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## Stories Tell Culture Connecting Identity with Place: Australian Cultural Policy and Collective Creativity

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# Stories Tell Culture Connecting Identity with Place: Australian Cultural Policy and Collective Creativity

## **Abstract**

This doctoral research investigates Australian cultural policy in relation to the community arts. The study demonstrates how 'art' and 'culture' are terms that are applied as interchangeable, disguising aesthetic values, social ideals and economic objectives. An understanding of what is meant by 'community' is also revealed to be contested and polemic.

Cultural policy managers and creative practitioners are interviewed and consensus emerges that culture does not require to be mandated. Local government is viewed as most proximate and therefore representative of community arts and cultural aspirations. As a result, local government is increasingly expected to voluntarily commit resources to community cultural development that also demonstrates expanded understanding of 'culture' as an integration of social and economic objectives. However, state and federal funding authorities nevertheless shape arts and cultural programs with incentive funding tied to local and regional investment in the cultural and creative industries.

Voluntary cultural policy planning, widely viewed as complementary to local government mandatory social policy management, has led to prevalence of the creative industries model, tending towards global homogenizing production. Storytelling emerges as a culture-making practice where cultural activists in particular, facilitate collective creativity with stories that tell identities in relation to the specificity of place.

A scholar-practitioner model is identified where the narrative arts are applied as a method of production and analysis of creative works. The intellect is triggered to reflect on knowledge and meaning transmitted in the sensory with stories told in painting, music, dance and performance, and where feeling is a catalyst for thinking.

## **Keywords**

cultural policy; creativity; community arts; community cultural development; identity; cultural and creative industries; storytelling; scholar-practitioner

## **Introduction**

The paper discusses findings of doctoral research that investigates the impact of Australian cultural policy on the community arts. Cultural policy discourse is analysed and found to imply aesthetic values, social ideals and economic objectives legitimating public funding for art and cultural programs. The study finds the Australia Council's community arts program has devolved to increased responsibility on local government to voluntarily commit to community cultural development planning and management. Local government is also expected to demonstrate expanded understanding of culture as an integration of social and economic objectives. However it is also evident that state and federal funding authorities shape local and regional arts and cultural projects with incentive grants. This funding is provided for local and regional planning that demonstrates application of community cultural development principles intended to build social capital; and the cultural and creative industries are strategies viewed as driving local and regional economic growth.

Although the consensus emerges that culture does not require to be mandated, the study finds that reliance on local government to fund and promote community cultural development, tends to promote idealized images of a shared national cultural identity that is resistant to difference and innovation. Storytelling emerges as a critical creative method and practice, capable of disrupting representations of difference mediated as marginal. Cultural activists facilitate collective creativity where stories connect identity with place. The creative arts transmit knowledge in culture making processes that inform and form identities. The study proposes a scholar-practitioner model, where the narrative arts are applied as a method of production and analysis of creative works.

## **Narrative Research Method**

Six Arts/Cultural Policy Managers, and eleven Community Arts Practitioners from regional and metropolitan New South Wales were interviewed for the research.

**Table 1:** Interviewed Arts/Cultural Policy Managers

<p><b>Regional Arts/Cultural Policy Managers</b> Arts Northern Rivers Regional Arts Development Officer Arts OutWest Regional Arts Development Officer Oberon Local Council General Manager Bathurst Regional Council Community Cultural Development Director</p>
<p><b>Metropolitan Arts/Cultural Policy Managers</b> Community Cultural Development Consultant Arts NSW Cultural Development Program Manager</p>

Arts/Cultural Policy Managers were selected with the aim of understanding how public policy impacts on the community arts. Interviewees were asked questions related to describing their position; how policy frames service delivery; the role of funding; definition of 'culture' and 'community,' and personal aspirations.

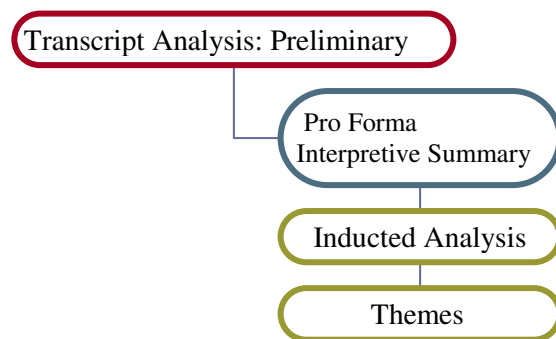
Participating Creative Practitioners identified as community artists, cultural workers, artswomen, arts/artist facilitators, community cultural development (CCD) practitioners, community educators, cultural activists, and/or community performance coordinators.

