A "Hidden Centre": Crossing cultural boundaries and ecstatic transformation

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Abstract

The following is an edited version of Liza Lim's keynote lecture presented for the Inaugural Totally Huge New Music Festival Conference (Perth: 8 Oct. 2005). It examines cross-cultural aesthetics and ethical questions arising from non-Indigenous Australian composers interacting with Australian Indigenous cultures. The paper begins in a formal and framed way and then moves towards more personal and speculative comments.

Tos Mahoney, artistic director of Tura New Music, brought up the idea of looking at the current bloom of interest in Indigenous culture from Australian composers writing Western art music.[1] Additionally, one of the key events for the Festival was an ambitious inter-cultural project entitled *Ooldea*, a collaboration between composer Iain Grandage, Ngaanyatjarra elders and the Western Australian Symphony Orchestra.[2] Just prior to giving this talk and one week before the scheduled premiere, *Ooldea* was cancelled due to cultural business in the Spinifex Country in the central dessert region of Western Australia. In *Ooldea*'s cancellation as much as its proposed performance, it seemed to illustrate a number of issues that I aim to draw out in relation to non-Indigenous/Indigenous artistic interactions.

This is a subject that I find problematic, fascinating, rich in possibilities and certainly one that seems very much part of the zeitgeist or spirit of our times. This question—how are non-Indigenous Australian artists interacting with Indigenous cultures?—is, I think, a minefield of issues because it goes to the core of so many deep wounds and cultural blind spots in Australia, arising from the violence of colonisation.

Earlier this year in Brisbane, there was a festival and conference called Encounters which focused on trying to establish a historical context for various encounters: meetings and misunderstandings between European Australian composers and Australian indigenous cultures from the earliest colonial period to the present.[3]

What emerged for me was a picture of great longing and a kind of anxiety of provincialism from composers of the past, say 150 years or so, to create a stronger sense of cultural identity for themselves in this country—the old and continuing identity issue of migrant people uprooted from their place of origin looking to make sense of their situation, looking for authenticity of being. Indigenous culture seemed to offer many composers a fruitful pathway towards establishing a longed for "genuinely Australian musical sound," often as a retort to the perceived cultural "deadwood" of British and European classical music traditions.

The 1930s and 1940s was a particularly fertile time for these questions when there were a number of Australian artists such as the painter Margaret Preston and composer John Antill who actively looked to Aboriginal materials—whether images, melodies, use of colour, or rhythm—as sources of inspiration (just as their counterparts in Europe from a slightly earlier period, drew upon so called primitive African art and the Indigenous traditions of their own countries). In Margaret Preston's case, she was able to travel widely in central Australia; and John Antill based his work *Corroboree*, dating from the mid 1940s, on visits he made to Aboriginal communities at La Perouse in Sydney.

The Encounters conference attempted to bring a historical gaze to this work, whether Isaac Nathan's *Aboriginal Choruses* of the late 1840s, or an example of a contemporary collaboration like that between Peter Sculthorpe and didgeridoo player William Barton, though few conclusions were made about the nature of various cross-cultural transactions, especially in terms of any theories of colonisation and power.

The pattern set by the earliest examples of cross-cultural interactions showed composers' academic reliance on anthropological books and recordings. Aspects of Aboriginal cultures were simply lifted as artefacts representing some generalised concept of Aboriginality—often in well meaning ways—whilst of course continuing to perpetuate colonising attitudes.

I am not sure how the motivations may have changed or if they have—and I mean this comment in the spirit of a question, including a question to myself, rather than a put down of what composers are doing. That is, I think Aboriginal cultures continue to be used by artists as a marker of authenticity in the construction of an Australian identity or sense of nationality. And I wonder if, how, and in what ways, this is being negotiated or transformed as more people engage in somewhat more equal (though I think there is a long way to go here), complex and direct "real life" inter-cultural engagements.

Recent projects, such as the Australian Art Orchestra's visit to Ngukurr in Arnhem land and the *Ooldea* project already mentioned before, are the latest instalments in this tradition in Australian music history. And I think these projects (and there are, of course, other examples), which show somewhat more demanding or complex qualities in their cross-cultural encounters, might give us clues for what is happening in this controversial area.

