Some notes about Contemporary Ceremony

What is this ritual-art form?

Contemporary Ceremony is a mode of emergent ritual performance that draws on the field of ritual studies for definitional concerns, whilst as a community oriented art-making praxis requires the artist's 'know how,' 'know what' and knowledge of creative and cultural lineages for compositional concerns. The audience, invited into the very fabric and design of these site specific ceremonies, are subtly transformed from passive witness to active participant, as scale permits, forging a sense and space of *communitas.*

Contemporary Ceremonies are complex in their intention. In creating public, reflexive experiences in which participants are "dramatizing self and culture at once, each made by the other;" a new space emerges where differences might be embraced. This experience enables space for insights, attitudinal shifts and cultural change – in a private/ personal experience as part of a public performance. As new paradigms are enacted, they are made real, even if only in the moment (eg. dancing sovereignty, performing physical acts of contrition, washing or sweeping as cleansing, building 'shrines' etc). In practicing CCs, through telling stories, making music, creating visual imagery and choreographing dances, a tacit understanding emerges between participants that the central issue is the *doing together* - the process of composing and final enactment of the ritual publicly and in solidarity. The content matter – divined from the complexities of community concerns, forms the symbolic 'glue' that brings resonance to form and enables communitas to coalesce. Contemporary Ceremony in its artfulness, intends to ignite experiences of reflexivity and receptivity between participants, whatsoever their cultural background, through an embodied sensorial (re) cognition of the temporal, ethical and geographical relationships between place/ space, community, self and other.

Relational Accountability – taking time to build networks with integrity

Contemporary Ceremonies are composed from an anti-colonial perspective. As such, they are guided by an ethos of recognition and respect for First Peoples. When ceremonies are conducted on traditional lands of Indigenous people – wherever this may be on the planet – consultation with traditional owners is seen as an imperative first step. Relationship building is thus a commitment which requires dedicated time for trust and true friendships to build, and for matters of concern to be shared. The vital element of *time* contributes to forming a foundation of 'relational accountability' - an active and affective communication of recognition and respect for First Peoples with the commitment to consult and collaborate on the forms and content used within composition. This enables a respectful reframing, where appropriate and permissible, of Indigenous cultural *morés*, cultural practices, and stories in close consultation and collaboration with Indigenous Elders and community members, and offers access to these processes for the wider community to experience and uphold.

In realising this intent, the process of composing Contemporary Ceremony necessitates the bringing together of individuals and groups from different community sectors in cross-cultural ensembles. Participants are invited to pursue a collaborative envisioning of the ceremony in undertaking the ritual as both process and event, with multiple points of entry for participation considered as integral to the ceremony's design. The process of Contemporary Ceremony, and the requirement of embodiment in its enactment, serves to align individual participants within a "micro-culture" — a temporary community. This “micro-community” reflects, whilst it co-creates, core aspirations of Contemporary Ceremony in realising shared and receptive space-time states of embodied reflexivity. As part of this process it is important to reiterate that Contemporary Ceremonies are created in collaboration and consultation with senior Elders of First Peoples, and that local protocols are strictly adhered to. When in a new geography – cultural concerns cannot be assumed, but rather time is required to build rapport and to listen and learn to specific community concerns.

Ritual Theory and Ritual Art in the 21st century

Rituals are ubiquitous and enjoy an endless flow of definitions dependent on disciplinary gaze. Whatsoever your intellectual bias, rituals can serve as “alignment processes” construed to facilitate and transport us into different states of receptivity, awareness, knowing, social hierarchy, spiritual and social connection. Further, ritual composition is a democratic modality. Anyone can design a ritual. However, its efficacy, arguably, depends on two major elements: the artfulness of its design (including the attention we bring to design of liturgy, symbol, elemental forms and anticipated sensorial enactments), and our level of commitment in the ritual’s embodiment, or simply put: how much we ‘care.’ Both art and ritual are inherently reflexive processes wherein, whether intentionally or not; we express who we are to each other and to ourselves as well.

> “If we do not birth and die ritually, we will do so technologically, inscribing technocratic values in our very bones. Technology without ritual (or worse, technology as ritual) easily degenerates into knowledge without respect. And knowledge without respect is a formula for planetary annihilation. It matters greatly not only that we birth and die, but how we birth and die.”

Grimes’ emotive language here is not simply rhetoric but real warning. “Planetary annihilation” is indeed of paramount concern as the debate over the effects of global warming gain ever increasing momentum. The importance of ritual to ground and embody our aspirations, to serve as sites and catalysts for shifts in consciousness, and to mark and honour the changing shapes and ages of our humanity, is part of on an ancient practice linking us to each other, and to other species across time and space. Ritual reminds us of our animal selves. From the specific and local to the oceanic and ‘global,’ in rituals we glimpse ourselves as a part of the continuum of life.