**Table 2:** Interviewed Creative Practitioners

<p><b>Regional Indigenous Community Cultural Practitioners</b> Visual Artist/Community Educator Two Community Educators Writer/Community Educator Community Educator/Storyteller Visual Artist/Community Artist</p>
<p><b>Regional Non-Indigenous Community Arts Practitioners</b> Community Choir Coordinator Children's Polynesian Dance Teacher Theatre-maker/Community Performance Development</p>
<p><b>Metropolitan Community Arts Practitioners</b> Community Artist/Visual Artist Artistic Festival Director/Professional Singer</p>

Creative Practitioners were chosen to shed light on community arts and cultural practice. These respondents were asked questions about their arts background; funding for their project; how they defined ‘culture’ and ‘community’; vision underpinning how their community project was implemented; whether they identified as professional and/or voluntary, and educational aspects of their enterprise

The study applied a narrative approach and a four-stage gestalt method in the interpretation and analysis of recorded interviews:



**Figure 1:** Gestalt Method

Critical enquiry is defined as a discursive dialogue between researcher and participant, in that negotiated analysis and interpretation compose the various strands that create the structure and form of the work (Clare, 2003, p.140). Participants were asked opened ended questions and subsequently told their story in their own words (Polkinghorne, 1988; Sandelowski, 1991).

A narrative method guides the process of inducting significant themes that propel stories told in interview (Riessman, 1993). A gestalt approach to transcript analysis seeks to convey a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Therefore, the interview and data interpretive analysis stages did not attempt to iron out contradictions. Instead the method reveals how inconsistencies can become significant in identifying parts by their relationship to the system as a whole in which they function (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, pp. 70-77). Participants were forwarded summaries at each of the induction and interpretive analytical phases with a request for feedback, and these responses were incorporated into the study.

## **Funding the Arts**

Australian cultural policy is defined as ‘matters of institutional politics and money’ (Morris, 2006, p. 2). Analysis of the evolution of funding art and culture in Australia reveals a dualistic logic embedded in cultural policy (Rowse, 1985). Rhetoric separates ideological values that ascribe excellence to select arts and cultural production, as distinct from popular culture marketed as commercial entertainment driving the cultural and creative industries

There has been a historic tradition of self-appointed cultural leaders who have influenced government spending on the arts, motivated by the belief that their patronage is in the national interest. Their reasons for funding ‘the arts’ have ranged from inspiring the community with artistic excellence; elevation of standards; education; encouraging tourism; decentralization and therapy for the mentally disturbed (Rowse, 1985, pp. 10-11).

The Arts Council of Australia established in 1947, grew from the Council for the Advancement in Education and Music (CEMA) founded by Australian opera singer Dorothy Helmrich in 1943. Helmrich adapted the Australian organisation from the Arts Council of Britain, with the principle difference being that the Australian organisation was formed entirely in country centres (Carell and Dean, 1982, pp. 61-63). The Arts Council of Australia promoted amateur theatre, arts and crafts tours to regional Australia on the ethos that art is a human necessity and not a privileged luxury. The Arts Council branches were responsible for organisation and management of productions that toured regional Australia. As no funding was provided in the initial stages, volunteers attracted to the organization included the NSW Division of the Country Women’s Association. While the Arts Council was still in formation, Helmrich was appointed to the Adult Education Advisory Committee, and it was through this Board that the first government grants were allocated to the Arts Council. However the scramble for government funding caused rivalry and division between the Arts Council of Australia and the Australian Elizabethan Trust Opera Company (Carell and Dean, 1982, pp. 80-85). The Australian Opera began as a Trust venture in 1956 which became known as the Elizabethan Theatre Trust Opera Company in the following year.

The Australia Council for the Arts (ACFTA) was established in 1968, converted to the Australia Council in 1973 and given its Act of Parliament in 1975. The Whitlam government instituted the Australia Council’s Community Arts Program in 1975 founded on cultural pluralist and social democratic ideals, advocating the right of ordinary people to access and participate in the arts. Funding the community arts was legitimized by ideals advocating ordinary people’s access

and participation in cultural engagement, as well as supporting creative expressions of Australian national identity (Hawkins, 1993).

Donald Horne Chair of the Australia Council for the Arts between 1985-1991, advocated principles of cultural democracy. He linked the arts to a community cultural development agenda, as he believed in expanding the arts from elitist connotations to wider social engagement:

broad imperatives with the need for a diverse marketplace of values, knowledge and ideas; the importance of artistic and intellectual activity and the life of the imagination; the need for broadening the engagement of Australians in cultural life (Horne, 2000, p. 299).