What I find intriguing about these recent collaborations are the ways in which the participants have been quite robust in their engagement with each other. That openness seems to be a good sign for some kind of cross-cultural exchange, and, potentially, for artistic transformation to take place.

The subject of crossing cultural borders has been a personal "theme" in my own work for a long time. Certainly, I have looked at my South East Asian Chinese heritage in works like my Chinese street opera *Moon Spirit Feasting* (2000) and worked with aspects of the traditional Asian performance practice in both instrumental compositions and installation pieces.[4] The background to all that work has always been some sense of addressing an invisible world of spirits, making a space for past resonances, memories and unseen presences.

For instance, one of the instruments I have worked a lot with is the Chinese qin (the seven string zither). In qin music, physical gestures are the outward signs of an inner silence (a state of receptive openness), in the same way Chinese calligraphy is a demonstration of an unimpeded flow between inspiration, the mind, body, ink and the page.

For me, the qin or zither is an emblem of how the sensuous and the physical worlds connect with the numinous—how visceral experience is intertwined with the subtle realms of energy, or the "interplay of tactility and dream."[5] I sometimes describe myself as a junkie for radiance, for illumination—the frisson of elemental qualities, earth, fire, water, air coming together.

What I want to do in this talk is use these elements—earth, fire, water, air—to mark out, or to make a symbolic template for thinking about various aspects of cross-cultural aesthetics in relation to Australian Indigenous cultures. I have taken as a model, the work of Debra Bennett-McClean, a Koori woman in Brisbane, who has worked extensively with what she calls "yarning circles" or "decolonised discussion spaces," and who uses these elemental symbols to promote Indigenous ways of ordering thought:

Fire
Earth Centre Water
Air

The Five Basic "Stations" of Indigenous Thought: A summary

Earth: The foundation place

This quality symbolises the ground one stands on, looking at where one is, the beginning of one's work. It is a place of investigation and excavation.

Fire: A place of passion

The Fire element is one of exploration. It is the energy that is needed to push oneself to completely engage in something. It also represents a burning away of illusions.

Water: A place of clarification

Refining ideas and tools is possible at this stage. Water is the element that enables a cool analysis of situations, where one becomes fluid and fluent.

Air: A place of freedom

The Air element sees one rise up like a bird to survey what has been achieved, being in one's element, and being free in one's invention because technical obstacles have been resolved. With achievement, there is also the responsibility of passing on knowledge to the next generation

Centre: A place of mystery

Also one of the five cardinal points in Chinese culture, synthesis and transcendence occur at the Centre. It is a place where everything is possible.

These five "stations" are not so much presented as a hierarchy, but as stages in a continuing process; obviously one can inhabit several stages of this journey at once.

What I am doing here is also setting out what I believe is a very compositional approach to thinking. What is composition?—a nonlinear way of structuring thought, feelings, unnameable impulses, and the subtlest impressions using symbols. Something occurring in one time position connects with something else at another time, whilst another thing, alternately harmonising or dissonant, reinforcing or contradicting the first statement, may be weaving a counterpoint. Sound carries information and lends itself to abstraction—the ordering of sound and silence in time creates patterns that can suggest order at several levels simultaneously.

Earth: The foundation place

I want to say upfront that I am not an expert and do not speak from a position of authority at all in relation to Indigenous culture. Rather, I am piecing together for myself some very subjective perspectives about Indigenous ways of knowing and being that arise from the part of the world where I live. My primary engagements with Indigenous cultures come through my next door neighbour in Brisbane, Murri elder Lilla Watson and her family; a collaboration with Waanyi artist Judy Watson who also lives in Brisbane; and through a couple of trips to so called "remote" communities like Haasts' Bluff, 300-odd kilometres west of Alice Springs, because of an interest in art and Yirrkala in North Eastern Arnhem land to put together a project for the Adelaide Festival involving Yolngu women performers. This is not much to go on, and obviously I am at the very beginning of a long process of engagement. I certainly feel that I am at a beginner's "earth" position in this journey.

