

## The Long Game: Progressing the Work from Thesis to Practice

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the evolution of significant findings made within the context of a doctoral research project and the structures that developed to share these findings through workshops for students and teachers. As the research concerned an 1838 Australian Aboriginal massacre and the construction of a memorial to commemorate this event one hundred and sixty-two years later, the aim of the project was to locate a reconciliation narrative. The project failed to do so, because ultimately in the words of the participants the memorial was seen as a beginning and not an ending.*

*Nevertheless this understanding did deliver powerful insights into the complex nature of reconciliation within a dominant settler culture. And it was felt that sharing these insights was worth pursuing.*

*Central to the doctoral research was the creation of a verbatim theatre play, therefore the workshops relied on drama techniques to establish through affect new ways of knowing shared history. However the execution of the content proved challenging. Because of the way settler history continues to be understood, engagement with the intellect via political correctness as opposed to the imagination was*

*problematic. The necessity of prioritizing the imagination became as much of a learning curve for workshop facilitators as workshop participants.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper begins with a discussion focusing on the development of a cross-cultural verbatim play about an Australian Aboriginal massacre at Myall Creek and the building of a memorial one hundred and sixty-two years later to commemorate the atrocity. As a non-Aboriginal playwright and researcher I assumed at the outset that the memorial signified a story about closure. However the play, a doctoral project, failed to find a reconciliation narrative, as intended, but the research that contributed to the play's developmental process revealed there did exist a reconciliation preposition: the word 'with'. This discovery, the importance of the preposition 'with', resolved the thesis and arguably advanced a more accessible and therefore more powerful bridge-builder in the decolonizing space than the investigation of an existing story (Aigner et al, 2014; Wilkinson, 2014). Reconciliation cannot be just one story.

Because this discovery occurred through performance, a collaborative arts practice, the opportunity arose to construct and deliver a series of drama workshops for drama teachers and students. The workshops were designed to explore the reconciliatory possibilities suggested by the research findings and were to be delivered by myself in partnership with Drama Educator Hannah Brown. Therefore after addressing some pivotal moments in the journey towards the recognition of 'with' in the research field, this paper then considers the content, the intent and the efficacy of the workshops.

Finally this paper concludes with a reflection on those cautionary responses to the workshop exercises, which, when they did arise, in effect inhibited collaboration. Passivity fuelled by divergent interpretations of political correctness proved challenging, particularly when cognition was allowed to dominate affect and debate diffused the workshop exercises. The cross-cultural field in the colonizer/colonized context is undeniably one of confrontation but also one of humour and hope; it is, I suggest, the very lack of safety in this space that, with trust, speeds connectivity. The question this paper therefore considers

at its conclusion is how, as workshop facilitators, might we have delivered safety and thus maximised participation and the rewards from doing so.

But first an elaboration on the possibilities offered by that singular preposition with companionable intent: the word 'with'.

## **ALL THAT 'WITH' REVEALS**

To work with each other, to be with each other, to learn with, to imagine a shared future with, to acknowledge a shared past with each other accentuates the importance of the transformative present and simplifies the collaborative imperative inherent in undertaking movement across cultures (Smith, 1999). 'With' encapsulates sharing on all levels and holding the word in conscious regard, I suggest, creates an equal space for diverse epistemologies. In practice however experiencing the transformative potential of 'with' is elusive and no doubt because of the way our Australian settler history is taught.

Despite being the oldest living culture on the planet, despite archaeological evidence estimating Aboriginal occupation to be of approximately 50,000 years' duration (Gammage, 2013), there is still no constitutional recognition in Australia that Aboriginal people were here prior to British settlement 1788. Proclaimed 'empty land' or terra nullius in 1770, Australia became subsumed by the British Empire as a bulwark against French expansion in the South Pacific. Critical to the terra nullius doctrine is an understanding that agriculture equates to ownership; it was imperative then to support the founding terra nullius myth by destroying or ignoring what is now recognised as deeply sophisticated land and fire management practices developed over millennia by Aboriginal people (Gammage, 2013; Pascoe, 2014).

