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This my Country, I'm Painting Here: The role of social practice art and participatory design in building resilience and place-making in the Warmun Aboriginal Community, Kimberley, Western Australia

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Acknowledgement of Country

This project acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which this research has been conducted, the Gija people, Elders past and present and the unique diversity of the Indigenous community in the Kimberley region. This research is grounded in protecting, recognising and acknowledging the continuing Indigenous ownership of the traditional knowledge, cultural expressions and intellectual property rights of its participants.

Introduction

In this paper I reflect on living in and working with a remote Aboriginal community to develop and implement a locally driven public arts program that reinforces Gija culture and traditions. In particular, how local consultation processes have informed my own inclusive design practice, as a non-Indigenous designer and researcher, and drive its social agenda.

The broader research is focused on examining how public art initiatives involving participatory design processes can nurture belonging, pride and a sense of place, as well as encouraging strong and inclusive local communities. In particular, as ways of creating physical environments (places) that are more responsive to their inhabitants cultural, emotional, spiritual and social needs (Hazen 2013). The methodology is informed by Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing. Here, 'design' is about making sense of things and 'participation' means collaboration; caring, attending to and listening, and co-creation to negotiate ill-defined and complex problems and promote healing and emancipation.

The theoretical framework combines and weaves connections between participatory

design and transformative action research, social practice theory and public art enquiry. Public art as social practice involves the creation of artworks and designs through social and participatory formats (Sholette n.d.). The goal is to bring about some form of change or transformation, where the focus rests on the skills, cultural traditions and knowledge in the community of interest (Hung et al 2006).

Transformative participatory action research (TPAR) positions participants as co-researchers. Here the emphasis is on personal and social transformation and emancipation (Chilisa 2012). Moreover, the researcher is a committed participant and learner in the process of the research. In alignment with the ideals of social responsibility, TPAR encourages participants to become engaged citizens through developing a sense of individual and shared accountability for their decisions and outcomes. The guiding principle of this framework involves decolonisation, 'a process of conducting research in such a way that the world views of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalisation are given space to communicate from their frames of reference' (Chilisa 2012, p. 23). Importantly it is a place where the subject of the research originates in the community and the problem is defined, analysed and solved by the community, as is the case here.

Gija Country

Warmun is an Aboriginal community in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. The main languages spoken are Gija, English and Kimberley Kriol. Gija country encompasses spectacular geographical formations including Purnululu National Park, and the site of the *Daiwul* (Barramundi) Dreaming, currently the Argyle Diamond Mine. Archaeologists believe that Aboriginal people have occupied this region for 60-80,000 years. Since the 1880's, the Gija people were put to work by European farmers who came to exploit natural resources and run cattle on their traditional lands. This time marked the beginning of the traumatic displacement of Gija people and their cultural traditions (Pelusey and Pelusey 2006). In the 1960's changes to Government laws meant that the pastoralists were forced to pay Indigenous people the same as non-Indigenous workers. Turkey Creek was established in the 1970's after Gija people were displaced from surrounding cattle stations when the pastoralists refused to abide by these laws. Gija people renamed Turkey Creek 'Warramun' after the significant *Ngarranggarni* (Dreaming) story of *Warrarnany* (the wedge-tailed eagle). (Pelusey and Pelusey 2006). Today, the Gija people of Warmun are internationally renowned for their ochre-based artworks. In 2009, one of Lena Nyadbi's artworks was painted on the rooftop of the Musee de Quai Branly in Paris (Figure 1).

For a white woman and an outsider (me) the material traces of the legacies of invasion and colonisation set against the profound backdrop of the Kimberley and *Warrarnany Gooningarrim-noongoo* (Wedge-tailed Eagle Dreaming), afford a challenging yet shared visual landscape that bring into question my own sense of belonging, cultural identity and place (Figure 1).



Figure 1: (l-r) Lena Nyadbi's artwork entitled *Dayiwul Lirlmim* (Barramundi Scales), and inspired by the artist's mother's land in Dayiwul Country, Western Australia installed on the rooftop of the Musee de Quai Branly in Paris, Image courtesy Musee de Quai Branly; Warmun life.

The Flood and the Forced Closures

In February 2011 Warmun was devastated by a flash flood that wiped out much of the community infrastructure and homes (McDowall 2011). All residents were safe but evacuated for three months while housing was rebuilt. Sadly, there was minimal consultation with the community in terms of the planning, design, suitability and location of new homes. Moreover, none of the local residents were employed in the rebuild that would involve training and skills development.

This project evolved through deliberate and negotiated consultation with the Gija community, Warmun Council and Art Centre during a pre-research trip in July 2014. These discussions were focused on how Warmun could re-establish a positive relationship with their environment following the devastating flood that wiped out the town and to negotiate the legacies of the rebuild. Centred on a locally driven public arts program that reinforces Gija culture and traditions, it was hoped that this project would enable the community to reclaim and activate public spaces and a sense of

ownership.