Part of the reason for this engagement is in order to be more awake to where I am (the dark reality of which, is that the places in Australia where I live and move around in have been made available through colonisation and dispossession). Another reason is to learn something from the extraordinary traditions of knowledge held by different Aboriginal nations just as I have also sought out artists and composers in places in Europe with its great cultural traditions. So on my part, there is white middle class guilt, with its various veils of preconceptions and assumptions, and there is also artistic curiosity primarily sparked by a passion for the visual arts, whether desert painters such as Eubena Nampitjin and the Balgo community, Tommy Watson and Irrunytju arts, or the incredibly varied, fine tuned work of Arnhem land artists from John Marwundjul to Djambawa Marawili, Galuma Maymura and Gulumbu Yunupingu.[6]

I find that the various strands of Australian Aboriginal culture that I have come across (compared to an Anglo-Western or Chinese world view) confront me with quite different epistemologies—that is, philosophical frameworks for understanding and questioning knowledge in relation to one's place in the world. That is, anytime I think I know a little bit about Indigenous thinking, I find that my assumptions are all wrong and that I actually know less than what I started with.

Here is a concrete example: I read in an art book the sentence "Aboriginal people have a deep and spiritual connection to the land" and think I understand the meaning. Then while sitting on the

veranda next door with Auntie Lilla one day, she casually mentions that one of the things she loves when Aboriginal dancers perform is the way the dust gets kicked up and covers everyone. She says she has an intense feeling of belonging when she gets covered in that dust; that this is the earth rising up to greet her and that it is her ancestors embracing her and telling her that she belongs to the place.

Now, that is not my relationship to earth—when I get covered in dust, I feel dusty and want to wash the dirt away. What Lilla is talking about is the earth as creator, the place of origin, in the most fundamental way, and not just a poetic metaphor. This relationship to the earth seems to me to be what really defines "Indigenous" in the current political sense when speaking about, for instance, Australian Aboriginal nations, native Americans, the Inuit, Maori, etcetera. Many peoples who live close to the earth (for instance, farmers and peasant cultures) would say they feel a deep connection to the earth, but they do not necessarily say that the earth is their creator or that the dust is their ancestor.

This for me is the beginning of my cross-cultural questioning—when Australian composers speak of landscape, when they picture the land as an inspiration for their work, this seems entirely understandable—after all, Australia holds so many extraordinary scenes of wonder, of epic grandeur and so on that surely it would provoke creative outpouring from artists in a poetic Romantic sense just as Gustav Mahler or Anton Bruckner or Ludwig Van Beethoven responded to scenes of nature.

When composers say "the earth sings" (as in Michael Finnissy's *Red Earth,* or various works by Andrew Ford), "the earth dances" (Harrison Birtwistle's *Earth Dances*), or that it "cries out" (Peter Sculthorpe's *Earth Cry*) and so on, they are no doubt expressing a deeply experienced connection with the natural world. Interestingly the first three of these are of British extraction. When we say that this feeling of communion finds some equivalence with Indigenous understandings of the land, I think this is an interesting point for further investigation.

I have many questions—can there be an inner aesthetic congruity between people who hold very different cultural values? The history of art is full of creative misunderstandings that led to new and original thought and expressions. What is the value of these kinds of conceptual appropriations in a creative sense? Appropriation, borrowing, influences—these are part of everyday life. What would it mean if artists did not look and listen, or refused to engage and learn from the cultures in this country?

In particular, what are the moral or ethical dimensions of more direct forms of appropriation? Appropriation means taking something without permission or payment, not properly acknowledging ownership, otherwise known as just plain stealing. Another angle would be to say that appropriation is cultural borrowing in a situation of manifest inequality. As artist Richard Bell angrily discusses in his manifesto for the Telstra Art Awards in 2003, there is also the even more complicated issue of situations when the ownership of copyright for an image, a story, a song, rests not only with an individual artist, but a whole community.[7]

In thinking about better models for correct cultural exchange, at a minimum this would have to include payment for time and information, seeking permission to use any kind of cultural property, and ultimately, true collaboration where artists share equivalent financial and intellectual property rights.

The questions we ask, the way we ask them, the context of how we receive information—all these things colour and profoundly shape the knowledge we think we have.