The "disappearance" of 95% of the Aboriginal population in the first one hundred years of British occupation once fuelled a belief that the remaining 5% would similarly become invisible (Milroy, 2011). The guerrilla warfare that characterized frontier settlement, that challenges its legality spuriously based on the doctrine of terra nullius, was ignored in history. There might now be attempts to recognize this century of violence but there is little political will to address the true nature of Aboriginal dispossession.

There is still no treaty and although through the judiciary there are attempts to recognise land rights, as Reynolds (1999) maintains:

It is obvious that the doctrine of terra nullius still holds sway. It may have been expelled from the courts but it still resides securely in many hearts and minds. As a nation we find it very hard to recognise our own distinctive forms of racism. They exist in ... ways of thinking which are often taken as no more than common sense (1999, p. 222).

Becoming aware of this pervasive 'common sense' embedded in colonizer history was for me the first disruption to the anticipated narrative flow for the evolving play within my doctoral thesis. I wanted to focus on the memorial; I was looking for a story about reconciliation, I assumed that the massacre would be a significant but an inciting event. What the first draft performed reading of the play, detailed below, clarified for me as a researcher and as an arts practitioner was the difference between history as data and history as drama: history as it is taught and history as it is held in the body. Seeing my six actors, three Aboriginal and three non-Aboriginal, working with each other, focusing on text but through their bodies making sense of grief and guilt, through movement shifting uncomfortably in a relational space that reflected assumed privilege and profound injustice, changed my understandings of history and the process of enculturation through the dominant Western paradigm. And, consequently, changed the play. Scholarship supports this experience.

Inherent in performance ethnography, the primary research methodology employed in this study, is precisely this offer of the body as a research site. Scholar and arts practitioner Jones (2005) confirms that performance ethnography "rests on the idea that bodies harbour knowledge about culture, and that performance allows for the exchange of that knowledge across bodies." (2005, p.339) It is the body, according to Alexander (2005), which conveys the relationship between culture and how it is experienced. It is performance-centred research, which "takes as both its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place and history." (Conquergood, 1991, p.187)

Having Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal actors together, I discovered, powerfully symbolised the history of dispossession. The drama began in the massacre but once introduced it remained omnipresent; in the play the memorial is a consequence of the

massacre but it is not a conclusion to the play's story; if anything, it is a call to consciousness.

## **WAKING UP TO HISTORY**

My doctoral play, *Today We're Alive*, was first read publicly at Myall Creek on a Sunday morning in 2011 in an isolated tin shed situated in north-west NSW, thirty-five kilometres from the tiny township of Bingara and over six hundred kilometres from Sydney. The tin shed has great community significance: it is the memorial hall built in 1923 on the banks of Myall Creek and it is dedicated to the local men of another century, who never returned from World War 1.

Just five hundred metres away from the memorial hall, the memorial to the Myall Creek massacre of 1838 snakes its way along a ridge. The massacre, the slaughter of twenty-eight Weraerai old men, women and children, is said to have taken place on the slopes below. It is the only Aboriginal massacre in Australian history where some but not all of the perpetrators were punished. Eleven of the twelve perpetrators were arrested and seven of those were hanged; the four who survived custody were released quietly back into society two months after the hangings, so great was the uproar caused by the unique judgement that called for white lives for black deaths.

All subsequent massacres went underground and despite the existence of court records, it took over one hundred and sixty years for this massacre site to be openly recognised. The committee of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members, who created this memorial over an eighteen-months' period from 1998 to 2000 remain passionate about its significance and its contribution to the national psyche.

The doctoral play was, and remains, verbatim text derived from interviews with twenty Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, most of whom are still committee members. The play's story, in this first draft, arced from first contact in 1788 to the first commemorative service at the memorial in 2000. The words of the play text faithfully conveyed different versions of events but through performance it became clear not all events had equal, linear, causal significance. For this first reading the performers embodied culture not characters; with occasional exceptions when documentary tracts were included, the voices of the actors were the voices of the characters. Despite being buried in the data the brutal truth of colonization emerged during this

first reading, particularly during the massacre sequence as it was told from the Aboriginal point of view and through this, the past became present in the now.

