

Stories for Country

Contemporary Indigenous performance and land

Introduction

This essay will consider notions of 'land' and 'country' as investigated in the site-based live performance practice of the Australian intercultural-Indigenous dance theatre company Marrugeku (1994-present). This will be centrally examined through a discussion of Marrugeku's recent production *Buru* (Marrugeku 2010) and the notions of 'country' emerging in the work.

The Aboriginal English term 'Country' can be defined as an area of land formations and, at times, stories which a group or individual may have connection to or custodianship over. Indigenous leader, Professor Mick Dodson explains:

When we talk about traditional 'Country'... we mean something beyond the dictionary definition of the word. For Aboriginal Australians we might mean homeland, or tribal or clan area and we might mean more than just a place on the map. For us, Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features. It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains. (2010)

As Mike Pearson, former artistic director of the Welsh site-specific theatre company, Brith Gof, cites "Landscape is a way of seeing that has its own history" (Cosgrove 1984:1). These histories – cultural, political, social and artistic – can underpin vast differences in site-specific performance practice, yet similar 'socio-topographic' (Berndt and Berndt 1989) and multi-temporal investigations of location and performance can be identified. Pearson says:

The simultaneous advent of the notion of landscape as its pictorial representation, and the privileging of sight is well enough rehearsed: 'A Landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring and symbolizing surroundings' (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988:1)

This 'cultural image' and the methods of 'representing, structuring and symbolizing' are produced from entirely different conceptual frameworks in an Australian Indigenous depiction of 'country' than one which draws on Western Art History's notions of 'Landscape'.

In this essay I will consider how these nuanced perspectives of 'Land' and 'Country' can manifest in live site-specific performance practice. I will begin by outlining some of the background to the relationship between Indigenous live performance and the country it is connected to, though a consideration of Indigenous place-paintings.

Country as it is seen – Indigenous place-paintings

Since the emergence of the now famous Papunya paintings in the 1970s, cultural representations of land, its conception in terms of landscape and its framing in Indigenous Australian visual arts have been widely considered as functioning in marked contrast to various movements in Western landscape painting.

This essay is not the place for a summary of the significant debates informing the history of the politics and aesthetics at stake in these issues of representation of land and country in an Australian or an Australian Indigenous visual art context. For a range of perspectives on this, see: Carter 1987; Bardon 1991, 2004; Morphy 1991; Myers 1991; Carter 1996; Morphy 1998; Myers 2002; Langton 2003; Muecke 2004; Myers 2005; Morphy 2008. However, in order to articulate an Indigenous live performance developed in dialogue with custodians for country, there are aspects of the discussion of visual art forms that are transferable and salient.

In the broadest of terms the contrast in understanding representations of landscape in painting revolve around Indigenous 'place-painting artists' depiction of country in terms of its ancestral presence and from an aerial perspective, as opposed to the distancing devotion to 'the horizon' encapsulated in the 'vanishing point' of renaissance art. As cultural theorist Stephen Muecke puts it, "In any case what is certain is that European settlement is responsible for the importation of representations of the Land in this country and, specifically, of the concept of distance that informs the categories of wilderness and landscape, terms that 'occupy' our relationship with the Land" (2004).

Howard Morphy, who works at the nexus of art history and anthropology, explores visibility and representation in the bark paintings on the Yolngu of Eastern Arnhem Land. (2008) In an intercultural investigation, Morphy explores the shifting cultural and social contexts that surround the production of Aboriginal art, but also possibilities for European and Aboriginal conceptions of art to converge. He cites Richard Brettell, "Art is not so much a mode of representation as it is a mode of seeing, and that in making important representations artists present the viewer not simply with an internally consistent image, but with an entire world view." (2008)

This world view – which is the result of the 'way of seeing' applied by Indigenous artists to their practice can be extended to the cross-cultural performing arts and the representation of real-

ity encapsulated in the dramaturgy of the work. Morphy notes that as hunter gatherers, the Yolngu develop an "acuity of vision" that seems remarkable to the outsider yet they do not represent the subtleties of the landscape or the water as they paint. "Yolngu do represent such features in art, and in music and dance, but they do not represent them as they are seen" (2008).