Perhaps the best path through these questions is the experiential one. Rather than theorising too much at the beginning, it would be better to find ways of immersing oneself in the so called cultural "other" to see where there might be points of connection and communication. One possible example could be when the Australian Art Orchestra's visited the Aboriginal community of Ngukurr with a view to establishing a collaboration with musicians there, and which was reported on the ABC's *7.30 Report* a couple of months ago.

Fire: A place of passion

Iain Grandage has spent various periods of time in the last two years visiting the Spinifex Country in the Great Victoria Desert, Western Australia, consulting with the Ngaanyatjara elders who he proposed to collaborate with on his *Ooldea* project. I asked him to speak about the collaborative

process and some of the questions, pitfalls, and surprises that confronted him, and also where this process has led him as a composer and he sent this message:

> Apologies from Melbourne for my absence. And apologies also to prospective audience members of next weekend's now postponed performance of *Ooldea*. It seems somewhat ironic to be working on a stage adaptation of *The Odyssey* at a moment such as this, where the Ithaca I thought I was returning to has changed, where the Ithacan orchestra at home no longer plays the song I wrote to share with my collaborators from the Spinifex lands.[8]

It is with deep sadness I found out Thursday evening that the elders would not be travelling to Perth as expected, but would be staying in Tjuntjuntjara to move some urgent business on. In making that choice (if there really was one) between traditional business and performing in Perth, the elders displayed in practical terms what it means to have culture at the core of one's life—inseparable from day to day activity, inseparable from country. Such a holistic view of life is for me a source of wonder. However, for the elders, it seems utterly unremarkable. It results in decisions that can to Western sensibilities seem unfathomable, but which in practical terms are simply necessary. It is time. The business will happen.

In researching *Ooldea*, I travelled across much of Spinifex Country with the elders, visiting sites, hearing stories and recording traditional songs (inma). These were obviously special moments for me and I learnt much (a knowledge which perversely shrinks every time I learn more). But the magnanimity of the men's sharing did raise the question of my own motivation for the collaboration. Am I seeking to find some lost sense of identity? To find my Australianness? I do not know the answer to that question yet. I am not sure I ever will.

I do know that I am inspired by Australian landscape, yet sense that this land is not my country to sing. Every rock hole, hill, and natural topographic feature has its own song—known only to it and the elders who care for it. In contrast, my reaction to a landscape or place is utterly subjective—a surface rendering of a place that contains deep resonances and meaning. While not wanting to belittle my own response to the land, when I observe the men singing their country, there is authority, craft, devotion and simplicity. As a composer—an Australian composer—I aspire to all those attributes. Simply, I would be content with one.

So, just as Odysseus realises that his life has become about journeying and not about arriving, I find myself finally relaxing into the experience of sharing repeated voyages with a remarkable group of men whose gift is a willingness to share a vast culture and whose lesson for me is to be patient.

Water: A place of clarification

I am going to talk a little about the project that I did recently with Judy Watson called *Glass House Mountains* where water was a kind of motto.[9] The Glass House Mountains are spectacular eroded volcanic plugs just north of Brisbane—I first saw them flying into the city more than ten years ago, and they have always struck me as being like massive ancient bells. For many people in South Eastern Queensland they are icons in the landscape and often figure in childhood memories of long car trips heading up north. Naturally, they are also very powerful formations for the local Aboriginal people. One mountain in particular which attracted both Judy and I was Beerwah, Mother Mountain, traditionally a women's birthing site.

Judy's exploration of Indigenous issues forms the core of her work as a painter, print maker and installation artist. The maternal side of her family is Waanyi, from country further north in Queensland (her father's side is Scottish). Hence, the Glass House Mountains are not her country, and both of us came to them as visitors.

In preparing a project that looked at aspects of the Glass House Mountains, we undertook quite extensive consultation with Indigenous custodians, travelling to various sites. We also did quite a bit of research at the Brisbane Lands Department looking at old surveyors' maps from Matthew Flinders's maps of the area dating from 1790 to all kinds of property, mining and satellite imaging maps.

Something that emerged very strongly was the extent to which the mountains area has been claimed, counter claimed, subdivided and mapped by competing parties, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. There are currently five or more different Indigenous language groups that claim the country, with a number of native title claims for various sites underway.