However, the Community Arts Program's radical agenda was resisted with arguments against funding the sector, scorned as unprofessional and viewed as supporting marginal arts. For example, Donald Horne refers to the attempts made by Barry Cohen Minister of the Arts in Bob Hawke's Labor government, to divest the Community Cultural Development Unit of its funding. In response to this opposition and internal resistance to funding the community arts, Horne organized a paper with Director of the Australia Council's Community Cultural Development Unit Jon Hawkes, with the aim of moving beyond the 'grants culture' and towards strategic alliances with local government (Horne, 2000, pp. 271-272).

Horne advocated broader engagement of the ordinary citizenry in cultural life, and writes in his memoir of raising with then Federal Treasurer Paul Keating, the idea of cultural investment rather than continuing a dependency on grants that protected art emanating from the margins (Horne, 2000, pp. 81-83). Horne asserts his ideas were dismissed by Keating who went on to propose *Creative Nation* (1994) which remains to date, the most significant attempt at articulating an Australian national cultural policy.<sup>1</sup> *Creative Nation* linked creativity as common to both economic and cultural development, which resulted in the convergence of the arts with information technologies and community sectors in the production of digital content (Thorsby, 2006, p.16).

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<sup>1</sup> In October 2009 the former Labor Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Peter Garrett instigated a public forum on the question of a national Australian cultural policy, with a report of responses published by the Australian Copyright Council (2010). In 2013 the Labor government released *Creative Australia* National Cultural Policy <http://creativeaustralia.arts.gov.au/>. The incumbent Abbott coalition government's Attorney General and Minister for the Arts has been scathing about aspects of *Creative Australia* and subsequent reforms to the Australia Council (Westwood 2013).

## Cultural Economic Policy

Creativity is a key resource in the so-called knowledge economy, where ideas are products and technology shapes how art is made. In this post-industrial paradigm, capital economies depend on consumption of creative output in the form of cultural industries where the arts, cultural and media sectors have converged into the creative industries contributing significantly to the economy.

The cultural industries are defined as the modes of production and organisation of industrial corporations to produce and disseminate symbols in the form of cultural goods and services, as commodities (Garnham, 1987, p. 25). The cultural industries incorporate infrastructure such as galleries, libraries and museums. The 'creative industries' is a term coined in the UK in 1997 to denote exploitation of intellectual property, in response to global technological shifts. Individual creative potential as a key economic driver, emerged out of the digital revolution (Henkel and Randall, 2005, p. 2) and the consequent knowledge economy is founded on a highly educated creative class, seen as valuable human capital (Florida, 2002).

'Culture' in the 1980's began to be debated in the media as not only incorporating aesthetic but also a complex of social customs, values and expectations (Frow and Morris, 2000, p. 315). Expanding cultural references to broader social ideals and economic imperatives, followed shifts occurring in UK economic policies where the Labor Party instituted strategies aimed at positioning industry in the direction of culture (Hartley in Garnham, 1987), re-conceptualised by the incumbent Thatcher administration that aligned culture in the direction of industry (Cunningham, 2002, p. 5).

Broadening 'culture' to economic references provides a context for how Australian cultural policy features creativity as a commodity in a post-industrial age with the convergence of the arts with media and technology. The information or knowledge economy relies on the production of digital content that fuels the cultural and creative industries. The Keating government's *Creative Nation* national cultural policy linking creativity with economic development, was dismissed as utopian by the incumbent Howard government. However the ground had been prepared for emphasis of creativity and industry in consequent arts and cultural policies with the amalgamation of information technologies, communication and the arts. The States were then able to easily identify clusters of creative growth (Throsby, 2006).



The digital age has seen post-industrial knowledge economies catapulted from manufacturing and service markets into the information economy, with technological advances in communication and information processing. The cultural industries crucially generate and supply innovation as a key resource that drives the economy as well as producing cultural goods and services. In the 'new economy' industry policy encourages national competitiveness:

aimed at fostering the creative industries through targeted assistance measures...including investment allowances, tax concessions, subsidies...Strategic competitive advantage in this new commercial environment is supposed to lie with those firms that can maintain a creative edge (Throsby, 2006, pp. 38-40).

Australia for instance is viewed as more likely to provide content rather than producing the technologies, and therefore cultural policy advocates a flourishing creative arts sector.