Loss of ritual means loss of these wisdoms in being, loss of our collective grip on reality, on each other and perspective of where we sit in relation. Loss of ritual is a loss of specific bodily means of knowing and puts us in peril when the unexpected occurs. Although ritual is often enacted in the subjunctive, imagined plane, it is concurrently a very real alignment process; its intentions and consequences are far from imaginary. Without ritual to anchor us, to tether us and confirm our place in the order of things, we risk spiralling into fantasy. In times of crisis, if rituals fail to anchor us – we find ourselves at risk. At this point in time – ritual might be seen as a potent form in which to cradle and communicate community concerns.

Contemporary Ceremony, as an artistic practice, seeks to reframe ritual forms in new assemblages: capturing and reinterpreting their potency. Grimes notes that ‘emerging ritual’ is an hybrid form – merging older forms with current concerns and forms – and that it is often temporary and “new, self-conscious, disestablished.” Use of the term ‘contemporary’ to describe Contemporary Ceremonies asserts that 21st century “matters of concern” constitute the affective “fields of power” in which their trans-cultural and relational “regimes of value” are being continually renegotiated. The zeitgeist - which I loosely define as ‘matters of concern that arise in the moment of ‘the now’’ drive the divinatory pulse of CCs.

The nature of process, time and resources are vital components which support a creative and impulsive “anarchy” that truly is at the “heart” of enactments of Contemporary Ceremony. Although rehearsed and composed – enactment is incumbent on the vagaries of weather, atmosphere, community attending and of how individual participants and audience-participants interpret each moment. As individuals become part of the microcosm and micro-community of the ritualizing process, from initiation and divination to completion in enactment there is a transformation over time and place on many levels. One of the most crucial aspects in composing Contemporary Ceremony is that there is ‘space’ designed within the form to allow for ambiguity - allowing individuals to process their own meaning from the assemblages presented. Symbols because of their multi-sociative possibilities tend not to tie meaning to one inviolable truth.

The process and ‘know how’ of composing Contemporary Ceremony reveals that central to their creation is the concern to consider these artworks as practices and processes rather than consumable ‘products.’ CCs cannot be replicated and repeated in new sites without going through a timely process of tailoring the form to each new place and community. They are thus always new and emergent.

Dreamtime at the G (2010 – 2013)

https://vimeo.com/98617644, https://vimeo.com/97900139

One of Melbourne's most iconic public spaces on which I have been fortunate enough to create four Contemporary Ceremonies is the Melbourne Cricket Ground, commonly known as the MCG or simply the 'G.' Built in 1853 on crown land, it has a capacity for a crowd of just over 100 thousand and is managed by the very white and very male establishment of the Melbourne Cricket Club. Concurrently it is commonly claimed as the 'spiritual home' of Australian Rules football.

However, the MCG is also known in certain circles as the 'Melbourne Ceremonial Grounds.' Pre-settlement, this very space was the site of regular, large gatherings (or Ngargees) of the five Kulin nations; who would congregate for Tanderrum and other ceremonies; to trade, share news, find partners, and all other manner of social and sacred business. However, if you visit the official MCG web page there is no mention of this rich cultural heritage. Instead it declares: "The MCG is a shrine...It is to this city what the Opera House is to Sydney, the Eiffel Tower to Paris and the Statue of Liberty is to New York; it symbolises Melbourne to the world. It inspires reverence."1

In 2010, I was invited by senior Wurundjeri Elder, Aunty Joy Wandin Murphy to direct an event of particular importance to the Indigenous community across Australia. This nationally televised event hosted by the Australian Football League, a multi-million-dollar corporate business, was a spectacle attended by around 80,000 people and watched by millions across the nation. The event marked the commencement of the 'Indigenous Round' of Australian Rules Football (Aussie Rules). As a complete 'non–believer' in what all but amounts to a national religion, (remaining unconverted) this was a foreign 'space' for me – but as an artist provided a spectacular scale and range to explore.

The space, bound up in layers of contested social significance, is a place where the sacred and profane merge in unexpected ways. A Lefebvrean spatial analysis of how the MCG might be conceived, perceived, and 'lived in' would take cognizance of the multiplicity of gazes through which the site is gauged. From shifting calendrical and highly ritualised sporting activities (is it a cricket ground or a footy oval?) to the continuing cultural associations and significances ascribed by the Indigenous community and others.