The more we spoke with people, the clearer it became that the "beauty" of this landscape is etched with histories of horror and grief, displacement, loss, genocide, and racism. Many of the local custodians had only returned to the area later in life after surviving the wholesale removal and dispersal of families and children to places whose names are now synonymous with violence and social dysfunction—Palm Island, Cherbourg, etcetera.

But rather than addressing these stories directly, our installation work looks at this country and the layers of history overlaid on the mountain sites in quite subtle ways, by pointing out, or alluding to, various subtle traces left by people.

Water became a kind of motto in the work—there is the recreation of the first European "gaze" on the mountains in one video projection, referencing Captain Cook's journey through the Pumicestone Passage into Moreton Bay. He named the mountains after the Glasshouses in Manchester because they reminded him of their shape. There is another video of axe grinding grooves in a creek bed—evidence of the long duration of Indigenous habitation and use of resources. Then there is a pineapple field evoking the current use of the land around the mountains over which there are three "boning rods" (surveyors rods) suspended like threatening spears. Other elements of the installation focussed on Beerwah, Mother Mountain, expressed as a translucent mountain sculpture, as musical improvisation by a solo cellist caressing the instrument as a "body" and sound installation.

I made several field recordings at key sites, and these were processed through filtering, multiplying resonant frequencies and layering while still maintaining the rhythmic shape of the original. Because of this, I felt that the sounds still retained the "signature" of their original form, even when kookaburras became breath sounds or drumming beats, and crows transformed into high bells, frogs into low bass drones, and cicadas into luscious chords.

Judy made a set of floor canvases tracing map contour lines with ochre colours, which, for her, represented a conflation, a coming together, of European mapping with the vertical "in country" gaze of Indigenous ground paintings. The ochre, for her, represented blood and volcanic soil.

What I find very interesting and moving in working with Judy is that she does not reject any part of the story—either European or Indigenous. She works in a very holistic and subtle way with the many complex, complicated dimensions of place. Rather than necessarily dividing up influences, histories and meanings into European or Indigenous, we were trying to look at a picture of what is there now—the multiple residues collected in a place.

Air: A place of freedom

One of the aesthetic categories that seems to be widely shared and highly valued by many Aboriginal peoples across Australia is the aesthetic quality of shimmer as a signifier of spiritual power. I have begun to gather Indigenous words that allude to this quality. For instance, "kalyuyuru" is a word in Kukatja, a language spoken in Balgo on the Western edge of the Sandy Desert and it describes the quality of songs found in dream. Songs found in dream are kalyuyuru—which means "like water shimmering as it falls."[10] Water falling in desert country obviously has a powerful drama and life giving meaning, and the vibration of light shimmering over water describes song experienced in a heightened state or another reality.

As another example, "miny'tji," a word from North Eastern Arnhem Land languages, is used to describe the shimmer of cross hatching on bark paintings, but also the effects of light on rippling water at certain times of day, or light shifting amongst the dense thickets of the tall thin trunks of eucalypt forests and so on.[11]

Composer and saxophonist Tim O'Dwyer and artist Lilla Watson have used this aesthetic quality of shimmer as a starting point in their ongoing collaboration. Lilla's primary artistic practice is making "burnings," where she uses mosquito coils to burn through layers of paper. She describes her

work as showing the "DNA" of the land and water, but from an ant's eye view looking up towards the sky. Multiple burnt "dots" make up the patterns of her work. Tim's practice, in recent years, has focused on developing interactive computer software to create multiple layers of his own sound in a live situation.

These two artists, therefore, share a technical vocabulary for multiplying small units—marks in space and sounds in silence—and this has led to a number of works that are increasingly interactive in nature. They are currently developing a new project called *Soft Night Falling,* where sonic impulses from Tim trigger changes in light coming through holes in Lilla's work which are layered on a video screen.[12]

Centre: A place of mystery

Photo by Liza Lim

This is an image of paint brushes which were made from my hair and were used to paint very fine miny'tji, or cross-hatched clan designs on a coffin lid. I am not allowed to show you a picture of the designs or the coffin. For me, this image is very much about hidden-ness, veiling and secrecy, and it points towards an aspect of non-Indigenous/Indigenous interaction that I think is immensely challenging.