The symbolic value of innovative products provides markers of individual and social difference that propels the production of cultural goods and services comprising the cultural industries. Technological innovation drives cultural production, where the costs of reproduction are marginal in relation to the costs of production leading to increased audience as the preferred profit maximisation strategy. The success of the cultural industries is founded on the ability to minimize risk by producing a cultural repertoire spread across a large market, where the cultural sector operates as an integrated economic whole because industries and companies within it compete for scarcity in consumer disposable income, advertising revenue, consumption time and skilled labour (Garnham, 1987, pp. 26-30).

With the rise of the first world's knowledge economy, countries such as Australia have been prone to global trade practices undermining unique expressions of cultural identity. The UNESCO 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity drafted a Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, designed to protect the cultural life of countries threatened by global predatory practice.<sup>2</sup> 'Culture' within these terms of reference is defined as expressions of fundamental values, and the role of cultural policy is to promote and protect cultural diversity, human rights, creativity and international solidarity. Proponents of free trade submit that cultural goods are not exempt and should be treated like any other merchandise. However France and Canada resisted this

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<sup>2</sup> UNESCO, Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (Paris, 2002).

view and won the right for a 'cultural exception' to apply to such products, which means that these countries can continue to protect their local cultural industries against the market power of major exporters of cultural goods, in particular the United States (Throsby, 2006, pp. 25-30).

The study finds that emphasizing the economic value of culture leads to creative production devoid of complicating specificity. Global practices of cultural imperialism veer towards a homogenization of the specificity of unique cultures (Malan, 2000), where difference holds the potential to innovate sameness sapped dry of creative renewal. Culture is therefore described as the telling and making of stories that connect identity with place.

## **The Community Arts**

Community Art is a term that also applies to amateur, participatory, collaborative or welfare art. The sector is a bureaucratic invention, constructed in an attempt to bridge the divide between amateur and professional arts practice (Hawkins, 1993, pp. xviii-xix). Rather than drawing up a statutory charter incorporating an understanding of how the Australian public cultural field had evolved, the Commonwealth instead gave the Australia Council its Act in 1975 with grants supporting art and cultural activities founded on unchallenged values (Rowse, 1985, p. 11).

Ideological maneuvering in relation to ordinary citizens' cultural engagement, culminated in the conversion of the Australia Council's Community Arts Board to the Community Cultural Development Committee (CCDC) in July 1987, in the wake of radical welfare rhetoric that continued to underpin community arts policy (Hawkins, 1993, p. 78).

Community Cultural Development is a model (CCD) defined by measuring indicators such as social capital and sense of community (SOC). These indicators are applied in predicting aspects of capacity building and collective efficacy (Sonn, Drew and Kasat, 2002). For example the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation conducted research into the impact of community arts participation between 1999 and 2002. Ten case studies were investigated and data collected from observations made of focus groups, public performances, discussions with audience members, and interviews with participants and creative staff. Three key mental health determinants were identified as social connectedness, valuing diversity and economic participation. VicHealth consequently developed policy aimed at harnessing the potential of the collaborative arts which targets social,

economic and physical environments with the strategic view of improving health and wellbeing (VicHealth, 2002, p. 25).

The community arts has always been a highly contested sector with no definitive description of the practice, and comprised of radical elements (Slottje 2009). Due to shifting and conflicting rationales for funding the sector, ambiguity persists over what is meant by the term 'community.' As a consequence, the community arts field has experienced uncertain status and legitimacy with consistent attempts to dismantle the program. Interviewed Community and Cultural Development Consultant Deborah<sup>3</sup> who worked in the Australia Council during Donald Horne's tenure as Chair, confirms the political maneuvering contributing to devolution of the Australia Council's Community Arts program:

When McKinsey's Management Consultants were brought in by the Australia Council to review the Australia Council's structure, they recommended the abolition of the Community Arts Committee and the devolution of funds to local government. They argued that Community Arts was not a Federal Government responsibility; it was a Local Government responsibility...What we've seen most recently with the Australia Council is an attempt to completely knock off that entity.

The study demonstrates that the Australia Council's Community Arts program has consistently been perceived as being too closely affiliated with the cultural fringes. A report commissioned by the Australia Council for example identifies Community and Cultural Development as an expert professional practice that has been marginalized from the broader arts and cultural industry: "The ability to embrace a range of arts and cultural activities in communities has been limited by the narrowly defined parameters for supporting community cultural development activities." (Australia Council for the Arts, 2006, p. 7).

Rationales for public cultural funding vary from supporting artistic virtuosity evaluated by demonstrated excellence that attracts and grows audience valued in the capacity to move and transform; promotion of community cultural development as a model instrumental to growing social capital; and the cultural and creative industries economic strategy advocating professional skills development and convergence in partnerships between the community, government and commercial sectors.