## **TRAUMA SITES AND LIVING HISTORY**

As Edkins (2003) argues we must accept that sites where atrocities have occurred will always exist in trauma time, where stories are truly heard and the resonances from the past resound in the present. At such places there is no resolution, no closure, because the multiple narratives they evoke challenge inherited identity of both colonizer and colonized. If we are, as either the colonizers or the colonized, to see ourselves in new ways (Saul, 2008), to forge new realities, if we are to remain open to different perspectives, then, as Edkins (2003) contends, we must resist wanting to resolve the past.

At this first performed reading the actors struggled to find a rhythm within a confusingly over-written text; the nature of first contact, the wool boom, the power of the squatters, the arrests of the perpetrators, the trails of the accused threatened to overwhelm the significant content distilled from the research field – principally the on-going terror for Aboriginal people as a result colonizer violence.

And yet the performance also elicited hope. The massacre might have dominated the play's story but it was the memorial story that generated a new momentum. When two of the central players in the memorial story came together, when "Letitia"<sup>1</sup>, a descendant of a massacre perpetrator, met "Sally", a descendant of a massacre survivor and the Kamilaroi Elder, who initiated the memorial at Myall Creek, 'not one person didn't cry'. What was true at their first meeting in 1999, was equally true for its re-enactment at the memorial hall. Tears of grief came during the massacre sequence and tears recurred, this time of joy, during "Letitia's" and "Sally's" embrace, making this moment an epiphany for actors and audience alike. In the first draft Rhonda is reading "Sally" and Anna is reading "Letitia"; Gen, non-Aboriginal, and Lily, Aboriginal, comment on the embrace. In this first draft this moment became:

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<sup>1</sup> "Letitia" and "Sally" are not the research participants' real names. As an undertaking for research purposes, their privacy was protected. However in the script extracts included in this paper the actors' real names are used, as the script at this early point did not have characters.

**Rhonda stands, followed by the rest of the cast. Slowly Rhonda reaches out to embrace Anna.**

**Gen:** *When Letitia met Sally not one person didn't cry.*

**Anna:** *Sally and I, we became very emotional. It was very emotional.*

**Rhonda:** *The families of the perpetrators came and asked forgiveness.*

**Anna:** *Sally told me when we were alone, she said: I've never had a sister but I consider you now my blood sister. So that was special; that was really special.*

**Lily:** *You know, you don't expect things to be done for Aboriginal people.*

**Anna:** *Somebody said it must have been very cathartic for you, but not really, no. My family broke up over it. They wouldn't accept it. They didn't want people to know they were descended from a murderer...My first response was I didn't want to know, it was shameful but I knew I couldn't let it alone. There was something in me that had to do something about it. I did feel that very, very strongly.*

**Rhonda:** *I think there was a reconciliation there.*

**Lily:** *So what I thought when Sally hugged Letitia was like the occupants of the house, the descendants, the ones who we'd come in and done a home invasion on actually in that embrace was like reconnecting with the land. It's like through that embrace, it's like through that, connection and belonging to Australia is really established. And it can only be done through Aboriginal people.*

**Rhonda:** *And it all just come together.*

The embrace is still part of the annual commemorative service held at the memorial each massacre anniversary on or near June 10<sup>th</sup>. The embrace remained through subsequent drafts and is a cathartic moment in the final version of the play. A short promotional film clip of the play includes the embrace and can be viewed [here](#).

After a successful tour in 2013 and the play's publication in 2014 (Playlab, 2014), the idea of developing a three-stage workshop aimed at introducing workshop participants to a reconciliatory experience gained momentum.