One of the challenging things for me, as someone educated in a British-Australian context who wants to learn more about Indigenous culture, is the seemingly circuitous and deeply experiential methods in which Indigenous knowledge is passed on. If you want to learn something, the best thing to do is to spend time with people, be quiet, sit there and wait. For instance, when Auntie Lilla told me about the importance of the dust kicked up by Aboriginal dancers. This type of information comes out of the blue and to one side. You only notice it out of the corner of your eye.

One thing I have found in my limited experience is that there is a lot of waiting; and through waiting and being alert, someone judges that you might be in a position of readiness to receive information, but you have to be awake at that moment to get it, and in a sense you have to earn it.

Another example of experiential learning processes is my journey to North Eastern Arnhem land. I arrived in Dhanaya, a little bay which is a homeland south of Yirrkala in North Eastern Arnhem Land. I have come to learn more about women's singing because I want to invite a group to perform at a series I am putting together for the Adelaide Festival. Everyone I speak to beforehand cannot tell me anything about how or what the women sing. Someone vaguely mentions that "it's about the changing light" which happens to be the subject of my twilight concert series. That seems a great lead to me. I ring David Page in Sydney to see if I can find out more since I know that Bangarra Dance Company have worked extensively with Yolngu people from Yirrkala and he says "the women don't sing; only the men sing."

Ok, obviously I have to visit and spend some time in the community. I organise to visit Yirrkala through friends (Stephen Grant and Bridget Pirrie) who run Grant Pirrie Gallery in Sydney, have close family ties through adoption to members of the Yunupingu family, and are held in extremely high regard by the community because of their strong financial support of artists there. I do

quite a lot of research into Yolngu culture, reading everything I can get my hands on and also get information from people on protocols, what to bring, what to wear, who to speak to etcetera.

I make arrangements to visit and in the weeks beforehand, the main person who I am to meet, the elder who holds knowledge of women's law and singing (Bridget Pirrie's adopted mother) suddenly dies. Nevertheless as an honorary family member I am still asked to go up there, and I arrive as funeral ceremonies—which have been going on for a month—come to a crescendo of activity. Due to the connections through which I have come and because of my interest in women's singing, I am immediately adopted by one of the elder women as a sister.

Processes of adoption are functional and it means that I am allocated a place within the local system so that people know how to relate to me. I am given a name and also acquire various complex clan relationships to people, things, kinds of ceremonies, and an extensive range of brothers, sisters, daughters, sons in law who must be avoided, poison cousins, ditto and so on. Because these relationships are sorted out first up, it means that there is a basis for which I can be in and move around the camp, and I realise that this is a very privileged space.

"Distant cousins" from Elcho Island arrive with special red ochre which is doled out in tiny foil packets which is to be rubbed on the body to protect or to "make one invisible" from any bad spirits. In exchange, they ask for lengths of my hair to make paint brushes. Everyone else has curly hair and mine is conveniently straight, and there is discussion about how suitable this was for making brushes. I feel intensely privileged that I can give something—in fact, something as personal as my hair—to be used to paint the coffin and also participate in an exchange like this.

I have brought lots of gifts—very Asian gifts, knowing the long pre-European history of Yolngu trade with the Macassan trepang (sea cucumber) fishermen, including Indonesian batiks, all kinds of Chinese preserved fruit and sweets—and I see in action the hunter gatherer attitude to material goods, where everything is immediately shared out and consumed. In fact, all the food I have brought for the week is gone on the first day.

I camp with "my sisters," the old ladies, and basically wait, watch, listen and keep my mouth shut. There is continuous ceremony going on—singing, dancing, and painting—and this has been underway for the past month. The men are singing extended song cycles, accompanied by yidaki (didgeridoo) and bilma (clapsticks) which seem to have various Macassan themes, since the dancers carry flags and swords alluding to Macassan sailors and their ships. Both men and women dance, but I still do not hear women singing.

My adopted sister tells me that I need to learn language if I want to find out about singing, and starts to teach me Yolngu Matha (language). She announces that these are leyju darok Matha (very nice/good words). (These words are noted using my own approximate phonetic system and are not written in standard Yolngu Matha orthography). Some of the words she teaches me are:

guiya – fish
mapahl – rock oyster, clam
namra – rock oyster
nerrewan – swamp oyster growing on a mangrove root
gingalma – mud crab
kangili – clam
danbala – mussels
ngorr – prawns
kia tawun – big flat oyster
kia pippi – pippies
djol komo – round clam
warrapal – clam
yarranuh – oval mussel.