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<sup>3</sup> Deborah Mills wrote the *Cultural Planning Guidelines for Local Government* (2004), <http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/17564690?selectedversion=NBD40323018> retrieved 1 July, 2014

Ambiguity persists over what is meant by the term 'culture' which retains references to implied aesthetic values, but that also point to broadened social ideals and economic objectives. The tendency to merge 'art' and 'culture' as interchangeable and synonymous terms, disguises entangled but distinct aesthetic, social and economic references. Works of art are evaluated as excellent in opposition and elevated above commercial entertainment produced for the masses. Cultural policy at the same time rationalizes funding programs aimed at growing social capital, with community building projects that target in particular, geographic clusters of populations identified as disadvantaged and/or dysfunctional; while the cultural and creative industries are advocated as drivers of regional economic growth.

### **Local Government: Community Social and Cultural Planning**

The study confirms an underlying consensus that culture does not require to be mandated due to the proximity of local government to spontaneously represent the community. While the Australia Council's Community Arts Program was founded on cultural democratic ideals advocating ordinary people's right to engage in creative expressions of Australian identity, there has been a prevailing view that the sector has privileged the cultural fringes at the expense of the broader mainstream. The subsequent devolution of the Australia Council's Community Arts program to increased responsibility on local government to voluntarily plan and manage community cultural development, is rationalized by the view that local councils are most proximate to representing 'the community's' arts and cultural aspirations.

The persisting debate over whether Australia needs a national cultural policy appears to be an ideological minefield concealing deep and troubling questions regarding legitimated and authentic creative expressions of a shared national identity. Shifting arguments that either support or are in opposition to funding the community arts, continue to disguise these implied meanings where the term 'culture' has come to refer to a conglomeration of simultaneous but distinct aesthetic, social and economic connotations.

Current cultural policy relies on local government to voluntarily commit to cultural planning, widely regarded as complementary to mandatory social planning and management. As a result there is increased expectation on local government to demonstrate expanded understanding of culture as an integration of social, economic and environmental imperatives. Although it is argued that local government is most proximate to identifying and sustaining community creative aspirations, it is also apparent that state and federal authorities nevertheless shape

local and regional arts and cultural programming. State and federal funding is most likely provided for project applications demonstrating investment in cultural infrastructure designed to grow local and regional economies; that demonstrate social capital with programs aimed at building community, and/or environmental initiatives that will attract tourism.

Arguments for applying the arts in community cultural development programs, advocate broadening culture to wider social ideals of ordinary engagement of the citizenry. Jon Hawkes (2001) for example argues a shift from cultural emphasis on economic objectives, to advocating cultural action developed by government methodologies that feature creativity as significant to social and environmental sustainability. However this community cultural development paradigm appears to have resulted in targeting populations for remedial attention where rhetoric legitimizing funding the community arts, relegates individual artistic excellence in ascendancy and responsible for the social development of groups constructed as economically disadvantaged and/or socially dysfunctional.

Community cultural development programs are funded in population concentrations of racial minorities, and the creative industries policy supports initiatives in regions experiencing economic downturn. For instance interviewed Arts NSW Cultural Development Program Manager states that cultural planning and creative industry strategies can benefit regional centres with declining populations such as Broken Hill, or those experiencing profound change such as Newcastle and Wollongong. Their respective local governments have long-term tourism and creative industry strategies aimed at counteracting the radical economic changes that have occurred in these areas over the past twenty-five years.

Emphasis on the arts in the production of social values that facilitate building community appears to have resulted in a paradigm that relegates culture as a subset of social policy. That is, social and community planning is a mandatory local government requirement, whereas cultural planning is a voluntary commitment. Due to culture not being mandated, a trend appears to have established where local government relies on self-appointed individuals who initiate local arts and cultural projects that this thesis maintains tend towards idealized creative productions of a shared cultural heritage. The research identifies artists scripted as marginal to a totalising discourse of Australian cultural identity, who nonetheless mobilize social and political change.

## **Storytelling: A Critical Creative Method**

The research identifies cultural activism where creativity is a catalyst for critical thinking. Duxbury, Grierson and Waite (2008) support this idea in describing art as research created by scholars who interrupt the drive of a knowledge economy to social, information and cultural capital output. They argue that transmission of meaning in the digital information economy reduces knowledge to fast transfer, instrumental to growing social and cultural capital (8). Instead artist-researchers examine a problem to be solved in a creative process that leads to new ways of thinking (9-11) where artworks are catalysts for generating new knowledge and understanding.