Living on Country is not a Lifestyle Choice

This project acknowledges and draws from the lived experiences of the Gija people and the largely denied (and on-going) history of forced removals, dispossession and loss. In 2014 the Federal Government decided that it would no longer accept responsibility for the provision of municipal services to remote Aboriginal communities (Harrison 2014). In 2014, Western Australian Premier Barnett announced that 150 Aboriginal communities would be forced to close. Widespread protests have been held across the country (including Warmun) to implore the Government to reconsider their position and to justly recognise the inherent right of Aboriginal people to live on country and have access to services (Reconciliation Victoria 2015) (Figure 2).



Figure 2: (l-r) Thousands attend a peaceful march in the Melbourne CBD, April 2015 to speak out against the closures; portraits and paste ups produced by students from Ngalangangpum School and utilised in the Warmun May Day March; a protest banner outside the entrance to Frog Hollow, one of the Warmun outstations under threat of imminent closure.

Outsiders as Assets

In the early 1970's school teacher Geoffrey Bardon spent 18th months living and working in the remote desert community of Papunya, 240km northwest of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. The Aboriginal people living here come from a range of language groups (mainly Pintupi and Luritja), and had been traumatically displaced from their own traditional lands and forcibly moved here (Wroth 2014). Consequently, this town held no cultural significance for its residents. During his time in Papunya, Bardon encouraged artists and Elders to transfer their cultural traditions and stories from sand drawings, rock paintings and body markings into acrylic

paintings produced on portable canvas and hardwood surfaces, as well as buildings. His actions were critical in encouraging and enabling the art of that time, not only in terms of the preservation of cultural traditions, but through the sharing and sale of these artworks, that in turn activated autonomous economic development (Wroth 2014). His work and the continuing advocacy of others signaled the birth and growth of the Papunya Tula art movement worldwide. Importantly here, this kind of technological transfer and visual reenactment of Country sought to enhance a sense of community, building resilience, pride and place.

There are some resonances with Bardon's approach to creative collaboration and community consultation with the asset-based community development perspective taken here. As an outsider and ally he negotiated a highly complex socio-political and cultural space to build trust, develop relationships and provide resources that could be utilised by members of the Papunya community in ways that allowed them to draw from their own spiritual perspectives and cultural practices that reinforce, add meaning and value to traditional dreamings and stories.

This project is conceived as two-way teaching and learning of traditional culture and beliefs combined with digital art and design technologies. The asset-based approach adopted here not only acknowledges and resources the expertise and assets of the project facilitators. It honours and resources the gifts, skills, values, traditions and ideas of the Gija people. Importantly, it is hoped that this kind of collaborative exchange can provide a means of diverting young people from high-risk behaviours (such as vandalism) and to develop positive life skills through the intergenerational sharing of culture and self-expression in the production of street art. This project fosters the participation of a broad sector of the Warmun community, including outstations such as Frog Hollow. Young people are actively involved in the decision making processes and have the opportunity to collaborate with people from different sectors (and ages) of the community. Tom Civil, a Melbourne based street artist with strong family ties to Warmun has been commissioned to instruct and oversee the making of the large scale mural-based outcomes.

White Woman, Yellow Car

The project was planned, framed and enacted over a number of months to ensure sufficient space and time was given to understand and incorporate the interests, aspirations, priorities and cultural knowledge of the community that would drive the form and content of the outcomes. This also ensured that the Elders were not

overloaded with requests at any one time. The April 2015 trip was also centred on workshops that introduced Warmun Arts media trainees to Adobe software as tools for storytelling and public communication. Specific instruction involved image digitisation, photo-editing, working with type and layout in the creation of a poster to name, theme and promote the event, known locally as *Art in the Streets of Warmun* (Figure 3).



Figure 3: (l-r) *Art in the Streets of Warmun* promotional poster; my yellow taxi; working with media trainees at the Warmun Media Lab;

So, while it ‘happened’, the project did not all go according to plan. Before I arrived, I was aware that people knew of me and were familiar with the project and its aspirations. However, it wasn’t until I actually got there that I realised that no one really knew me. It’s hard to appreciate when immersed in funding applications just how critical building trust, relationships, remembering people’s names, having chats, playing games, making jokes and getting to know everyone is going to be. I also drove into Warmun in a bright yellow car (Figure 3). Clearly, no one was going to miss me. However, what was a source of embarrassment (for me) turned out to be a beacon. The car became an identifier, a conversation starter, and I became a taxi driver. I participated in Warmun life and became known as the ‘bright [yellow] girl’. Finding Kimberley Kriol difficult to understand also meant that I had to slow down and take the time to really listen. It was only then that people started to open up to me.