It is the relationship between the seen and the unseen that is a critical element in Indigenous visual art. In this essay, I argue that the relationship between the seen and the unseen is also central to storytelling in Indigenous performing arts. It is not my point to set up opposition between 'ways of seeing' land in Indigenous and Western arts contexts here, and I acknowledge that there are many non-Indigenous artists who now explore 'being in place' from multiple perspectives. However the example of the perspective in Indigenous place-painting reveals an immersion *in* country, steeped in both its micro signs and its meta-narratives which is relevant to a dramaturgy which evolves 'in situ', drawn from a perspective which is not 'looking at' but 'grown' from 'sitting down' (Ab. Eng.) in country. As Muecke explains:

These indigenous place-paintings had their origins in ritual and thus there was no distance inserted into the process of their creation; they were created as re-enactments. Whether they continue to defy the label of representation depends on the relationship of the viewer to the place painted. Uninitiated viewers mostly understand the paintings as representations of places, since they do not share relationship with the place painted. Yet for initiates, who share substance and relationship with the particular place, the painting embodies place presented in the relation; that painting, they might say, is my country or, indeed, the painting is me. The same cannot be said of European landscape paintings, for they represent places via a quite different conceptual instrumentation. (2004)

These place-paintings, the dot paintings of the Western and Central Desert and the bark paintings of Arnhem Land being the most famous, often contain storylines which traverse a vast area of land, the detail of which are not revealed to the un-initiated viewer. Whilst the application and function and also the permissiveness around the use of the dots (in the desert paintings) and the *raak* (Kunwinjku) or crosshatching (in the bark paintings) have changed significantly over recent decades, it is their perspective which is significant here. This perspective may, in any one moment, be describing subtle depictions of topographies, variations in land form and water ways, socio-spatial arrangements, objects of ceremony, narrative aspects of a dreaming story or the supernatural powers associated with a particular location. These story lines, revealed and concealed (depending on the knowledge of the viewer) in the work, are living presences in the landscape. In *The Speaking*

Land, Berndt and Berndt describe how the stories transform into living presences in country.

In all of the myths collected here the land is as important as the living characters who travel it. In the Dreamtime creation, mythic, shape-changing characters moved across the countryside, leaving part of their eternal spiritual qualities in the land. Eventually, these characters and forces retreated into the living environment, where they remain today, spiritually anchored. (1989)

This presence "spiritually anchored", and its multiple manifestations across time and place, is historically the key signifier of country in Indigenous place-paintings. In discussing how this is represented Morphy proposes that the project of Yolngu art and modernism converge:

For Yolngu, rather than using techniques of visual representation to imitate the reality of the seen, are more concerned with conveying the reality of the unseen, the underlying forces in the landscape. In this respect, then, Yolngu art might also be deemed more conceptual than perceptual. (2008)

While there are of course differences in the movement of conceptual art and how it manifests in both the visual arts and performance art and how Morphy is proposing its function in Yolngu art, I would like to apply this line of inquiry into live performance created in Indigenous contexts where there is a direct dialogue with custodians of country. These relations are conceptual in nature and steeped in relationship between the seen and the unseen as they manifest in that place, for those people. This is suggested as an alternative to the considerable supply of Indigenous theatre that follows the implicit realism of the 'perspectives' applied in the British text-based theatre model (see Casey 2004). Following this alternative model, would, in turn, be a proposal for audiences to 'listen differently' to Land as it manifests in performance and to develop (after Paul Carter) a 'poetic understanding of country' (Carter 1996) in their reading of Indigenous performance and their own relationship to it.

In discussing interpretation of the Walpiri graphic system of painting and its relationship to narrative in country, art historian Fred Myers outlines how iconic elements can have multiple meanings as events, objects, landforms and dreaming stories. Furthering this Myers proposes (after Morphy 1984, 1992) that "Ambiguity (or multivocality) (V. Turner 1969) constitutes part of their aesthetic force." (2002)

Considering Indigenous live performance possessing an "innate multivocality", speaking to multiple strata of audiences furthers the argument for an Indigenous performance practice which is contemporary in nature and rendered in an interdisciplinary form capable of exploring ambiguity that functions in multi-vocal performance modes.

Indigenous storytelling – narratives of place

The nature and function of Indigenous storytelling can be considered through a number of frames – mythic, historic and contemporary. I will now outline some of the factors that contribute to how stories function and how their meanings manifest in Indigenous performance. The lens for these considerations will be examples from the recent production *Buru* (Marrugeku 2010) which I co-directed with Dalisa Pigram for our company Marrugeku.

Marrugeku is based in Broome in the far North of Western Australia. The company's large-scale outdoor and intimate indoor works are created through long-term collaborations with Indigenous elders, law men and women and practiced by a devising cast, at least half of whom come from the local community. The company utilises traditional and contemporary dance and music, circus, installation and video art in its productions, touring to remote communities, urban Australian and international arts festivals.

