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Talking Country

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Figure 1: Annette Nykiel, 2015, *Discourse of the Country (8767), first light Warakuna*, digital image, courtesy of the artist

I have lived and worked in the Country, in agriculture, in mining and exploration, in art and arts management. I have been to desert and coastal places within Western Australia. As well as the handmade and the home grown, I glean, recycle, recreate, reimagine, and make do. The dust and the mud have entered the pores of my skin; mingled in the air in the space that I breathe, in the cloth that covers me, and the string that I make from it. I have an empathic fascination with what I see and feel around me; a haptic, spatial awareness honed to keep me out of danger (mostly). I have an inextricable attachment to the Country and this forms the basis of my creative practice along with my bricoleur's tool kit and the materials around me.

As a bricoleur, I practice an “improvisational” approach making use of ideas, methods and materials at hand (De Freitas, 2011) informed by experiential and haptic observation in situ (Nykiel, 2014). *Untitled (7573)* (Figure 2) is a bricolage of existing media and methods, at hand, innovatively creating new forms and new meanings.



Figure 2: Annette Nykiel, 2015, *Untitled (7573)*, image of an ephemeral bricolage, courtesy of the artist

This paper is about an argument to open a discussion. It positions me in the context of contemporary Australian ‘Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people’s attachments to land in all their complexity’ (Head, 2000, Nash, 2002). A possible meeting place (Carter, 2013) with ‘[u]nsettling effects and partial understandings . . . more in the spirit of postcolonialism than security and old certainties’ (Nash, 2002). This is an uncomfortable, complex, liminal space of seeking to come to terms with the Country and one’s connection/attachment to it, encompassing the associated politics and myths, for the ‘settler Australians who do not subscribe to the myth of *terra nullius*

and Aboriginal Australians' (Mahood, 2000, Langton, 2012). There are also cultural, social and political influences and appropriation issues at this 'meeting place of traditions' (Radok, 2012). I subscribe to Marcia Langton's (2012) premise that appropriation, a common technique for many artists throughout history 'because of its personal and universal resonance' rather than a 'self-conscious quotation' (Langton, 2012) is an elaboration of an idea in a visual spatial-temporal conversation rather than theft. A discourse that allows ideas to be recontextualised and discussed now to create new meanings and understandings.

Attachment to the Country is coloured by the concept of place and a sacred impulse to belong and make meaning. Veronica Strang (1997) explains 'the concept of place as a repository of history and sentiment, and as an inextricable part of the construction of human identity'. This is 'contested and reformulated to represent cultural as well as personal identity and values ... [these create] attachment to place ... a universal human need ' an 'impulse towards the sacred' (Mahood, 2000). Sasha Grishin quotes Gregory Bateson's concept of the sacred as 'a way to make life make [sic] a certain sort of sense', a way to belong and make meaning (Bateson, as cited in Grishin, 2006). This impulse to make sense may be the introvert myth of the spiritual quest or the extrovert myth of heroism and conquest (Mahood, 2000). In Australia, the introvert spiritual myth, is now equated with Aboriginal attachment to the Country rather than the gnostic myth of the solitary spiritual quest. The heroic, pioneer myth is out of favour in post-colonial thought (Mahood, 2000). Peripatetic women, working and collaborating as artists and service providers in the Country are now superseding the extrovert myth of the masculine hero, explorer and painter with muse (McLean, 2014a, Mahood, 2005, Nykiel, 2010, 2014, Rey, 2009, 2014). *Peripatetic Women* (Figure 3) is an image of peripatetic women in the Country often not seen but still practicing in the Country. In the distance, a 'troopy' full of women, driven by an arts worker heading back from a trip out bush, the photo taken by me at the wheel, while we were stopped waiting for the dust to settle and a telling of a story of this place.



Figure 3: Annette Nykiel, 2015, *Peripatetic Women (8653)*, digital image, courtesy of the artist

Hand makers are championed by Sue Rowley (2003 para 33) who by their slow time, and embodied making resist the notion of the heroic genius. Artists like Nalda Searles, Kim Mahood and myself have made solitary journeys, worked in the desert and continue to articulate attachments to the Country in our creative practices. Peter Latz (Beudel, 2013), like Kim Mahood(2000), who were brought up in the desert with Aboriginal women and kids, express an uncompromising connection to place; an attachment to the desert; which draws them back again and again. Una Rey (2009) describes Kim Mahood's journey "home":

through the deeply mythologized country [sic] of the centre ... overwritten with contemporary Indigenous reality which is warmly inclusive and acknowledging of her attachment to country: belonging is not mutually exclusive, as long as reciprocity is respected.

This description is a good example of Catherine Nash's (2002) interpretation of the term Country and an Indigenist axiology. I define Indigenist as someone who is 'sympathetic to and respectful of Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies but does not necessarily identify' as Aboriginal (Nykiel, 2014).

