

Abstract

Composing Contemporary Ceremony:

Towards a praxial technique from a critical 'practice as research' perspective

Composed between 2007 and 2014, in collaboration with artists, Elders, and general public, Contemporary Ceremonies map multi-sited, transcultural ritual-art practices where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians meet in reflexive exchange.

This thesis posits a theory for composing these events from an emplaced and relational perspective utilizing Nelson's definition of 'Practice as Research'¹ which interrogates the "know that, know how and know what" of composition. This perspective includes propositional knowledge as found in ritual studies and Indigenous studies, procedural knowledge found in practice, and the ethical and instinctive choices made from experience and insight, which temper and guide aesthetics and poetics.

An 'Indigenist oriented research paradigm' guides each step of this research, its findings, and outcomes, in an emplaced reconsideration of ritual theory and the artistic praxis of ceremony making. One vital ethical and relational imperative has been to articulate compositional 'matters of concern' from Western onto-epistemological lineages that I find to be in concert with Indigenous "Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing."² In doing so, I acknowledge and interrogate my own heritage and story in accordance with Indigenous protocols of research, as articulated by Shawn Wilson in 'Research is Ceremony.'³ The post-humanist philosophies of Bruno Latour and Peter Sloterdijk and their complimentary theories of 'spheres' and 'networks' have assisted in articulating the ethical, relational, and spatial perspectives in this approach.⁴

Through abbreviated grounded theory analysis of the structural, philosophical, and social dynamics revealed in four case studies, theory coalesces throughout the passage of the thesis to reveal the proposed praxial technique for Contemporary Ceremony composition as conclusion.

Data collected for analysis includes auto-ethnographic accounts of case studies, artist's diaries, video and photographic documentation, anonymous questionnaires, and working drawings, all of which have enabled the 'matters of concern' found in compositional dynamics to be identified and grouped into 'categories of meaning.'

Categories of meaning emerged from scrutinizing data through a 'Lefebvorean lens' which considered producing the space of CCs, determining how they were conceived and perceived, and charting them as they evolved and were enacted in lived experiences. Hyperlinks in the text enable an experience of a mediated version of these CCs, and further detail is provided in auto-ethnographic accounts of each of the case studies.

This thesis is structured in three books. It honours Wilson's contention that 'research is a ceremony' through following the trifold schema of Arnold van Gennep's theory on rites of passage.⁵ The first book, '*Separation*' considers how the cosmos of Contemporary Ceremony is conceived. The second book, '*Transition*' considers the communities' and other entities' perceptions of CCs, whilst the third book '*Incorporation*' reveals the artist's material thinking, and from analysis of lived experience, disentangles the praxial technique.

Preamble

Respect, Responsibility and Reciprocity

Before anything else, there is a ritual to enact – a '*breaking of ground*.' It may have little to do with the rites of current-day academia, but the 'ritual practice' of acknowledgement has precedence that stretches back in

1 Robin Nelson, ed. *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

2 Karen L. Martin, "Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous Re-Search and Indigenist Research,," *Journal of Australian Studies*, 76, no. Voicing Dissent, *New Talents 21C: Next Generation Australian Studies*, (2003).

3 Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008).

4 Bruno Latour, "Spheres and Networks: Two Ways to Reinterpret Globalisation," *Harvard Design Magazine* 2009.

5 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Gabrielle L. Caffee Monika B. Vizedom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960; repr., 1960, 1992).

time.⁶ There are protocols⁷ this entire thesis is governed by, and which must, be applied; even if restricted to 'performative utterances'⁸ constrained by text.

I respectfully acknowledge Aunty Joy Wandin Murphy, senior elder of the Wurundjeri Ballock of the Woiwurrung peoples, and N'arweet Carolyn Briggs, senior elder of the Yallukit Wilam of the Boonwurrung. From Freshwater and Saltwater peoples these women are traditional owners and custodians of central Melbourne, on whose lands I work and have lived.

Both of these women have guided me, collaborated with me, and taught me about local Indigenous culture. I have been taught that the Creator spirit 'on country' travels in the form of a great wedge tailed eagle *Bunjil*, and his companion *Waa* the black raven, is both messenger and protector of the waterways. At night, *Bunjil* transforms to take the form of a star, known to Western Astronomy as *Altair* – 'the flying eagle.'⁹ Exact and precise, an Indigenous tradition of astronomy has guided the night-time survival of the *Kulin* nations for millennia.¹⁰ I have learned that health; wellbeing, spirituality, and identity are interconnected in a holistic pattern in which land is acknowledged as sacred.

I am not an Indigenous Australian. I am one of the 'settlers' – an invader – inhabiting an "embodied and emplaced awareness of 'being in Indigenous sovereignty.'"¹¹ In accordance with protocol I further qualify my relationship to this country, owning both my privilege and my whiteness, in an: "anti-colonial construction" of my "non-aboriginal self."¹² As newcomer, it is important for me to pay my respects and to take time to acknowledge Elders: past, present, and future.

