

Notes from a Cross-Cultural Frontier: Investigating Australian Aboriginal Art through Podcasts

Siobhán McHugh, Ian McLean, and Margo Neale

Warning: this article contains the names of Aboriginal people who have died.

Australian Indigenous art is a highly contested site, partly because of the numerous players in the industry. There is a perception that the Indigenous art industry is mainly run by white outsiders and the artists have little voice. In our cross-disciplinary investigation of these cross-cultural relations, our first concern was finding a methodology that allowed the voices of Indigenous artists living in remote Australia to be heard. This paper discusses how and why we used oral history to conduct an art historical investigation of the cross-cultural politics of Indigenous art centres in Australia, with the aim of disseminating it widely as a sound-rich narrative podcast. It examines the relational and performative aspects of the in-depth interview and the heightened effect achieved by converting raw interview to a narrative podcast format, in order to communicate new knowledge in an inclusive, inventive and collaborative way.

KEYWORDS: Australian Aboriginal art; Indigenous Art; oral history; podcasting; interviewing

Introduction: Podcasting as a New Medium

At its simplest, a “podcast” can be defined as an audio file that is shared online. The term “podcast,” coined by *Guardian* journalist Ben Hammersley in 2004, was a portmanteau of “Ipod,” a portable Apple device that allowed consumers to listen to audio, and “broadcast.” But as a mainstream movement, “podcasting” really took off in 2014, when technological innovation and experimental audio storytelling serendipitously collided: Apple embedded a native app in its popular smartphone and an independent US radio team packaged investigative journalism online as gripping episodic narrative, called simply “Serial.” *Serial* took advantage of the unconstrained nature of the podcast ecology to play with the form: unlike radio, there were no restrictions on explicit language or content; episodes could follow a natural narrative arc rather than be overly condensed or forcibly strung out to suit a broadcast clock; and the presenter, Sarah Koenig, did not have to

sound like a public radio brand – she came out of the ether unmediated, speaking directly to listeners, who became quasi-companions on her quest to figure out if Baltimore high school student Adnan Syed really had killed his former girlfriend Hae Min Lee, a charge of which he had been convicted. Unwittingly, by bringing together a range of factors – high quality audio production standards, a transparent and discursive narration style, strong investigative journalism and, crucially, the ability to be heard at the touch of a smartphone button via the new Apple app – *Serial* became an instant hit, clocking up five million downloads in the first month (more than double those of *This American Life*, its broadcast begetter). By October 2018, three seasons of *Serial* would have achieved an astonishing 450 million downloads (Quah 2018).



Artist Alma Nungarrayi Granites interviewed by Siobhán McHugh at Warlukurlangu Art Centre, Yuendumu, Northern Territory, Australia. Photo: Siobhán McHugh

Serial's popularity triggered a podcasting boom as media organizations scrambled to emulate its success. Newspapers developed significant new audiences via long-form audio storytelling podcasts and narrative news digests; in the former category, for instance, co-author McHugh collaborated with Australian masthead *The Age* to produce three investigative journalism podcasts, *Phoebe's Fall* (2016), *Wrong Skin* (2018) and *The Last Voyage of the Pong Su* (2019), which attracted over a million downloads each. In the narrative news category, in February 2017 the *New York Times* launched *The Daily*, in which host Michael Barbaro tapped the expertise of the paper's reporters to produce an insightful twenty-minute wrap of the day's news. By September 2019, *The Daily* had clocked one billion downloads, garnering around two million listeners per episode. As podcasting became more popular with listeners, non-media professionals in diverse fields began to test its potential to communicate content: academics, writers of fiction and nonfiction, public intellectuals, celebrities, hobbyists, fans, comedians and activists all had a go, emboldened by its low technological and financial barrier to entry. By April 2020, there were over a million podcasts on Apple's iTunes platform, a major distributor (Binder 2020). This boom, in both production and consumption, shifted "podcasting" from being perceived merely as a technology, to an aspiring new medium.

While it is in many ways a first cousin of radio, podcasting has its own defining characteristics, such as a strong host-listener connection and a narrowcast 1:1 delivery style—92% of listeners in the UK listen alone (Cridland 2020). Podcasts are more opt-in than radio: listeners actively select their preferred content, rather than just passively hearing what is on offer. Podcast production is unregulated, constrained neither by institutional gatekeepers nor laws moderating content, in the way broadcasters are. But like radio, it trades on sound's long-established ability to trigger listeners' imaginations and have them co-construct their own mental pictures, imprinting the content in the mind much as a good novel does. Whereas video tends to harness you passively to a screen, audio provides more space for the listener to create bespoke meaning (McHugh 2016), thereby producing elevated perceptions of engaged intimacy and authenticity. Critic Jonah Weiner (2014) describes the [podcast] form's "special sense of intimacy" in the context of an "empathic partnership" which arises partly because "we tend to trust voices instinctively."