Buru

Buru is Marrugeku's first contemporary work for children. *Buru* in the language of the Yawuru, the Traditional Owners of Broome in Western Australia, can mean dirt, land or place, or alternatively time or seasons depending on its context. *Buru*

can encompass all these things. The production follows a story sequence inspired by the six Yawuru seasons as a manifestation of *buru*. They are: Man-gala—wet season; Marrul—big tides, mangrove fruit time; Wirralburu—wind change, start of salmon time; Barrgana—cold time, creek fish are fat; Wirburu—first hot wind blows, Laja—build up to the wet season, when the first thunder and lightning appears and the animals come out again.

The production *Buru* was the result of an inter-generational Indigenous knowledge transmission project where Yawuru elders shared stories for country with a group of local young performers. In consultation with key story holders the cast of nine young people (aged between ten and twenty years old at date of premiere) co-devised and performed the work, telling a series of stories for country - some based on the contemporary experience of the young cast, some reflecting traditional stories for Yawuru country as passed on by the elders.

In October 2010 *Buru's* premiere season was staged at the site of the *Walmanyjun* story, a red sand dune and rocks along Cable Beach in Broome. The production toured to remote Indigenous communities in the Kimberley region of Western Australia in 2011 and to venues in America and Canada in April 2012. *Buru's* set, designed by Indigenous visual artist Fiona Foley, juxtaposes the built and the natural environment in Broome including giant seedpods and a video screen in the shape of a turtle's breastbone.



Myth narratives

That Indigenous myth narratives have a co-presence as landform, story, dance, song and what the Yawuru call *Bugarrigarr*, (which has been thought of as 'the dreaming' in English) has been widely documented over decades of Australian ethnography. Indigenous stories in their own 'socio-topographic' context (Berndt and Berndt 1989) function as both a mapping of country and a mapping of social interactions and in both the past and a continuous present as a living interpretation of what in non-Indigenous contexts we might call 'existence'. Stories are polysemic and devolve meaning in multiple ways simultaneously to different sections of the community. They are both universal and archetypal guides to multiple aspects of daily life, good and bad, but also operate as an enigmatic and somehow shifting veil, obscuring and revealing meaning in a complex and multifaceted patterning of narrations of events, transformations and kinship ties.

In 'the dreamtime', or the 'time before time', the creator beings walked the land. Their varied activities, whether placing the first people in the landscape, or giving languages, or being caught up in some wrong-doing which resulted in retribution and shape-changing, became land formations mapping their passage and eternal presence in the landscape, where they remain "spiritually anchored". (Berndt and Berndt 1989)

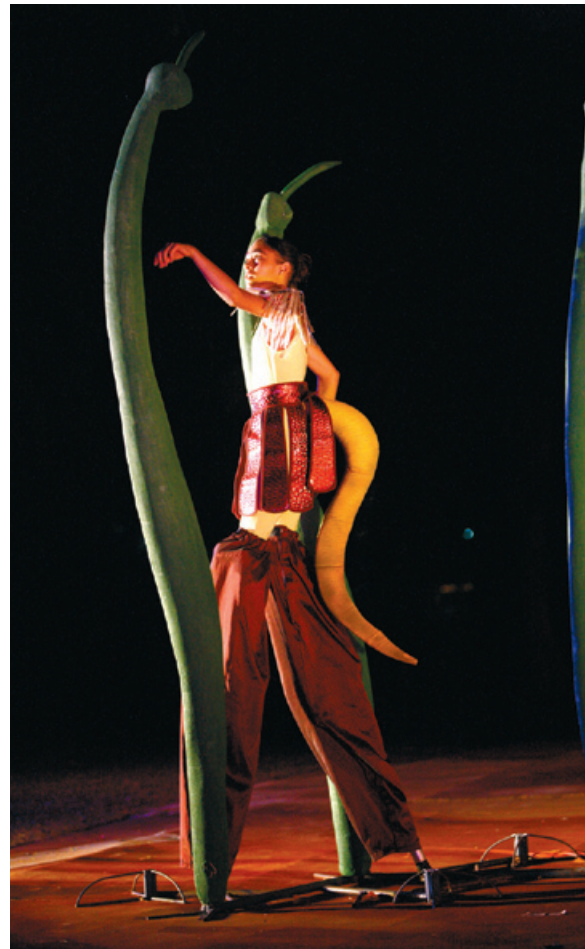
It is, then, the land which is really speaking – offering, to those who can understand its language, an explanative discourse about how it came to be as it is now, which beings were responsible for it becoming like that, and who is, or should be, responsible for it now. The physiographic sites are like chapter headings in a book, and each one has much to say. The Speaking Land must be heard. But what it says may be understood only if we know its language. (Berndt and Berndt 1989)

