authority in what is accessible to filmmakers. Clear benefits result from arriving with the willingness to learn, developing flexibility in dealing with how and when things occur and maintaining respect for each community's own cultural way of doing things.

Although the right to question and speak out about the turbulent history of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples belongs in the social conscience of all Australians, it remains an extremely challenging area of inquiry, fraught with the propensity for offending some whilst appeasing others. Bitter struggles continue to exist in the perpetually colonial circumstances of interventionist, non-Indigenous methods of identifying and addressing the ontology of Aboriginal people (Nicoll, 2004).

The lateral nature of Indigenous social law operates in strong contrast to the hierarchical administration of western colonial authority, making for difficult negotiation of social governance. Each tribal country contains its own cultural laws and protocols, and to address Indigenous culture as any one single entity is to make a sweeping erasure of the cultural, spiritual and custodial identities of whole and individual nations of people (Graham, personal communication, 2006).

We have been practicing our culture for thousands and thousands of generations. We want to strongly maintain and practice our culture . . . [we] want to stay in our communities and pass on traditional knowledge to the future generations. For old people the intervention is bringing up bad memories of the past, the old days, the ration days, the dog tag days and the mission days. (PAPA meeting interviews, retrieved April 27, 2010 from <http://rollbacktheintervention.wordpress.com/statements/>)

Clarity of professional and ethical intentions enables the provision to performing (and, in fact, all) artists of a space that is in no way attempting to rehabilitate or superimpose external values about people's personal, creative or cultural choices. Each project serves to creatively open doors to intercultural discussion, and to stimulate an exploration of new pathways towards empowered experiences in self-development for all participants, seeking to stimulate, engage and develop aptitudes for creative expression.

Careful consideration of Indigenous cultural awareness guidelines assists non-Indigenous people to better understand and develop interpersonal communication tools that furnish a more sustainable and ethical practice of intercultural collaborations based on effective listening wherein the question must frequently be asked *"to whom is this project bringing benefit?"*

Part B Recognition

A journal of creative theory and intercultural collaboration

It has long been my experience that inside each of us exists an inner tribe, a hidden world of character fragments; multiple pieces of a complex core identity formed by an incalculable variety of organic responses to life-exposure. Consider then, that our

creative expressions were reverberations of inner or abstracted personal meaning, coded as projected, outer narratives (Jung, 1961 cited in Kaplan, 2007, p. 23).

What if these unfathomably symbolic interpretations of life, as described or depicted by an inner self, an observer self, could freely speak, fluent in the turbulent, patterned sequences of poetry, music, painting, dance, literature, comedy, drama and sculpture, whereby each expression extrapolated on behalf of our non-verbal, non-linear or non-literal selves? (Kaplan et al., 2003).

In my capacity as a narrative drama director, my role is to first earn trust and then build capacity in my cast in order to engage creative willingness to experiment with performed improvisation. This is a complex process that has required enormous personal investment. Taking cues from Indigenous elders and community leaders has undoubtedly smoothed the process into a blended, organic, learning encounter for everyone (*Just love them . . . : Positive parenting in Yarrabah*, 2008).

An example of the duality of roles and the required fluidity of responses includes a situation where I was suddenly called upon to stop filming in order to reassure emotionally distraught members of the cast because “bad news” had found its way into the production camp, and the available community workers were attending to a medical crisis elsewhere (*Rain painting*, 2008). The need to provide palpable safety in a solid manner of presence, establishing very clear emotional boundaries for everyone is a requirement of working in Indigenous community-based projects. The relationship requires much more dedicated focus of reinforcement, positive reassurance and unshakable commitment than a simple gesture of typical “white” dismissal.

Mary Graham explains that conflict and volatility are seen as a normal, natural part of the way in which Indigenous communities communicate (Graham, personal communication, 2004). Dramatic displays of emotional expression are anathema to the stereotypically non-Indigenous practice of suppressing and repressing all feeling under the stiff upper “white” lip. Unless there has been sufficient investment of time and personal commitment made to developing creative collaboration, the risk is that the cast may well leave early, go home or just quit. As a result of many lengthy consultations, I gratefully experienced extraordinary commitment from my cast and crew to stay on track, to push through and overcome the usual production disasters, the personal crises, the tedium, the bad news, and sudden sicknesses that have naturally arisen in the course of the production paths. This show of project solidarity and creative community strength has surfaced from making sincere connection with communities, involving my whole family, revealing my own vulnerabilities, demonstrating endurance and maintaining flexibility and respect for the cultural protocols of the community.

The practice of working with untrained actors, under the pressure of limited time frames, with low or no budgets created an “*invent-by-necessity*” method of directing a structured improvisation style that flowed very effectively (*Blue colour*, 2007; *The edge*, 2008).