Sisters 4 Life

Graffiti is a pervasive and contested feature of the Warmun streetscape. Toilet blocks, the basketball court, fences, building exteriors, poles and paths are covered in an array of typographic inscriptions. Long lists of first names, family and crew names, rude words, brands names, doodles and slang expressions, such as ‘*bad boys*’ and ‘*Sisters 4 Life*’ draw an intimate and revealing portrait of the lives, interests

and values of young people in Warmun. The complex patterns of typographic markings evidence strong family bonds, skin and kinship ties. However, much like Western forms of 'tagging', this naming graffiti is not well-regarded by the rest of the community, importantly Elders. As such, it became integral to the authenticity of the project that time was spent understanding and incorporating young people's need for self expression. This was achieved through the construction of a public art space that the young people could self-manage and through active involvement in the design, production and maintenance of this space and its visual content over time. Moreover, Gija children were also given the chance to make their mark on the buildings where they spend time together, creating a sense of respect, ownership and empowerment around the use of these communal spaces (personal communication with A Crane, 26 August 2015)¹ (Figure 4 and 5).



Figure 4: (l-r) 'sisters 4 life' naming graffiti; Ngalangangpum School high school students creating their digital paste up portrait wall. Some of the *Art in the Streets of Warmun* collaboration took place between visits. These particular portraits were produced in Warmun, printed in Melbourne then brought back to Warmun.

Working with the Ngalangangpum School I ran a series of creative lettering and portraiture workshops with high school students. These sessions were designed to complement the school art program curriculum that was focused on identity, belonging and place through portraiture. We talked a lot about street art, what it meant to them and how it can transform space in a powerful and positive way. Students remarked on how they didn't like seeing their names defaced by others with rude words or by scratching out, around the streets. This particular group of students were responsible for the first large-scale public art outcomes (Figure 4). It took the form of a large format paste up wall of digital self-portraits that incorporate organic

¹ Anna Crane is the Community Programs Coordinator at the Warmun Arts Centre

textures from nature. Some of the high school students also developed a pasted up visual narrative with a super hero theme. The emphasis here was on developing their capacity to be street art leaders and heroes. Students commented on how they felt pride seeing their artworks publicly displayed.

Berrema Daam Ngarag Noonamenke Ngagenybe Daam

Art in the Streets of Warmun isn't about bringing street art from Melbourne to Warmun. Rather, it is seeking to understand what street art means to the people in Warmun. In April, a language workshop was held at the art centre to consider and develop Gija words and expressions to describe what art 'outside' means and how it translates. For the Gija people *Ngarranggarni* (Dreaming), culture, language and art can never be separated. The language developed to describe the project reflected this interconnectedness - *Berrema daam ngarag noonamenke ngagenybe daam*, meaning *this my country, I'm painting here*. Interestingly, the Gija word for painting on canvas and painting on buildings are interchangeable. In Gija culture, all forms of creativity and the making of artworks (e.g. printmaking, photography, paste ups) are considered to be the making (e.g. painting, drawing) and celebration of Country.



Figure 5: (l-r) Street sculptures; the rainbow mural; Ngalangangpum school students large format charcoal portrait paste ups.

The first week of *Art in the Streets of Warmun* (July 2015) also involved a series of preparatory school holiday workshops focused on street art, portrait photography, paste ups, stencils and street sculpture. Crucially, these workshops also provided the opportunity to talk more informally with the children about their hoped for outcomes - like rainbows (Figure 5). Reflecting on the impacts, these younger image-makers developed skills and confidence in visual design, using a variety of materials and application technologies and in the conceptual development and production of artwork in public space (personal communication with A Crane, 26 August 2015).

Valuable conversations also took place around cultural appropriateness and the reinterpretation of images from more traditional forms such as rock art sites and ochre painting.

More formalised meetings with Elders and other members of the community about the making of artworks became points of ongoing conversation, exchange and negotiation. Community roundtables at the recreation centre provided the place to discuss and contest ideas, thematics, locations and materials, and to drink tea. The decision and making process (about what to do and how to do it) was both deliberative, ongoing and shared. The sites were largely chosen because of their significance as gathering places and sites of communal performance, celebration and learning and are highly visible to residents and also to the visiting public (personal communication with A Crane, 26 August 2015). The production of the 'Milky Way' mural happened quite spontaneously and developed organically out of a conversation that unfolded over a few days with Rusty Peters, one of Warmun's senior artists in the space. The interior open air corrugated expanse of the recreation centre, where movies are screened at night and stars becomes visible, was aptly chosen for this particular artwork (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Desma Juli, Nancy Daylight. Tom Civil, Maurice Peters and myself working together on the design and production of the 'Milky Way' mural with Gija senior artist and Elder, Rusty Peters advising and looking on.