This knowledge gives an indication of the richness of seafood in this area. But why is she teaching me these words as the starting point?

Later when walking with her to find bush medicine, in addition to telling me words, she sometimes mentions whether the words are Yirritja or Dhuwa, that is, what classification (or the anthropological word is "moiety") thing falls into.[13] Through my adoption, I am a Yirritja woman, which places me in a certain relationship with other Yirritja things, and another kind of relationship with Dhuwa things. For instance, she tells me not to listen to a song cycle performed later that evening because it is Dhuwa, "not important for me." I begin to see that words for various kinds of shellfish are not any less important than any other part of the language.

I find everything around me very hypnotic—most people only spoke Yolngu Matha—the sounds of ceremony; the emotional intensity of the situation (the funeral). I begin to feel that these people are living inside an epic, mythic reality where song, language and ritual binds together every element in the environment in incredibly complex ways. Looking around, I see that everyone from little kids to elders are participants, as singers/dancers/painters and that everyone seems entirely sure of their place within this environment.

But, in fact, despite these unfamiliar things my overriding impression was not so much how different it was to be in an Aboriginal community, but how much the vibe was like being in South East Asia. The language seemed quite like a South Indian Dravidian language to me ("Nha mirri?" or "how are you?" "Marrkap mirri," "really happy") and the liveliness and the sense of community, the lack of clear demarcations between life, death, art and ritual reminded me of the street festivals in Penang.

I notice that even as I was bringing my projections to the situation in terms of interpreting what was going on, Yolngu people are projecting their own myths on to me. Arts coordinator Will Stubbs mentions that as a single Asian woman, some people, particularly the older people, would see me as a manifestation of Bayanis, a trickster woman from their Macassan stories.

The women I am with are keen to perform at the Adelaide Festival and view it as a way to share their culture. Gulumbu Yunupingu tells me that women's crying songs are for healing. Right at the end of my stay, I am invited into the place where the coffin is housed and hear the women sing, keen and cry out for their sister. It is completely shattering, raw, heart wrenching and cathartic.

I would like to illustrate a couple of things which arise from this. Firstly, that there are different modes of acquiring knowledge that may evade the logical, interrogative traditions of Western science and of positivistic academic enquiry. One of the difficult things which anthropologists, for instance, continually come up against is the issue of secrecy—some things may not be known, some things may not be repeated in public and must stay hidden. In a culture where material goods are shared with everyone and nothing is kept aside for oneself, intellectual and cultural property is fiercely guarded.

Perhaps more important for me though, was the demonstration of the reality of the personal nature in which things are shared and knowledge transmitted—the way modest acts of exchange and trust open doors to understanding on a basic interpersonal level. This applies of course to my next door neighbour, where chatting over the fence or on the veranda may or may not lead to some cultural discussion. All of this is important so that one can move away from talking generically about Aboriginal Culture (big A, big C) in some fixed way, to the particular qualities of specific times, places, people, situations with all the complexity and paradoxes that an interaction between people can contain. I think that these are all things that anyone who is interested in Indigenous culture will come across and engage in, and have to negotiate in their own personal way. I express these in terms of the elemental structure again.

Earth—a fundamental creative relationship in Indigenous culture that we have so much to learn from. Fire—experiential learning; leaving aside preformed questions and assumptions (especially any well meaning assumptions that you might be doing any Indigenous person a favour) so that one can be ready to hear, see, and understand in new ways. Water—clarifying one's position and being fluid; not getting fixated or stuck by holding on to one dimensional positions; flowing with complex situations. Air—a reciprocal exchange of skills, knowledge and resources based on respect, and finding ways to truly collaborate. A hidden Centre—respecting that which cannot be known; making space for what stays hidden.