This process of structured (or assisted) improvisation involves the provision of an outlined screenplay, whereby we usually sit around, I tell the cast a story, and the actors show it back to me. After lengthy discussion and development of the characters’ back-stories, we rehearse and experiment with the performances, and all

the while the camera rolls. Best takes are incorporated into the narrative drama, and interesting examples of the most positive development as takes are incorporated into the documentary production journal.

All dialogue and monologues are experimental; some improvised, some fed line by line, mostly playfully goaded and coerced from the actors in a rapid, organic process of creative development that feeds back significant reinforcement of their emerging skills, aptitudes and talents, initially in the immediate experience of a “take” well done, and follows up later with the evidence in a finished film that usually far exceeds the expectations of the participants.

This practice of directing partnered, experimental narrative frameworks evolved from the sort of crisis management that comes from working with unfeasible time and budget constraints. These limitations forced a collaborative method that recognised the abundant, natural talent that springs from people raised in such strong, cultural traditions of performed narrative (dance, song, storytelling).

There was little or no need to chisel away rigid forms of self-consciousness or strip out the typical layers of fear that non-Indigenous people often display when attempting to act and perform for others and/or to camera for the first time. Assisted improvised dialogue, grounded in the screenplay’s narrative outline, was discovered to deliver great and immediate results, as well as offer actors the right to speak in their own voices. The freedom to avoid stereotypical scripts and impositions of vernacular and colloquial language meant that no one ever said “deadly” unless they really wanted to. There was scope enough for everyone to creatively meet the challenges head-on; with authorship and real freedom to interpret and perform. This style of directing became a conceptual breakthrough that enabled fresh forms of collaboration to occur in mutually satisfying ways. I began to recognise this method as the starting “place” for my studio practice to operate as social action.

American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz suggests that “*acted culture*” (as depicted within ethnographic texts) shapes future identities; impressing subsequent cultural layers as empowering impacts upon the collective “*symbolic action*” frameworks of communities.

The animation of a performed organic narrative—“*improvisation*”—in creative expressions encourages reflexive states of self-actualisation to occur, an application fully articulated by Stanislavski as “active analysis”, whereby Stanislavski’s actors developed theatrical selves, learning applied skills in concentration, imagination and communication (Stanislavski & Hobgood, 1991, pp. 229-232).

As an experimental director, my practice-based theory of creativity resides in two simple, yet effective formulas for initiating new works. Firstly, I establish a conceptual framework that pairs “*Survival*” and “*Mysticism*” (*cultural narrative*) and, secondly, I positively manipulate the motivational directions (*moving towards . . . or away from . . .*) of my cast. Although these practical applications are broadly founded on human values theories of Dr Clare Graves, and psychotherapeutic theories of Dr Milton Erickson and Neuro Linguistics Programming pioneers, Richard Bandler and John Grinder, the specific creative applications and performance models have emerged from my own creative theory of studio practice as social action, particularly as a result of working interculturally.

Utilisation of these practice-based theories delivers dynamic creative outcomes that naturally occur, particularly when a creative binding of mystic rationale is merged with the instinctive human drive for survival.

This happens in a conceptual marriage that engenders potent partnerships of charismatically unstoppable force. Cultural narrative fuels the “survivor’s” (*actor’s*) creative quest with fantastic notions of reason and logic, infusing learning with *raison d’être*, initiating the heroic quest of symbolic purpose, each task becoming radiantly charged by a grail of promise, the possibility of achieving legendary status, a fully developed prowess.

The mythic (or heroic quest) is an embedded feature of all human culture (Campbell, Moyers & Flowers, 1988).

Yarrabah community leader and advocate Elverina Johnson uses just such an evocative call-to-action in her speeches, inspiring young members of the Indigenous community to come to action; challenging the next generation of activists to stand up and speak out about what’s got to change for Aboriginal people and communities.

Being a leader takes courage, even if you have to stand alone sometimes. Sometimes when we want to be leaders, not everyone will follow, not everybody will agree with our vision. Not everybody will agree with what we think is right. But it comes from that consciousness that says “something’s got to be done here. Something’s got to be done in our community about the violence, something’s got to be done about our children not going to school, something’s got to be done about suicide, something’s got to be done about our health problems”. When you get that consciousness from within yourself, that comes from in here (pointing to her heart), that says I’ve got to do something about it, then you may be the only person who can do it at that time. (Johnson, personal communication, May 2008)

Contemporary, creative environments become powerful learning landscape when imbued with organic and primal ideas, re-energised, palpably charged with custodial lessons and heroic constructs that inspire, command and excite curious inhabitants. Reconnection with ideas of a spiritually animated, cultural landscape is a powerfully positive opportunity for creative “reconciliation” to take root in the imaginations of non-Indigenous children and youth. This is perhaps merely a single, vital step towards healing our disregard for land, not only for green spaces, but also for all land, remembering our indivisible connection to nature, and the opportunity to rebuild intercultural relations with each other. Many Indigenous people are actively, urgently promoting such teachings in the hope of rescuing a sustainable future for everyone.