The first large scale exterior work decided upon at these roundtable sessions was a painting of the Aboriginal Flag. While it may seem a cliché (to an outsider), it was not. At a time of forced closures, the flag is not only a powerful symbol of cultural pride. It is an important reminder to (an outside audience) that we are all living on Aboriginal land. This wall has now become a highly activated space where group portraits and selfies are taken (Figure 7).



Figure 7: *Warrarnany Gooningarrim-Noongoo*, (Wedge-tailed Eagle Dreaming) and Aboriginal Fag mural; Rusty Peters; Tom Civil using the digital projector at night to trace the outline for the mural on the recreation centre exterior.

The focus then moved onto a finding a way to visually express the Gija dreaming story of the wedge-tailed eagle - *Warrarnany Gooningarrim-Noongoo*. Rusty Peters, language experts from the Art Centre, Gija Rangers, local community support and Tom were central to this re-telling (in Gija only) utilising narrative based street art techniques². The challenge was in deciding upon which parts of this complex and layered story in a bold, and immediate way without losing its significance on the largest, longest and most visible corrugated surface in Warmun (Figure 7). The location was considered and reaffirms the centrality and value of Gija culture and language in the community.

Stakeholder Feedback

Two months after leaving Warmun and with consolidated feedback from the community and Warmun Arts (personal communication with A Crane, 26 August 2015), I have an understanding of the positive benefits and impacts thus far, summarised below.

- Working with the Ngalangangpum School, high school arts curriculum focused on developing leadership capacity through curatorship is being developed to ensure the long-term management of the public art outcomes.

² *Warrarnany Gooningarrim-Noongoo / Wedge-tailed Eagle Dreaming*

Moolarriji thoorroob wananyinde jiyirrem miyalgaleny!

He's the best hunter, he never misses a kangaroo – Number one hunter!

Danya garayi wiyinji miyaleboorroo biyaya wiyinji. He's flying around, looking for meat.

Ngeleli Wanggarnal, Ngajigal-Noongoo. This is the crow, she is his sister.

Jiyirriiny Nginiyin Goorngam-Boorroo roord nginji yilag.

The kangaroo has come for water and he is sitting down there.

- The sensitive and comprehensive consultation fostered intergenerational engagement and supported the ongoing involvement and mentoring of young artists, who developed their skills and confidence in visual design, community consultation processes.
- Gija community members have commented that they feel these murals make the community look aesthetically beautiful and have enhanced their experience of their public spaces.
- Residents have expressed satisfaction and pride in the positive image they project of Warmun for people visiting the community for work, social reasons, to patronise the Warmun Art Centre and as service providers.
- The project facilitated engagement with ideas around about individual and collective authorship. Such large-scale collaborative works have not been attempted before in this community and has opened up the possibility of further projects exploring the transformation of space with art and images.

Inclusive Design Processes, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Me

‘Thank you for asking permission. Thank you for listening to us. No one has come here and done that before.’ Terry Mosquito

Having the privilege of working with an Aboriginal community has given me a new perspective on the role, value and place of design in social transformation and community development. It has also challenged the essence of who I am as both a designer and white woman with colonial heritage. Working with the Gija people has taught me that it’s ok to bring your cultural baggage with you. Just be prepared to face it. Also, that conflict is an important part of the design process. This project ended up being much more than participatory, and not just inclusive, it was relational. It was about learning and healing through attending too, listening, taking time and care. It involved recognising power inequalities and creating often unexpected spaces (like a yellow car) for dialogue. Consequently, this project afforded a place where relationships between designers and users, and social transformation could be reimagined. Complementing principles of engagement outlined in the Closing the Gap Initiative (Hunt 2013), collaboration was an empowering process, with small achievements along the way to mutually agreed longer term goals. Most importantly, I learnt that for me everything is interconnected, there is no separation. Work, family, art, design, belonging, pride, identity and place are one.

Whether these visual outcomes point to the success of a research methodology that combines social practice with TPAR and participatory design in the co-creation of public spaces as works of art to 'create greater awareness in the people of their own resources and mobilise them for self-reliant development' is uncertain (Zuber-Skerrit 2011, p. 192). However, based on my experiences and feedback from the Warmun community, TPAR affords a complementary and powerful framework capable of investigating and empowering resilient and positive Indigenous communities in the immediate future. However, this project relies on further funding to continue. The immediate goal is to promote the project and raise Warmun's profile through media coverage and committed advocacy in line with community interests. The longer term goal is to apply for further funding and sponsorship to expand the project and connect with more Aboriginal communities who would like to explore the connections between public art, place-making and pride.

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