The stories themselves have no singular interpretation. Even the simplest of stories, told to children or the uninitiated, are tributaries of other more potent stories, or are framed in way that obscure the comprehension of other meanings until the listener is deemed ready to hear it. The meta-narratives of *Bugarrigarra*, or creation stories often lead to other more complex stories.

The production *Buru* blends contemporary reflections on young people's lives in the environment of Broome with traditional stories of the Broome peninsular. The performance portrays young people hunting and fishing in various seasons alongside the story of *Janyju*, the Red Lizard as told by Karajarri elder and Yawuru language specialist Doris Edgar performed in rap and contemporary dance and *Walmanyjun*, the Greedy Turtle story as told by Yawuru/Jabirr Jabirr elder Cissy Djiaagween portrayed with a giant turtle on stilts and a school of stilt fish. In the prologue to the performance *Buru* acknowledges and presents the two custodial

'Boss Lizard' figures, caretakers of the land and the seasons, as shared with Marrugeku by senior Yawuru law man Patrick Dodson. During rehearsals each of these elders visited to pass on the stories directly to the young cast. Following is an account of the Boss Lizards as told to the young company by Patrick Dodson during rehearsals in April 2010:

These Lizards, they are called Lizards because we can't say their name, they are that important, they are that significant. They are very, very real. They created all this land. In Broome, along this country, Karajarri County, the Yawuru country, Nyikina County right through to the desert to Uluru. They have a big role. They are big things, bigger than anything you can imagine. They can see for miles. They also have very clear eyes. They can see the littlest things on the ground. Little foot prints, little hand marks. Any things that have been done by people – they can see it. And they have very good hearing; they can hear you whisper miles away. They know what's going on in here (points to chest), inside. They know whether you are guilty, if you have done something wrong. They know whether you



Tian Hall as a Boss Lizard waking up country in *Buru*.
Photo Rod Hartvigsen 2010

are happy or sad, or whether you are doing the right thing. They know all of these things. And particularly when you live in the country – you go to the beach, you go fishing, you go hunting, you go walk in the bush, you come back home. They are still there. They can still listen to you, they still see you. They can look through these walls. Nothing can stop these things. They are all powerful. They have a magic about them. They can destroy things or they can keep things alive.

These people, these big Lizards, they are the people that made all of these things. They brought them into life because when the world first started it was flat like this thing you are walking on (points to acrobatic mats). And gradually it started to get some shapes, a little bit of a hill, bit of a gully, some grass starting to grow, some creeks starting to run, some water holes being formed. And then these figures started to emerge, they couldn't talk. They had a mouth but they couldn't talk. So these Lizards came through the country. They walked through the country. They could see for miles. And for the Yawuru people they came from this place down south, came from there and they followed walks through all this country, travelled through, put all those landmarks

there, all that coastline, all those rocks, all that beach. All the tide that comes in and out, all them trees all the fruit all the things that fly, bats and birds and snakes and lizards and insects all those things. These are the people that put them there. Then they see these human beings, but they had no mouth they had no voice so they give them the language; this mob here – this is the Yawuru language. For this part of the country. From there (points), right up there, half way to Nimalarragan, to Willy Creek. Then out to the desert, between here and Dampier Downs. All of that, that's the Yawuru people's country. Coast and the sea. (2010)

After explaining the presence of the Boss Lizards Patrick went on to acknowledge the connection between the public aspects of the story which we might make manifest in the live performance and the more secret sacred aspects which the cast might learn as they grow older and earn the right for more cultural responsibility:

But you are involved with this now, you are involved with this Bugarrigarra business. You are getting involved with this in a very public way and that's good because you are allowed that. In a public way, you are allowed to do that. And these two lizards will say: yeah that's ok,

Crystal Stacey, Madelyn Bin Swani and Emma Sibosado as Gudirrr Gudirrr (snipe shore birds) in Buru. Photo Rod Hartvigsen 2010



we'll let these young fellas play because they have to learn and understand, but later on we might want them to go in more deep and learn more of what the real story is underneath some of this. And these two lizards they will teach you this. But this is the beginning and they might say we are happy now because we see our young people here playing and trying to explain to this public over there that there is a rich culture, rich belief here, living, still alive. (Ibid)