Attachment to the Country, for me, is about a visceral, sacred need, visualised in *Bound to the Country* (Figure 4), for example. An image from an ephemeral installation of mineral samples (probably bearing traces of blood and sweat) and string (sweat and tears), hand plied from the rags used to clean a place where I had stayed; a place with a long colonial history but with a different significance for me. It is my personal reconciliation with the Country, a sense of belonging, a sense of place, an attachment that is informed but not defined, by my Indigenist ontology and axiology, but more importantly, by time spent and the experiences of a keen, haptic observer and slow, embodied maker. This forms part of my identity.



Figure 4: Annette Nykiel, 2015, *Bound to the Country* (7417), image of installation courtesy of the artist

In discourse with a number of creative Australians, some living or working in the Country, Peter Read (2000) explains belonging to the Country as a knowing, an intimate connection, an emotional and/or spiritual response to a place with which there has been a long term relationship and physical engagement. In Kim Mahood's words, '[e]verything scratches, prickles, burns, abrades' (2012); and blood, sweat and tears that I can well attest to, seem also to be an intrinsic requirement for a "love of the land". Read (2000), also points out issues of cultural anxiety, 'reasoned self-doubt', guilt and the collective nausea of postcolonialism including self-righteousness

on either side, issues of appropriation, and political inertia (Rey, 2014, Read, 2000). Rather than being discursive triggers, these issues tend to stifle conversations, particularly when not in the Country, as political correctness engenders a fear of showing ignorance in case you get it wrong.

However, there are artists meeting and collaborating less hung up on labels, politics and “-isms”. Instead, they are conversing with signs, symbols, language and shared time in the Country to yarn and to materialise their feelings and a shared connection to the Country as *Quietly Making* (Figure 5) documents. Makers, who are beginning to converge in a place, are without expectations of exploitation and romanticism but with a real intention of engagement (Izett, 2005, Radok, 2012, Rey, 2014). At this cultural convergence, this meeting place, artists are quietly and slowly making place-based art with aesthetic value and dare I say *beauty* while critics, and indeed academics, take sides and draw battlelines before retreating to the bunkers of political correctness (Angel, 2012). People are sitting down (often derrieres on the dirt) in the Country, having real space, real time conversations with makers, materials and the place. Erica Izett (2005) describes this as ‘more than aesthetic tribute... [it is] ...embedding a complex new awareness of country [*sic*] within ... [creative] practices’; a quiet making.



Figure 5: Annette Nykiel, 2015, *Quietly Making* (8201), digital image, courtesy of the artist

Anita Angel (2012) building on Bernard Smith's (1988) notion of 'cultural convergence' reminds us that the 'act of convergence does not imply the destruction of either tradition ... [as] aesthetic form transcends cultural divisions' (2012). The "converged" art may be argued to be art 'of the present' rather than "contemporary art" because of its 're-engagement with aesthetic values' and beauty, place and locality rather than the global cosmopolitan. Also the cultural convergence is in the liminal space and time between dichotomies of identity, politics and culture (enforced by post-modernism), a fertile, liminal ground for visual and verbal discourse where conversation in real time is common ground and shared space (and often quite noisy). Una Rey (2014) would agree and Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs (1998) go as far as to 'refuse the language of reconciliation and resolution of polarised difference or national unity' (Nash, 2002).



Figure 6: Annette Nykiel, 2015, *Community Engagement (8619)*, Warakuna, digital image, courtesy of the artist

Community Engagement (Figure 6) articulates the local, place-based community engagement of a non-indigenous arts workers in a remote community. 'Post-Modernism also isolates, ignores or undermines the role of individual non-Indigenous artists' (Angel, 2012) working as service providers directly involved in the Aboriginal art industry who 'have "articulate" the concept of cultural convergence through their "art"' (Angel, 2012) and their community engagement (Rey, 2014).

The exhibition *roads cross* (Thwaites et al., 2012) is an excellent example of the work of these artists, many of whom have had service provider or arts advisory/management roles in remote communities. Other contemporaneous artists including Mandy Martin, Kim Mahood, Nalda Searles, Cecile Williams, Una Rey, Johnathon Kimberley and John Wolseley and myself also practice this way. Others like Jo Foster, Thisbe Purich, Claire Freer, Edwina Circuit, Ange Leech, Louise Allerton, have put their individual practices on hold while facilitating this cultural convergence, so the public/social art becomes their practice. To articulate this, we spend time sitting down on the Country, in doing so, we find what Erica Izett(2005) describes as:

a way of making art that, no matter how individual, ... [that is] notably informed by an Indigenous ethic of place ...[and has] an astounding acuity for the semiotics of country, and a passion to articulate it.