Bundjalung elder and traditional custodian of Wollumbin (Mt Warning) Uncle John Roberts speaks passionately about his own custodial relationship with the spirits of his tribal landscape.

Everywhere I go, you know, I talk to the place, I tell them who I am, and what I’m doing there . . . I come here with respect and honour, and I walk in. But I always let the spirits know I’m coming. (Roberts, personal communication, April 2007)

In a landscape populated by discarnate ancestors, powerfully animated by unseen nature spirits and forces, it is highly practical to respond with strong commitment to respectful, custodial responsibility.

Technology as culture, the argument for place & (in)conclusions

Many of the ideas in this paper flow from an examination of a perceived tension of opposites existing between the intrinsic sense of place and community expressed by so many Indigenous people and the increasing level of social and cultural displacement arising in mainstream, non-Indigenous, western, middle-class society as a result of prolonged digital telesthesia (Wark, 1997). David J. Twyman, Director of the Kings Cross Youth Refuge in the 1980s, originally coined the idea of “*videosyncrasy*” to describe such emerging “behavioural syndromes” as media driven social displacement (Twyman, 1982, p. 1419).

As a user, educator and facilitator of digital media technology, I am becoming critically aware of the potentially negative impacts such insular and isolating pursuits as mastering digital media technology may impose upon the organic, cultural fabric of dynamic Indigenous social interactivity. My assertion here is that particular conditions of social fragmentation have rapidly arisen in non-Indigenous, western society from a widespread identity wanderlust expressed via digital technology-as-culture.

The rapid introduction of digital media technology frameworks raises many challenging questions about the damaging social impacts occurring in small, tight-knit, marginal communities suddenly caught up in the “disembodied narcissism” of online broadcast reality and social networking. There is an idealistic assumption within contemporary, western government and community organisations that the provision of digital media technology and related training to regionally marginalised Indigenous communities is a worthy gesture promising social empowerment. This assumption that such “bringing” *empowers* is a facile reading of the enduring nature of cultural integrity, and an imposition that threatens communities with continued misappropriation and capturing of culture (Janke, 2010).

This challenge to the aggressive promotion of digital technology is not seeking to deprive nor exclude anyone from having access to the tools that can creatively enable communities through viable education resources; rather the debate considers layers of the escalating “mess” that much of non-Indigenous, privileged, western society has created for itself, and begs the question “*how do we assume the right to determine how technology empowers, and to what end?*”

General Manager of Beaudesert’s Indigenous community organisation, Mununjali Housing, Brad Currie expressed the opinion (personal communication, May 27, 2010) that much meaning can be lost and distorted in online communication, where expression is limited to interactions occurring via social networking devices such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. Currie described the crucial absence of body language as a breaking down of the physical component to interaction in both tonality and subtle meaning that occurs when people are sitting in front of a computer engaged in disembodied communication. There is a critical absence of consequence that happens in not fronting the other person in a communication. Aggressive activities that spread and perpetuate community-harming conditions, such as digital gossip and rumour-mongering, threaten communities, causing deep division, anger and pain to erupt. Currie says that awareness of, and receptivity to, body language is fundamental to our social development.

Do such emerging forms of non-Indigenous cultural displacement result from an urge to recreate and represent “self” in a landscape of unlimited digital choice? Is this frantic phenomena tapping directly into the lethargy, the *ennui* of privilege that festers in the white, western, “life stayer” paradigm, imposing widespread conditions of unquenchable yearning? Such yearnings are metaphorical end-products of physical and spiritual disconnection from land, symptoms of our separation from family and community, and ultimately the root cause of our social fragmentation.

Wangan elder Owen McAvoy sings a very old traditional teaching song in the Birri Gubba language about hunting. McAvoy translates it as:

Young fellers, when they get older, when they come into manhood stage there, they got to learn how to go out and get food, hunt for that kangaroo, for food . . . they teach them young fellers how to do it, they give them that spear, what they call a doola, and they teach them how to throw that spear then, and how to get that woora now, and knock him down, then they got to learn how to trail him then, till he drops, and then they have to come along with that nulla nulla and knock him on the head . . . (McAvoy, personal communication, June, 2007)

McAvoy’s explanation of the hunting song goes on to describe that this is a teaching song for emerging men to learn about the very real processes of survival and of sharing; of bringing back the meat to feed everyone, how to put that “*manga in your mouth*”. This is a lesson about taking care of the whole community, all the way from the people to the companion hunters; the dingoes that accompany the men as they set out to hunt for food.

Such a song engages on a very deep level, enlivening the minds of all “young fellers” to get ready for the challenge to survive. In its most powerful, raw and trance-inducing form, this song is a very deep teacher, speaking of the vital importance in properly preparing oneself for life’s longest journeys.

Such songs are sacred codes; preserved forms of an ancient language that commands us all to uphold and honour the established order of our cultural traditions; a principle central in the heart of all Indigenous cultures, and key to the Australian Indigenous cultures which have survived time-spans greater than we may ever fully know.

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