The arena is currently the largest in the southern hemisphere. Maps of the MCG do not prepare one for the vast expanse of manicured lawn and sheer scale of this gladiatorial arena. One feels the sanctity, a truly awesome impact, when first stepping up, out and onto the 'hallowed turf' from the players' race. And like any sacred space, there are areas where the uninitiated are not allowed – the centre circle was 'off bounds' except in one or two circumstances.

871 http://www.mcg.org.au/about– us/about– the– mcg Older iterations of the website once stated cursorily: "the Yarra park area has significant indigenous pre–history" now with the removal of this line the MCG executive ostensibly erase its prior history.

'Dreamtime at the G' (D@G) has been held at the MCG for the past ten years. It is the AFL's recognition of the Indigenous contribution to 'Aussie Rules,'[2] with the game's origins in *marngrook*[3] and the significant contribution made to the sport by Indigenous players. Aussie rules is very popular amongst many Australians and is particularly so amongst Indigenous communities. The considerable talent of Indigenous players sees Aboriginal & TSI community represented as 11% of currently listed AFL players.[4] The AFL has seen many generations of Indigenous football players who were at the top of the game. As a reconciliatory gesture, and one creating positive media campaigns for the corporation, the AFL produced the event in order to honour these connections.

Figure 1: View from the 'Player's race' and site rehearsals on the day. (Photo: Natalie Davey)

The D@G Contemporary Ceremonies, were pre– match evening events, heralding the start of the 'Indigenous round' of the football calendar. I was lucky enough to direct and co-devise them from 2010 to 2013 inclusively, working alongside Aunty joy Wandin Murphy to produce a spiritually steeped event, a celebration of land, cultural survival, and of honouring ancestors. It was a re-inscribing of sovereignty and ongoing spiritual connection to land, on a highly significant and symbolic site. It took place over an exactingly-timed 14.5 minutes, due to broadcast requirements for national television, in the middle of what was ostensibly a 'footy field!'

A shift and separation occurs when at the start of each dreamtime ceremony, the floodlights are, one by one, switched off, and the arena is plunged into darkness. As the TV commentary blares its introduction all participants await the cue – and then the call to ceremony cuts through the air – the sacred and profane blur, until at the end of the 14.5 minutes the floodlights flash back on and we all rapidly quit the 'stage' for the next ritual to begin: the 'Richmond versus Essendon' match.

---

2 'Aussie rules' – an Australian diminution of 'Australian Rules Football.'

3 *Marngrook* (*Gunditjamara* language) was a First People's game played with a possum skin ball, which included high jumps similar to what is known as a 'mark' in Australian Rules football. Hallinan and Judd note the racial tensions alive at an institutional level within the AFL. Chris Hallinan and Barry Judd, "Duelling Paradigms: Australian Aborigines, Marn-Grook and Football Histories," *Sport in Society* 15, no. 7 (2012); ibid. 980.

4 John Robert Evans et al., "Indigenous Participation in Australian Sport: The Perils of the 'Panacea' Proposition," *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 7, no. 1 (2015). 5.

The Call to Ceremony

The *'Call to Ceremony'*[5] (below) which *Woiwurrung* senior elder Aunty Joy Wandin Murphy, and artists Tania Bosak, *Gamilaraay, Kooma*[6] woman Maurial Rose Spearim and I created in 2008 for the work *Longing*, *Belonging, Land* is another example of hybridity. The inspiration for creating the call came from experiences of the *Karanga,* the formal Maori calls of welcome to the Marae.[7] Whilst we had no intention of mimicking or appropriating the form in content, style or tone, there was an intention to introduce the 'call' as a ritual process: to gather and focus attention for the start of our Contemporary Ceremony. Written in *Woiwurrung* language, this call has now been used on many formal occasions. It has also been nationally televised as the start of each Opening Ceremony for *Dreamtime at the G (2010 – 2014).* The *Call to Ceremony* has been adopted in many of Aunty Joy's own *Welcome to Country*[8] ceremonies and I have used this idea as a compositional component – the 'call to ritual' in Contemporary Ceremonies with other Indigenous communities, and in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The many "regimes of value" forged into new relationships and other hybrid dimensions of Contemporary Ceremony will be further investigated in the case studies of this thesis, as the dynamics of Contemporary Ceremonies' emplaced composition in post-Apology Australia (and post-apartheid South Africa) and their relationship to ritual theory are further delineated.