This leads to a quiet making, slow, embodied and place-based as Tim Acker reflects on his involvement in the *Canning Stock Route Project* (2010), working with local people, arts workers and artists 'spending time in country with them, sitting down quietly' (Acker, as cited in Rey, 2009). *Embodied Making* (Figure 7), documents my slow, embodied making while 'out bush' using repurposed, local plant/earth dyed cloth in the Country around Warakuna.



Figure 7: Annette Nykiel, 2015, *Embodied Making* (8692), digital image, courtesy of the artist

Indigenous scholar Brian Martin (2013) comments that ‘culture can support and refigure a cohesive and collective identity in Australia’. Juanita Sherwood (2009) agrees and she asks:

every Australian to examine the impact colonization [sic] has upon their past and present in order to formulate a future that does not reinstate the past ... a discourse [informed by] ... a balance of truths and histories.

This flies in the face of the rhetoric of post-modernism and the contemporary art ontology – globalisation, cosmopolitanism, diaspora, creolisation outlined by Ian McLean (2014a, 2014b). However, it supports Langton’s ‘creolisation of Australian culture’ (2012) and Anita Angel’s (2012) call challenging ‘fixed art historical categories and false binary oppositions’. Ian Mclean (2014b) in his keynote address to the “*The Undiscovered*” symposium in Perth citing Okwini Enwezor and agreeing with Terry Smith (Public lecture Contemporary Art: World Currents UWA July 25, 2011) would argue that much of today’s art is not contemporary. Contemporary art is an ontology rather than just art made today, and ‘is geared towards cosmopolitanism, globalisation, creolisation and diasporic relations, discourses that are hostile to identity discourses’ but conducive to “international discovery” (McLean, 2014b). Mclean (2014b) also commented that the rest of the world is over identity politics; Métis appropriation artist and scholar David Garneau (2013, 2014) is one who would disagree. So, should we be talking about “the Country” at all in this contemporary context? Is it only from a historical context and a faithful recording of now, for the future, as Ted Snell (2014) intimated at the *The Undiscovered* symposium that race, nation, or gender are important?

This is the antithesis of Paul Carter’s *Ground Truthing* (2010) and mythopoetic wisdom which encourages multiple threads, regionalism and shared histories and perhaps why there are few meeting places (2013). I would agree, along neo-materialistic lines (Bolt, 2013), that not knowing and talking about the Country not only depersonalises and dehumanises people (from an empathetic rather than anthropocentric point of view) but puts the Earth itself in jeopardy. As Barbara Bolt states ‘the new materialist discourse derives its urgency from the ethical, ecological and political imperatives that loom as a consequence’ of the anthropocentric narrative (2013). Therefore, it is important to discuss the Country and the people who share it. I am a bricoleur maintaining and strengthening my awareness of and attachment to the Country (Nykiel, 2014):

For me, creative research and material thinking, are a partially tacit and embodied epistemology where a critical engagement with and handling of

materials and objects in the ... [Country] are a necessary part of the creative process.

By exhibiting my art and communicating my thoughts, here, now, I am a string connecting to the Country. The string, *String Journal* (Figure 8), I make is a document and a process of my travels, a metaphor for my practice and for the journey as well as a physical object 'For the bricoleur to use the means at hand ... she must first be aware of them' (Kincheloe, 2008).



Figure 8: Annette Nykiel, 2014 *String Journal* (5584), digital image, courtesy of the artist

Art, being a creative media, allows big questions to be asked and articulated. Viewing and discussing art and these questions becomes an experience, which can be assigned value, as one cannot value what one has not experienced (Barrett, 2013, Angel, 2012). Regionalism, local solutions to local problems, celebrates diverse culture including creolisation in cohesive and collective ways and 'forge links among people' rather than express differences (Rose, 1996). I seek to go beyond a nationalistic, racial, gender focus to a far less anthropocentric agenda focussing on the Country to increase knowledge and appreciation of the Country 'of the present'

(Angel, 2012). Perhaps these discussions will be retrospectively judged as post contemporary. While taking place now, they forego the 'contemporary ontology' in favour of the local, and the diverse.

This response to the Country will extend arts-practice in Australia, because this is, where it is taking place, now. *Unstrung Journey* (Figure 9), typifies my response to the Country. The outcomes of this quiet making, the exhibiting of these responses and the resulting critique should be encouraged as it enriches and humanises Australian art and identity today.

As to the world stage, who knows? It may well be judged too parochial to be 'discovered' in the overgeneralised, unspecified spatio-temporal context of postcolonialism in this contemporary world (Nash, 2002). However, it is important to have ongoing discourse about the Country: the spaces, places, the people, and an exploration of personal and cultural impulses for meaning and belonging.



Figure 9: Annette Nykiel, 2015, *Unstrung Journey*, multi media image, courtesy of the artist

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