It is of *paramount* importance to respect the land consciously and actively, and all 'Entities'¹³ who dwell here. It is vital to protocol, and in awareness of the 'new climatic regime,'¹⁴ that I 'care for country.'¹⁵ In doing so, core values of respect and reciprocity, equality and responsibility – vital to survival and protection – must be bound and guided by spirit and integrity.¹⁶ This credo has sustained an ancient and enduring civilization, and one that surely charts for us newcomers: 'how to be here' and perhaps if we embrace these concerns more deeply, 'how to live.'

I have been taught that I am welcome here, if I obey the laws of *Bunjil*. To obey these laws is simple, even straightforward, but they have been much abused since colonisation. I am asked to do two things: to behave in a way that does not 'harm the land,' nor 'the children of the land.'¹⁷ I am offered with generosity all that this land offers, 'from the tips of the trees to the roots in the earth.' Such beneficence in the face of colonial devastation is humbling.

Recognition and paying respect as ritual forms require commitment to do their work; otherwise we risk prefacing public events with tokenistic, 'politically correct' prologues.¹⁸ Without sincere consideration and intent, these ceremonial gestures risk becoming meaningless. The practice of 'deep listening' or 'dadirri'¹⁹ – listening to self and other entities and always to the land – is a vital part of this process. Shawn Wilson in *Research is Ceremony*,²⁰ urges us to perceive of research beyond the academy, challenging researchers to consider that:

6 Karen Martin, "Please Knock before You Enter: An Investigation of How Rainforest Aboriginal People Regulate Outsiders and the Implications for Western Research and Researchers" (James Cook University, 2006). Of late, scholars have championed as ethical imperatives, the acknowledgement of traditional custodians in academic texts and the telling of one's own story.

7 Refer: Book Two Chapter Five: Error! Reference source not found.

8 J.L.Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Amen House, London: Oxford University Press, 1962), The William James Lectures, delivered at Harvard University in 1955. 4–6.

9 Dean Stewart: Walkin' Birrarung oral history walking tour 16.06.2015, also noted in Mudrooroo, *Aboriginal Mythology: An Encyclopedia of Myth and Legend* (HarperCollins, 1994). 4.

10 Ray P. Norris and Duane W. Hamacher, "Australian Aboriginal Astronomy: Overview," (2013). 3. <http://www.atnf.csiro.au/people/rnorris/papers/n287.pdf>

11 Michelle Carey, "Whitefellas and Wadjulas: Anti-Colonial Constructions of the Non-Aboriginal Self" (PhD, Murdoch University, 2008): 'Protocol', 2.

8 ibid.

13 Martin. 3.

14 Bruno Latour

15 Jon Altman and Sean Kerins, eds., *People on Country Vital Landscapes, Indigenous Futures* (Sydney: The Federation Press, 2012). 29.

16 Both Elders have taught me this in word and deed.

17 N'arweet Carolyn Briggs, Senior Elder, Boonwurrung uses this phrase repeatedly in her *Welcomes to Country*.

18 Kristina Everett, "Welcome to Country...Not.," *Oceania* 79 (2009). 57-58.

Everett in her article: 'Welcome to Country...Not!' stresses the dilemma these ceremonies present as a: "safe" kind of inclusive gesture of recognition all the time knowing that such claims are not legally enforceable; (in terms of land rights) nor recompensed in other ways (such as rises in health, wealth and opportunities indicators in Indigenous communities.)

19 Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, "Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness," *Compass Theology Review* 22 (1988).

20 Wilson.

The source of a research project is the heart–mind of the researcher, and ‘checking your heart’ is a critical element in the research process. The researcher insures that there are no negative or selfish motives for doing the research, because that could bring suffering upon everyone in the community. A ‘good heart’ guarantees good motive, and good motives benefit everyone involved.²¹

He continues:

I think that part of relational accountability too is that you are accountable to yourself, not just to other people. You have to be true to yourself and put your own true voice in there, and those stories that speak to you. That is retaining your integrity; it’s honouring the lessons you’ve learned through saying that they have become a part of who you are. The research ceremony is grounded in the community, and with the relationships that are being built comes the recognition that I am an integral part of that community too.²²

As reciprocal gesture, being accountable or in “giving an account of oneself,”²³ this thesis pays “maximum respect”²⁴ as a sincere offering in gratitude to Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants who have been integral to process and event of composing contemporary ceremonies. There are many people who have been part of this journey – too many to mention here – but all are important, indeed integral, to this work.

Contemporary Ceremony is a form we grew together in collaborative, knowledge-sharing spirit. My intention is that this research will fill a gap – and contribute to the knowledge of composing (and avoiding tokenistic) future contemporary ceremonies.



21 *ibid.* 60.

22 *ibid.* 123.

23 Judith Butler, "Giving an Account of Oneself," *Diacritics* 31, no. 4 (2001).

24 Lunga Smile, curator & artist from Lwandle migrant village museum used this phrase frequently during the process of Quiet Emergency – one of the case studies in this thesis.