Exemplified in Patrick's telling of the Boss Lizard creation story to the young cast of Buru are the notions of the seen and the unseen, multi-temporal realities and interpenetrating relationships between story, landform and cultural obligation which I identified earlier in discussion of Indigenous contemporary place paintings. As the Yawuru Native Title Owners state in their cultural management plan:

From Bugarrigarra, our country is imbued with a life force from which all living things arise. Within the country our rayi (spirits) and our ancestors live. It is from the country that our people, our language, our stories and our Law arise.

Bugarrigarra is often glossed in English as 'Dreamtime', and bugarrri does mean 'dream'. However the term bugarrri and Bugarrigarra is the world-creating epoch and the supernatural beings active in that time. These beings are responsible not only for the formation of the world and its contents, but also for the introduction of social laws and principles governing human existence. Bugarrigarra is also created with the introduction of the various regional languages, the seasons and their cycles, the nature of our topography and the biodiversity. (2011)

In order to engage in culture-making at this level with the development of our productions *Burning Daylight* (Marrugeku 2006) and *Buru* and the current work *Gudirr Gudirr*, it has been critical for the company to steep our process 'deeply' in local perceptions of 'being in place and time'.

Indigenous notions of time and conceptions of history underpin causation and effect in story structures and their place in a community's collective understanding. Patterning of occurrences interconnected with others, and intersections of mythic time and historic time can present a reality radically different from non-Indigenous understandings. These perceptions of time have a specific impact on the narrative structures we are considering.

Through these understandings I seek to identify a range of elements in Indigenous myth narratives and their relationships to place, time and history which can significantly inform how reality could be perceived and by extension how performance can function in a contemporary Indigenous context.

For *The Speaking Land* to be heard what it says may be understood only if we know its language (after Berndt and Berndt 1989). I acknowledge the vast 'inside' knowledge not accessible to arts workers, who are not cultural custodians, and that often a story we have been told is only a piece of a multifaceted puzzle. Yet I believe it is possible to identify significant features which can help define pathways to create contemporary Indigenous performance. A number of signature elements that reflect Indigenous approaches to meaning, place and story have begun to crystallise through Marrugeku's body of work in a set of propositions which begin, in my mind, to form an Indigenous dramaturgical model. Core elements include:

Considering the simultaneous co-presence of what the Yawuru call *Bugarrigarra*, or 'Dreaming', with contemporary life and historical stories. That the logic of the relationships between these 'stories' may come from a causality foreign to non-Indigenous audiences

The polysemic story structures which hide as well as reveal meaning to different sectors of the audience and even to many or most of the artists engaged in creating the work

The assumption that place has a much more significant impact on narrative structure than a chronological approach to time and that a 'socio-topographical' landscape may dictate significant elements of a work's structure as it is devised.

Understanding that comes from 'feeling', specifically when audiences can be brought into a cross-cultural mode of perception where they experience meaning from another way of 'being in time'

This initial articulation of a dramaturgical model is distilled out of the contexts surrounding Indigenous experience of place and art making, where there is an ongoing deeply held connection to country, as in the case of Marrugeku's early work in Western Arnhem Land and current work in Broome.

The Host, the Ghost and the Witness

In an example which is resonant with Marrugeku's work, the Welsh company Brith Gof took notions of site specificity, as they emerged in the 1980s in both visual arts and live performance contexts, and extended them past the physical traces of current or previous occupations apparent in a site and into both an aesthetic and culturally negotiated 'density of signs' in their multi-art form theatrical language. The company's use of multiple and interpenetrating narratives is certainly aligned with Marrugeku's own and not uncommon in contemporary and postmodern performance.

In discussing the multivocality of the 'reading' of a site in Brith Gof, McLucas, Morgan and Pearson

state “Rather than present a specific or single reading of site, such a fractured work disperses the site, constituting ‘different groups of audience in different places’ such that every single member of the audience is going to have a different reading of the piece.” (1995) Considering this in relation to Marrugeku’s work brings me to a greater understanding of how spectators might participate in an experience of contemporary Indigenous performance work. That is, that whilst a performance may reveal and conceal meanings from its audience, it simultaneously allows spectators to negotiate their own relationship to the seen and unseen knowledge embedded in the performance and to an experience of relationship to country that is ‘en process’ and ‘becoming’. This is, I would argue, an essential experience for Australian audiences and a critical aspect of the ‘dramaturgy of the spectator’ in contemporary Indigenous performance.