As an arts-based narrative approach, storytelling is highly accessible to outsiders (Barone and Eisner, 1997) and is viewed as a cross-cultural sense-making process familiar to all people (Dart and Davies, 2003, p. 140). Symbolic expression invites response to collaborate in signifiers that are open to multiple readings (Barone and Eisner, 1997, pp. 75-76). Dart and Davies (2003) describe a narrative research method where story is selected and processed as data content analysis. McClintock (2004) details storytelling as a narrative method that documents and evaluates projects incorporating qualitative expressive/artistic practical skills complementary to analytical methods.

Storytelling emerges as a cultural aesthetic described here as creative expression of the multiplicity of identities in relationship with the specificity of place. Interviewed Wiradjuri Elder Dindima identifies as a tradition bearer and keeper of stories that continue her unbroken connection to country. Her storytelling is viewed as a critical creative method intended to disrupt tendency to marginalize (her) identity as peripheral to a prescribed local vernacular expression of Australia identity. Dindima sees her role as keeper of the stories that tell of the creation of places that are significant and hold particular meaning for the local Wiradjuri people.

The Gurrungutj and Mirrigan creation story Dindiam relates provides an alternative interpretation of local landmarks. Mirrigan a Quoll man respected for his ability to fish, is in pursuit of the resplendent rainbow serpent-fish Gurrungutj. Gurrungutj and the mighty warrior crash and pound the landscape in a songline that ripples out from Gundungurra into neighboring Wiradjuri country. There are many places where they engage in fierce battle like at Flat Rock between O'Connell and Lithgow, where they create the Wingicaribee, Wollondilly and Cox Rivers in the Burragorang and Megalong Valleys between Katoomba and the Wombeyan and Jenolan caves. Stones piled as ammunition can still be seen today

in Lucas Cave at Jenolan. The Gundungurra segment of the story ends at the Duckmaloi River where Gurrungutj dives deep down into the water. Mirrigan asks Billagoola to help him, and the little diver duck finds Gurrungutj with his head caught in a crevice between rocks. Billagoola pulls out a piece of Gurrungutj and brings it back to Mirrigan where there is enough to feed the clan. Participant Wiradjuri Community Creative practitioner Jodie confirms that the Gurrungutj and Mirrigan story ripples out into affiliated geo-language groups in a songline that interconnects in a composition of ‘singing country’<sup>4</sup> that sustains relationship of cultural identity to land.

Interviewed Sydney Creative Practitioner Vandana applies this storytelling method that aims to measure the impact of the community arts sector. She cites the Most Significant Change theory of this narrative method where creative projects are evaluated by documenting stories in the performing and digital arts that map:

emotional and different types of ways people react...[I]t’s about the narrative...all our projects have narratives...document all the time...allow the participants to record their own response [which] shape that process... For example a project I evaluated recently featured a man from Iran who said “The sun sets in a different place in my country.” Just to use that as a quote is powerful because it gives a sense of the person coming from somewhere else, rather than stating “we have a really culturally diverse group here.”

Dart and Davies (2003) propose the Most Significant Change technique, which identifies domains of inquiry for storytelling; develops a format for data collection and selects story for content analysis (McClintock, 2004, pp. 1-4). Vandana maintains that cultural workers need to document and evaluate their work in developing a critical theoretical model of community cultural development that clarifies community arts planning and management. When she first started working at CCDNSW, Vandana spent six months mapping the Western Sydney cultural landscape where she found a significant number of cultural workers who required assistance with documenting their projects. She consequently developed a kit, *Showcasing Diversity: Evaluating Community Cultural Development*

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<sup>4</sup> Nigel Spivey (2005) refers to the inventory of song themes of the Aranda people living around Uluru first documented in the late 19th Century by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen and more thoroughly several decades later by Theodor Strehlow (1908-78). English writer and traveler Bruce Chatwin (1940-89) was influenced by the work of Strehlow and popularised the concept of the Songlines as tracing movements of totemic ancestors serving as routes, as well as investing the land with ritual and spiritual significance (118).

*Projects* (CCDNSW, 2006) which provides cultural workers with theoretical tools to help plan and document their projects.

This kind of arts-based narrative research method supports the study's proposal for a critical creative practice that fleshes meaning in the telling of story, connecting identity with place.

## **Cultural Activism: A Critical Creative Practice**

Cultural activism is defined as a critical creative practice that can expand thinking in a feeling paradigm of storytelling that has the potential to innovate representation of difference stereotyped as marginal to an idealised mainstream. Cultural activists dream of writing spaces that are multilingual and polysonic. Meaghan Morris for example says she would "like to make Australianism refer to a multilingual habit of reading and a polyphonic way of hearing...rather than an impossible story of uniqueness." (Morris, 2006, p. 32).