Wandeat!	*Come!*
Wandeat Gaboney	*Come Together!*
Wandeat, Gaboney, Narra Jarra Nooun,	*Come together as one for Healing!*
Narra Jarra Noun,	*As one for Healing,*
Dooroorong.	*Our Hearts.*
Wandeat, Gaboney, Narra Jarra Nooun	*Come together as one for Healing*
Dooroorong	*Of our Hearts.*

My involvement was always at Aunty Joy's invitation over the 4 years and from the first year we worked at carving out a space and sense of ceremony in what was originally billed as 'pre-match entertainment'. By the last 2 years, the AFL and the television channels had started to adopt our language and called it Contemporary Ceremony.

5 Call to Ceremony: https://vimeo.com/162218830

6 *Gamilaraay* and *Kooma* are both First Peoples nations of Australia.

7 These formal calls, *karanga*, are an important Maori protocol of welcome which herald the commencement of ceremonial activities at the Marae, which is a house like structure used for community gatherings and sacred ceremonies. http://www.korero.maori.nz/forlearners/protocols/marae.html

8 Refer **Error! Reference source not found.**

Figure 2: Kulin Elders (seated) and Songman Archie Roach, and fire torch and honour guard for Indigenous players entrance (photo: Natalie Davey)

The process each year was fairly much the same. It was usually initiated by a call from the AFL (often with only 6 weeks or less lead time to the event) and I then immediately called Aunty Joy to see if she wanted me to be involved, and from there the research phase began. I was new to the footy scene I had no understanding of the game, or its players names, or anything of the Indigenous history with the game. So, I started with acknowledging Indigenous connection to land and country and consulted with Aunty to see what she felt was of central importance to her community. Often when meeting up we would serendipitously and with synchronicity bring the same ideas to the table, and together we would weave ideas into a ceremony which then needed to be presented to AFL events executives, the sponsoring football teams, and an Indigenous advisory board.

2010

In the first year of my involvement, we convinced the AFL of the importance of the Call to Ceremony, and also introduced the idea of large lantern puppets signifying each of the different Creator spirits from the different Australian states. The sense of ceremony in this first event was fleeting – held together by Aunty Joy and the smoking ceremony, but the creator spirits particularly 'worked' as spirit symbols on television screens, even when seemingly at times swamped in scale somewhat by the arena.

Figure 3: On site rehearsals with Creator Spirit puppets. Site rehearsals only take place on the day of the Ceremony (Photo: Christina Sheppard)

2011

Year two was a simpler affair. There were no puppets and with only two weeks to go till the event, my invitation gave me little time, or budget, for divination. This time Aunty Joy invited another Wurundjeri 'elder' and his group of men to participate and we also invited a group of schoolgirls from a rural Indigenous community dance program to be involved. We were given access to the whole of the centre of the arena, where an Aboriginal flag had been painted, and here Indigenous opera singer Don Bemrose performed the Call to Ceremony.

From the middle of the darkened stadium, a spotlight snapped on illuminating an ochre clad man, standing on the Aboriginal flag – a symbol of prior sovereignty. His voice boomed across the vast arena, as he called out *Woiwurrung* words in a rich baritone. Don's operatic 'know how' merged with his ceremonial 'know how' and with this understanding of the epic spirit scale, his call to ancestors was a challenge to the contemporary audience to 'come together, as one, for healing.' I found this image potent as many "regimes of value" were bought together in 'affective fields' powerfully forging new relationships to identity, place and time.

2012

In 2012, I worked alongside Australian folk-music legend Shane Howard to mould the musical score for the ceremony. Issues arose around questions of protocol, and for the first time in my involvement there was some opposition towards non-Indigenous participants – in spite of the Senior Elder's wishes. I took this information on board and had many **consultations** with cast and crew to see what the best road ahead might be. But there were ruptures even on the level of the executive. During one meeting both Shane and I walked out, saying that unless Elders were happy and respected we would not continue. The particularities of these negotiations are not important to compositional dynamics, and in taking my relational accountability into consideration I will not divulge more details, but, what is important is that through adopting **'*dadirri*,'** inner quiet listening, throughout the process of **divination**, the way ahead clarified. In spite of some personal discomfort with this event, I was required to '**hold fast'** to the **intent** of the ceremony.

In spite of the challenges, it was a beautiful event and conjured up a magical and transporting atmosphere. Big puppets were made as effigies of Aunty Joy's story of emu and brolga. This **story** is of a battle between the birds over an egg, and when it splits open, sunlight fills the darkness and the laughter of kookaburras fills the air. Unbeknownst to us all at the time, we had been enacting this story during the process of composition. It was also symbolic of what the two football teams would soon be undertaking in contest.

This was the first year that we included the raised fist gesture at the end of the ceremony as a gesture of community solidarity, to be read as both rock ‘n’ roll gesture and ‘black power’ salute. It was also significantly, named by the television station as the ‘Dreamtime Ceremony.’