## THE EVOLVING WORKSHOP

Mapping the workshop content reflected my own post-doctorate understanding of reconciliation as a gradual process of increasing awareness. This accelerating awareness led to a capacity to adapt, to transform and could only be achieved by consciously entering the shared space knowing one's own inherited perspective, in my case non-Aboriginal, while simultaneously recognising departure points in terms of an Aboriginal perspective. Furthermore, as neither culture is static, both perspectives are subject to change; the pathways along which change occurs may not be predictable. Therefore to fully understand another's culture at any point in time, one first has to understand one's own.

Indigenous scholars identify such critical thinking as an essential requirement for those entering the cross-cultural arena, as in this space problematizing the dominance of Western epistemology is an imperative (Smith, 1999; Chilisa, 2013). But to initiate this awareness of multiple perspectives in a workshop scenario, when participants could quite easily have never met anyone, who identified as Aboriginal, was the first challenge. The cross-cultural space, it was decided, would have to be manufactured through a brief exploration of vulnerability and resilience, rather than race alone. If we could locate an empathic response at the outset using drama techniques, we, Hannah, my workshop collaborator, and I, felt we could continue to use different sections of the play, *Today We're Alive*, to enable individual responses to a reconciliatory experience through the emotional and relational opportunities offered by the performative.

The workshop we designed takes ninety minutes and has three separate modules. The aims of these modules are:

- to illuminate the divisive imperative embedded in colonization,
- to nurture a dialogue with the internal critic
- to offer an opportunity to critically pursue a cross-cultural collaboration in order to commence a shared artistic endeavour.

It is hoped that through reflection and through feedback the participants can become sensitized to on-going racism and how they might potentially create new insights into their own understandings of emergent reconciliatory initiatives.

We begin with a brief outline of the Myall Creek massacre and memorial, then referring back to Reynolds' (1999) observation that we don't necessarily recognise our own distinctive forms of racism, we introduce a personal story about racism through filmed content. The personal story belongs to a friend and colleague, Aboriginal actor, singer and songwriter Elaine Crombie, and it concerns a particular episode in her life, when at sixteen she was ridiculed at a party by an older non-Aboriginal boy she assumed was her friend. Involving betrayal, humiliation and racist slurs in regard to alcohol abuse, she still carries the emotional scars of the sudden and unmotivated attack. With her consent, we filmed her telling this story and interspersed that footage with sequences of her performing her own music at a concert. Her music manifests spirit and joy, her story about the boy demonstrates chronic pain; in entwining these two aspects of Elaine, her songs and her story, she offers insight into a universal narrative about resilience. It is Elaine's story about racism that we invite the workshop participants to interpret through a series of three freeze frames.

We ask our participants in groups to depict the origins of the young man's attitudes towards Aboriginal people. Media, family and history text books are popular choices. Participants are then asked to create a freeze-frame involving young man himself. Let's call him "Damo". The task is to redeem him; we ask: what might subvert this racist stereotype? We ask the participants to present a final freeze frame with a caption. Sporting prowess, achievement and leadership featured as redeeming agents. Participants therefore complete this exercise having expressed through the body aspects of dominant culture, marginalised culture and the possibilities offered by

instruments of inclusion.

The second exercise involves a verbatim speech from *Today We're Alive*, a story about an experience of Aboriginal spirituality from the perspective of a non-Aboriginal man. It happens to be a beautiful speech, rich in hesitation, filled with awe. Participants are grouped in pairs and are invited to re-interpret this speech, filling in the hesitations with internal dialogue. This exercise reflects those learnings from the research field, which convey new understandings about the relationship between the spoken word and silence in mapping cultural change. Articulating what is unspoken opens participants up to the possibilities of uncertainty as being a site of transformation; discoveries made in this exercise, experienced as shifts in body language, in facial expression, in breathing, flow into the workshop's conclusion.

The final exercise involves using verbatim text, interwoven as a dialogue, which has been taken from the play and adapted for the exercise. "Jayson" is an Aboriginal artist, "Peggy" a non-Aboriginal activist and both want to build a memorial but at the scene's opening neither of them are looking for partnership with each other:

**Peggy:** So here I am surrounded by memorials to dead white men but nothing to Aboriginal people... And I thought I can't get anywhere with this. I don't know if I have the energy, the resources, the time, I don't know if I should be doing it, I'm not Aboriginal – so I left it.