I find this journeying that I have been talking about (of which, I say again, I am only at the very beginning) incredibly interesting and full of vitality. The vitality comes from the fact that art, and its creation, is an intensely human thing—anything which leads one towards an enlarging of the senses, the intellect, or the subtlest gradations of thinking and feeling. All this is what feeds the creative process. The shared encounters of so called "ordinary life" can open out into the extraordinary. I have used this model of the elements as a way of defining a symbolic space of heightened subjectivity from which to speak.

To conclude in a similarly subjective vein, when I was taken for a walk at Dhanaya in Yolngu country by a custodian of the land, I was given a glimpse of how every stone, every plant, every inch of earth is named (in incredibly subtle and multiple ways) and contains within it whole histories and liturgies of people and ancestors. This knowledge has radiance, and a power which may not be taken lightly.

Nothing, in this culture, stands by itself, but through language, designs, sound, rhythm and ritual, is coded into a rich network of symbols with spiritual significance. The culture requires that each member of the community be able to express or articulate this knowledge through art (story, music, dancing, painting, weaving, etcetera) as a prerequisite to being a real person in the fullest sense. Custodianship is extended to the aesthetic realm. I have come to think of Aboriginal cultures in Australia as a model of an artist's culture because it seems that the transformational power of symbolic thinking underlies so much of how these cultures operate.

Composers too (insert your own label: writer, poet, artist, film maker, listener, etcetera) are, I think, well able to understand these kinds of symbolic transactions, the transformative gesture through which one says "let this thing stand for that," "let this generate a reverberation over there." The shape of the world is an evolving, interconnected and complex network, and within it there are myriad possibilities for turning a boundary crossing into a spark for creative exchange, and for opening up to an experience of greater aliveness and, indeed, ecstatic transformation. Most transforming of all perhaps is to discover that across a boundary is not an unknowable "them" but in fact, the "us" that we recognise in another way.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of Liza Lim's keynote address to the Inaugural Totally Huge New Music Festival was published as "Crossing Cultural Boundaries and Ecstatic Transformation," *Sounds Australian,* 67 (2006), pp. 10-17.

[2] Grandage's *Ooldea* was scheduled to premiere at the Perth Concert Hall on 15 Oct 2005, as part of the Festival. –*Eds.*

[3] Encounters Festival (Brisbane: 12-17 April 2005). See also Danielle Carey, "Igniting the Flame: Documentation and discourse," *Sounds Australian,* 67 (2006), pp. 3-6.

[4] See Keith Gallasch, "On The Go: Australians performing internationally," *RealTime,* 53 (Feb-March 2003), "Melissa Madden Gray, Actor, Singer, Dancer, Choreographer: Woman on the verge," *RealTime*, 45 (Oct-Nov 2001), http://www.realtimearts.net/ accessed March 2006. –*Eds.*

[5] Patricia Sykes, "Liza Lim, radieuses ellipses," *Mouvement*, 36-37 (Sept-Dec 2005).

[6] See: Judith Ryan and Kim Akerman, *Images of Power: Aboriginal art of the Kimberley* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1993); various *Saltwater: Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country: Recognising Indigenous sea rights* (Neutral Bay, NSW: Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre / Jennifer Isaacs, 1999); Hetti Perkins, ed., *Crossing Country: The alchemy of Western Arnhem Land art* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004); Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998).

[7] Richard Bell, "Bell's Theorem, Aboriginal Art: It's a white thing," *Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award: Celebrating twenty year* (Darwin: Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 2003), p. 20.

[8] Grandage is here referring to the Melbourne and Perth Festival production of *The Odyssey* (2005), directed by Michael Kantor, with a script by Tom Wright, musical score by Grandage, and sound design and effects by David Franzke. –*Eds.*

[9] Liza Lim and Judy Watson, *Glass House Mountains*, installation work with performance by the ELISION Ensemble (Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane: Queensland Music Festival 22 Jul – 27 Aug 2005).

[10] See Richard Moyle, *Balgo: The musical life of a desert community* (Perth: CIRCME, 1997).

[11] See: Lynne Hume, *Ancestral Power: The dreaming, consciousness, and Aboriginal Australians* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2002), pp. 84-88; Morphy, p. 99.

[12] Lim showed some video documentation of Tim O'Dwyer and Lilla Watson, *Sight and Sound of a Storm In Sky Country* (Sydney: Sydney Festival, 2005).

[13] Morphy, p. 152.