In documentation of the production *Tri Bywyd*, co-artistic director of Brith Gof, Clifford McLucas states:

The Host site is haunted for a brief time by a Ghost that the theatre makers create. Like all ghosts, it is transparent and Host can be seen through Ghost. Add into this a third term – the Witness – i.e., the audience, and we have a kind of a Trinity that constitutes The Work. It is the mobilization of this Trinity that is important – not simply the creation of the Ghost. All three are active components in the bid to make site-specific work. The Host, the Ghost and the Witness. (McLucas in Kaye 2000)

Brith Gof go further in their discussion of the relationship between *The Ghost* and *The Host* in ways that are relevant here.

There’s always a mismatch between the ‘host’ and the ‘ghost’, and from the beginning of the work it’s fractured, it’s deeply deeply fractured [...] it actually leads you to techniques which are of multiple fracture [...] we are dealing with a field of elements, and with symphonic relationships which can sometimes be made to work, and sometimes can’t [...] they are more discursive and have gaps in them- you can see other things through. (McLucas, Morgan et al. 1995)

It is in the ‘gaps’ and the ‘seeing things through’ that the potential for a performance practice developed in an investigation of Land/Country exists. It can draw on the potentials latent in a ‘place-event’ and in a negotiation with an audience, whose presence completes the trinity to engage in the kind of ‘seeing’ or ‘listening’ required for the ‘Speaking Land’ (Berndt and Berndt) to be heard. The audience’s role of listening brings the stories into being, as they are mutually arising and require perception, participation and knowledge of country and story. But this ‘work’ of listening also requires acknowledgment of the gaps and the ‘not knowing’ in order for the witness to participate in

the renewal of culture. Leading an audience into a ‘mode of perception’ where it can ‘feel’ this perception required, yet not be alienated by the ‘gaps’ in their knowledge is one of the more subtle and complex demands of Marrugeku’s dramaturgy. In Australia, the audience’s participation in ‘keeping things alive in their place’ (after Muecke) is critical to sustaining the way contemporary Indigenous performance can contribute to the present and future culture-making and culture-mapping.

Summary

This ‘work’ of listening to country requires commitment and attention. This is a challenging national project currently being undertaken, with varying degrees of success, across many disciplines and many areas of social, political and cultural life in Australia. Marrugeku’s work of salvaging stories in contemporary forms and bringing them into focus in open public settings has a small part to play in this project.

This is a long-term project with potential to contribute to the survival, preservation and growth of specific cultural knowledge systems and knowledge transmission for young Indigenous community members.

At opening of the Papuna Tula exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2000, Art Historian Fred Myers outlined what the paintings themselves have achieved.

The hopes of the Yarnangu painters at Papunya, Yayayi, Yinyilingki and beyond for new levels of connection and recognition, the expectation of renewed value for their own cultural forms, this is all part of what the paintings have achieved. Equivalence has not been easy to work out, but in the long view it is clear that the original insistence on the power of their paintings has borne out. The effects of the painting movement have been remarkable, far beyond what my early literal translations had imagined. I understood what the painters said, of course, but I would never have anticipated the effects they had in producing a recognition of their value and power across cultural boundaries. They have contributed to the accomplishment of land tenure security, of establishing significant identity for those whose Dreamings they are, and that they have made a kind of Aboriginality knowable to those who view them. In this way they have evidenced the power they were said ‘traditionally’ to have. (2005)

Finally, after considering the contexts which surround the creation of contemporary intercultural-Indigenous dance-theatre, I would like to project to a near future and imagine the kinds of results productions with a similar genesis and sense of ethics could ‘achieve’, for their specific communities. If the ‘power’ the dance, song and story

where “traditionally said to have had” (after Myers above) is maintained as they are transferred into a contemporary process and outcome then perhaps these results these could parallel those of the Pintupi paintings. ‘Achievements’ could include acknowledgment of the significance of indigeneity in the nation's past and future and of the ‘libraries of knowledge’ embodied in the dance form. There could be comprehension by a wider audience of Indigenous understandings of ‘being in place and time’ along with forms for the sustainability of open public storytelling. In addition these dance-theatre productions could function as evidence towards achieving native title, exemplifying living traditions in contemporary intercultural lifeworlds.

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