Storytelling is identified in the study as a catalyst for critical thinking where cultural activists tell and make stories that can expand thinking, potentially disrupting institutional practice of erasure. Interviewed creative practitioner Nyree identifies as an Indigenous (Gamilaraay) visual artist who paints about the Stolen Generations.<sup>5</sup> Her work is generally of faceless people whose identities were erased with the practice. Nyree says it is important to her that people who buy her paintings show that they 'connect' and 'feel' what she is trying to say, as her paintings are a visual connection for non-Indigenous people to understand and empathise with survivors, "because too many people say 'they should get over it. Why don't they get over it? Why don't they get on with it?' No. People need to know why it's difficult to get on with it."

Dindima teaches Wiradjuri language, stories and songs in local schools and also in jails across central west New South Wales. She escaped the government removal policy because of her fair skin, and she views her appearance as a positive factor in that "there was no danger of us kids getting taken away...some knowledge was passed on to me, and it's a joy for me to be able to pass some of this knowledge to the younger ones coming up."

Dindima says Bathurst was named 'after some Lord Bathurst over in England.' However the Indigenous people know 'all of the Bathurst Plains [as] Batriguu.' She tells the creation story of Waluu known as Mt Panorama, believed to be an

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.caminka.com.au/joomla/> retrieved 1 July, 2014.



extinct volcano ‘because before these events happened, it was a flat place.’ Two brothers fight over a woman who chooses the younger good hunter brother. The older brother is angry and kills his younger brother whose blood soaks into the ground making it tremble and spew out flames, with the land rising up to form Waluu. Waluu means ‘to watch over,’ and when young men were causing trouble “they’d be sent up to Waluu” to move the problem on and where they could reflect on what they’d done wrong... also they’d be given a job” to see who was coming and leaving Wiradjuri.

Dinidma says

We share that place with a lot of other people particularly at racing time...awful things happening at the Mount...there’s been occasions when Wiradjuri people have had to go up there and do what we call ‘fix up’ to re-balance the energies there.

Cultural activists are identified by the study as disrupting attempts at framing identity as marginal, in depictions that are confined to sociology, history or ethnography. Perkins and Lynn (1993) argue that Indigenous art which is reduced to ethnographic functionality, negates an aesthetic sensibility outside a contemporary context (xi). Artist cultural activists present land claim hearings in the visual and performing arts as testimony to land custodianship. Indigenous stories that confirm identity as connection to country in claims to land, was legally recognised in the Ngurrara Native Title determination at Prinini.<sup>6</sup>

The study describes artists as cultural activists who enact roles of leadership, education and/or facilitation, disrupting how identity is mediated as peripheral to an imagined ideal of Australian homogeneity. For example interviewed Indigenous creative practitioners raise how artists involved in the Australian 1988 Bicentennial protest brought about significant social, cultural and political change. Indigenous Creative Practitioner Jodie was a member of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative that together with writer Kevin Gilbert, were instrumental in organising the Treaty ’88 Campaign, protesting the Bicentennial celebrations (Croft, 1990; Phillips, 1994; Lee, 2000). At the same time, Boomalli founding member and artist Tracey Moffat was arrested by London police in voicing her opposition to the Aboriginal flag being raised in a re-enactment of the First Fleet setting sail for the antipodes (Riley and Fisher, 1988; Crawford, 2008). Jodie says that the protest brought together musicians such as Paul Kelly, Midnight Oil and “where Yothu Yindi got their first break...a lot of non-Aboriginal people were very actively involved” which was a reconciliation movement before the

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<sup>6</sup> National Museum of Australia, Ngurrara: The Great Sandy Desert Canvas.

government funded Reconciliation Councils. Interviewed writer Melissa <sup>7</sup> notes that the 1988 Bicentenary was a major historical turning point that influenced the Mabo decision ten years later.

Innovation is the key to the success of the cultural industries where popular culture offers goods and services imbued with symbolic meaning in which “narrative and its musical equivalent is the most popular form of culture.” (Garnham, 1987, p. 29). However, the study identifies artists as cultural activists who trouble the edges of totalising universal fictions with the production of collaborative creative works. Slattery (2003) for example examines an arts-based educational research paradigm that deconstructs identities in the creation of unique visceral experiences. Interviewed visual artist Vandana demonstrates this method in using the spice turmeric that evokes memories and emotions that the South Asian women in her Sydney workshops transcribe in paintings. Vandana says the olfactory nerve unlocks memory and emotion translated in the stories painted by the women, that re-image identities (Blacktown Advocate, 2006).