**Jayson:** You walk away. Close the door. But in their absence you're glad to get away from those eyes. Eh? Those eyes – watching.

**Peggy:** It's not my place to be doing this.

**Jayson:** I think a memorial would be great. It's great. To think that it might be there to recognize the fact that those people were massacred, right? But it doesn't take away the fact that they were.

**Peggy:** A rock. A boulder. As simple as possible.

**Jayson:** As simple as possible – with maximum impact.

**Peggy:** With maximum impact.

**Jayson:** I want the privilege and honour of doing it.

**Peggy:** And it all just took off from there.

We ask that the participants determine prior to performing the scene exactly when and why, as characters, they each decide to work with each other. We then invite the workshop 'audience' to comment on the transformative changes they noticed.

It is with the first and third exercises that we have occasionally met resistance in the workshop environment. In the first exercise involving freeze-frames there can be an unwillingness to portray stereotypes in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. In the third exercise, reconciliatory outcomes can be too easily demonstrated rather than experienced and participants are unable to articulate when the idea of working together becomes a possibility. A return to respecting the drama aesthetic and its integral contribution to the transformative potential of performance, I suggest, could solve both these difficulties.

Theatre-makers in zones of conflict, Cohen, Varea and Walker (2011), refer to their aesthetic as the resonant interplay between the expressive forms of culture and those who participate in them. White (2015) concludes in his discussion of applied theatre aesthetics that there is an art in participation itself, "which invites people to experience themselves differently, reflexively and self-consciously." (2015, p. 83)

If we had introduced Elaine's antagonist, "Damo", into all the freeze-frames, rather than just the fourth one, we would have enabled workshop participants to create stereotypes through assumed knowledge of "Damo's" world and not directly reveal anything of themselves. And we would have prioritised the collective imagination through the invention of character.

Similarly, in the third exercise, we did not allow our workshop participants to actually imagine the world 'Peggy' and 'Jayson' might have inhabited. Where did these two disparate characters, both artists, overlap? What would their memorial have been like? If we had allowed time for our two characters to physically design their own memorial, we would have, through their shared imagination, given all workshop participants greater insight into both the nature of resistance and the steps they took, as characters, towards acceptance of self and of

other.

Eager to pursue an outcome, we forgot that in trauma time there is no closure; that reconciliation is a process. And it is through time, through relationship and through the shared imagination in the cross-cultural space that we find new ways of knowing.

## CONCLUSION

What the workshops reveal is the challenge embedded in initiatives that have a reconciliatory intent, where judgement, unexpressed anger, unexamined arrogance and determined detachment can co-exist with an expressed awareness of injustice and inequality. In terms of attitudes and behaviours there could well be examined and unexamined aspects of ourselves operating simultaneously. “Letitia” might say: ‘There was something in me that had to do something about it’ but in practice not everyone responds to the call in the same way.

What we discovered in the workshops is that creating a sense of safety, where participants were free to express themselves through a commitment to the tasks, does not reside in words. Our instructions as facilitators, our reassurances, our shared dialogue with participants did not always guarantee commitment. Safety, like trust, it seems, stems from being given the freedom to imagine interior and exterior worlds and the time to create them. On reflection, we recognise that there are multiple possibilities influencing reconciliatory initiatives; part of the reconciliatory process might well be a simultaneous reconciliation with our divided selves. Because no-one starts as neutral.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

After a three decade-long career as a performer and television writer and editor, Linden Wilkinson returned to Sydney University in 2003 to attain a Drama teaching diploma. She completed her Master's degree in 2008 using verbatim theatre as a research modality to investigate long term trauma and commenced her doctoral study in that same year. Now published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2016), her doctoral thesis again uses verbatim theatre to explore cross-cultural content in the Australian context. She is an independent arts practitioner and teacher and is currently developing a performance project about military personnel transitioning out of the Australian Army.