Figure 4: Elders Procession and dance of Emu and Brolga (Photo: Wayne Quilliam)
Figure 5: The egg is raised as it splits symbolically releasing sunlight (Photo: Wayne Quilliam)

2013

This was the fourth and final year of my involvement with Dreamtime at the G. I had found that dealing with the corporate world was taxing and was not convinced of the sincerity of the organisation’s position, regardless of individual executive’s personal commitment, with regard to their more-than-symbolic support for the Indigenous community. Also, I felt it was the appropriate time for me to ‘back out.’ I had always felt that my role would be one that I would hand over to an Indigenous ritual-artist, as the next generation were keen to take on more of these responsibilities. So, I intended to ‘go out with a bang’ and make it the most diverse and fun celebration we could muster.


Figure 6: cast gathering pre-ceremony and Ninja Circus rehearsal (photo: Natalie Davey)

After consultation with Aunty Joy, I asked the other four senior Elders from the Kulin nations to come together to be part of this ceremony. This was a huge endeavour, as since European invasion there had been no recorded coming together on this significant site with Elders from each of the five tribes of the Eastern Kulin nations. This year we decided to refocus on ‘identity’ as a theme, as this was what the community were most concerned with celebrating. The Indigenous advisory committee were also very firmly in agreement that they did not want any more effigies, so the design needed to be massed full of ritual performers to compliment the scale of the site.

We had a huge number of participants, and alongside Elders and musicians there were 60 – 70 dancers on the arena from Indigenous schools from across the state, an Indigenous children’s circus troupe from the central desert, a band of 40 young drummers, and the ‘core team’ of Indigenous choreographers, performers, artists and musicians who had collaborated with me on these events since the first year.

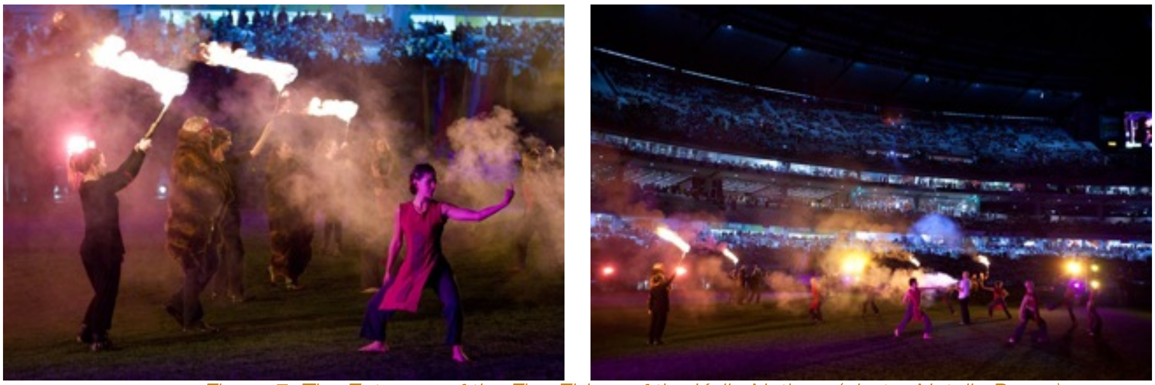

Figure 7: The Entrance of the Five Elders of the Kulin Nations (photo: Natalie Davey)

This year for the first time the event was described in print and other media as a Contemporary Ceremony. Viewed in its entirety the event stands in stark contrast to the ritual of the football match that was to follow. This, coupled with the experience of ‘working for television’ made these experiences particularly curious for me. The televised Contemporary Ceremony, when reviewing it via video, is so very different to the lived experience. The televised version is interspersed with edited in images of ‘blokes kicking footies’ or ‘cut-aways’ to the teams warming up. The televised ritual created a very different experience (and yet a parallel one in time): a technologically framed ceremony versus the embodied and experiential one. The difference marked a poverty in translation, a different entity made for a mediated engagement.

For expediency, I will not go into detail of this event, but note that it was a joyful and riotous affair – which the five Elders held together. This ceremony during process and enactment exhibited the same concerns that I had been grouping since the first year, these recurring 'categories of meaning' were: *Invitation, Consultation, Site, Intent, Cosmos, Community, The Artist's Self, Theme, Alignment states, Divination, Heart of the Matter, Inspiration, Design (trifold schema, liturgical, visual, musical etc.), Designation, Production (as process and genre of organisation), Holding fast, Exhalation.*

Figure 8: Skin Choir sing "Treaty" and community performers dance and give clenched fist salute. (Photo: Natalie Davey)