Cultural activist artists tell and make stories as a critical creative method that disrupts discourse disguising shifting and conflicting values, ideals and meanings. An underlying ethos of cultural activism is to decentralize the artist celebrity co-opted into an economic model of production, so that the creative act of collaboration is of more significance than the status of the artist facilitator (Milliss, 1973).

Cultural activists therefore scratch and strike <sup>8</sup> with critical aim at ideologies that confine identity to the periphery but never quite in the centre. For example two of the interviewed participants raise the example of the western Sydney Urban Theatre Project,<sup>9</sup> cited in one instance as a model of cultural action, while in another exemplified as a case for professional arts development.

Scott Rankin founder of Big hArt seems to want to bridge the community cultural development and cultural action divide with theatre shows such as Ngapartji

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<sup>7</sup> Melissa Lucashenko is of Yugambeh/Bundjalung descent and has written award winning novels including *Mullumbimby* (2013), *Too Flash* (2002), *Killing Darcy* (1998) and *Steam Pigs* (1997).

<sup>8</sup> Boomalli, the name of the Sydney Aboriginal Artists cooperative, means ‘to strike,’ ‘to mark’ (Riley and Fisher, 1988), ‘to fight back’, ‘to light up,’ in the languages of the Kamilaroi, Wiradjuri and Bundjalung peoples of New South Wales. Retrieved 1 August 2014, from <http://www.boomalli.com.au/history.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://urbantheatre.com.au/> retrieved 1 August, 2014.

Ngapartji, intended to teach and preserve Aboriginal language while providing opportunities for professional skills development.<sup>10</sup>

The study defines vernacular cultures as the collective expression of identity in relation to place. That is, culture is a creative expression of the people who identify and are linked to the specificity of place.

Participant Creative Practitioner Lyndon for example believes that innovation emanates from the specific culture of place.<sup>11</sup> In the interview for this study, Lyndon says every town, suburb and city in Australia

has its own culture...need to identify exactly what those cultures are...they all make this extraordinary mosaic or tapestry...no such thing as an Australian identity...someone who comes from Cooktown for example has a very different view of the world than someone who comes from Sydney. So their identity is very, very different.

Lyndon cites examples of shows he facilitated in collaboration with local communities aimed at identifying the specific culture of a place that will engage those people “creating work that really reflects that, so people understand the connection to where they live.” He produced the community music theatre piece *Bob Cat Magic* involving the local people of Mt Isa “because it was about them...It also validates for them the culture of their place” and the local people then “see bob cats as performers...musical instruments...dancers.” Lyndon also adapted Peter Weir’s *The Cars That Ate Paris* as an outdoor rock musical in Lismore involving the local kids. The show’s script, new music and rehearsals centered on the specific culture of Lismore, and although the production toured Perth and Adelaide “it worked best in Lismore because it was about that feral culture at that place.”

A view of the collaborative arts emerges as holding the potential to express the specificity of culture of place that comprises a kaleidoscope of Australian cultural identity. The study concludes that cultural activist artists tell story in image, word, song and dance in a critical creative method and practice that blurs boundaries of difference constructed in the margins of totalising narratives of Australian cultural identity.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ngapartji.org/> retrieved 30 July, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Lyndon elaborates this point in his monograph *A Regional State of Mind: Making Art Outside Metropolitan Australia* (Terracini, 2007).

## Conclusion

This study finds that Australian cultural policy discourse is prone to ambiguous and implied aesthetic values, social ideals and economic objectives legitimating public funding for art and cultural programs. Creative works are variously promoted and assisted in relation to expressing values of a shared common heritage; the creative industries strategy aimed at economic growth, as well as community cultural development modeling designed to build social capital.

Increased expectation on local government to voluntarily plan and manage community cultural development is in tandem with responsibility on the authority to demonstrate an expanded understanding of culture as an integration of social ideals, economic objectives and environmental imperatives. However the study finds that because cultural policy is not mandated, there is a tendency for local government to rely on key local individuals to initiate arts and cultural initiatives. As a consequence, projects that are supported tend to reflect idealized representations of a unified shared cultural heritage, resisting difference and therefore innovation.

The research proposes storytelling as a critical creative method that holds potential to disrupt labeling difference as peripheral to an identifiable Australian mainstream community. The scholar-practitioner applying this method, collaborates in creative works that deciphers the multiplicity of identities in relationship with the specificity of place. Creativity in this paradigm is a catalyst for thinking in the transmission of meaning in the narrative arts where song, dance, image and word flesh meaning that tell and make culture, connecting identity with place.

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