The combination of intimacy and empathy which podcasting can achieve makes it a powerful tool for marginalized groups seeking to have their voices heard—not just figuratively, but literally. There are podcasts for all kinds of minorities: LGBTQT (*Nancy*), feminist (*Secret Feminist Agenda*), people of color (*The Stoop, Resistance*), refugees (*The Messenger*), those who are incarcerated (*Ear Hustle, Bird's Eye View*), those with mental health issues (*Terrible, Thanks For Asking*), and many more. Florini (2015, p. 214) has analyzed how podcasting, like community radio, has been a liberating force for Black people in the US, allowing them to

gather in a virtual space “free from the policing of the white gaze,” speaking in their distinctive vernacular. Fox et al (2020) have further noted how “African-American podcasting’s ascent marks a potent articulation of Black identity and experience in media history.”

Podcasting has also afforded opportunities for Indigenous voices in various cultures to be more widely heard. In Canada, *Finding Cleo* (CBC 2018) is an award-winning investigative journalism podcast in which the host, Connie Walker, a Cree woman from the Okanese First Nation in Saskatchewan, investigates the disappearance of a Cree girl apprehended by child welfare workers in Saskatchewan in the 1970s. In a very different genre, *Red Man Laughing* (2011-) is hosted and written by Anishinaabe comedian Ryan McMahan, from Couchiching First Nation in Treaty 3 Territory. McMahan, the first Indigenous comedian to be broadcast as a full-length program on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, explores Native arts, culture and society on the Indian and Cowboy network, billed as “the world’s only member-supported Indigenous podcast network.” McMahan has also made the acclaimed podcast series *Thunder Bay*, about the ongoing impact of colonialism on Indigenous residents of a small city, and *Stories from the Land*.

In Australia, younger voices are to the fore, with playwright Nakkiah Lui and her friend, actress Miranda Tapsell, bringing a deeply satirical but also heart-felt perspective to issues of race and culture in the ironically titled *Pretty For An Aboriginal* (2018). Meanwhile, twenty-something host Marlee Silva sets out to “empower Indigenous women by helping them understand their worth, and what they’re capable of” in her *Tiddas 4 Tiddas* (2019) podcast. In the US, Indigenous voices are sometimes heard on mainstream podcasts such as *This American Life*, where in one episode, “Trail of Tears” (1998, 2020), two Indigenous sisters retrace the route of the eponymous forced relocation of their Cherokee nation from Georgia to Oklahoma, along with many other Native Americans, in the late 1830s. In contrast, the podcast *Coffee with an Indian* (2018) is hosted largely by Native American Brian Melendez, in Nevada. This often pungent podcast covers issues related to politics and culture on a “modern Indian Reservation,” from addiction and spirituality to the significance of Indigenous names, and dealing with a fractured cultural identity. A loose conglomerate of archaeologists and academics make up the Archaeology Podcast Network, founded in 2014 to develop outreach about archaeology. It hosts a range of podcasts, including one, *Heritage Voices*, which “focuses on centering indigenous and traditional community voices in discussions on anthropology, crm/heritage, and land management.” In one episode, “Collecting Oral Histories in Indian Country,” the non-Indigenous host, anthropologist Jessica Yaquinton, interviews Aaron Brien (Apsáalooke), a member of the Night Hawk Dance Society and faculty in Salish Kootenai College’s Tribal Historic Preservation and Native American Studies programs and Dr. Shandin Pete (Salish/Diné), Director of the Indigenous Research Center at Salish

Kootenai College, Montana. They discuss what roles oral history plays in culture, how to collect them in the best way, and how a non-Indigenous researcher might best approach this task. This episode resonates strongly with the design of our research project, “A New Theory of Aboriginal Art.”

This project, funded by Australia’s peak academic funding body, the Australian Research Council (ARC), was conceived by an art historian, Ian McLean, with input from Margo Neale, art curator and Head of Indigenous Knowledges at the National Museum of Australia. In a departure from traditional academic research methodologies, the third investigator would be a practice-based researcher: oral historian, radio documentarian and podcast producer, Siobhán McHugh.



Researchers Margo Neale, Ian McLean and Siobhán McHugh, Brisbane 2018.
Photo: Siobhán McHugh

Our mission: to research claims that a white elite of managers, dealers, curators and art historians had hijacked the discourse on contemporary Australian Aboriginal art. The focus of this debate is the 100 or so federally funded art centers in remote Australia run by white managers, employed by local Indigenous boards, to support and market Indigenous artists. Widely considered an outstanding economic success, the bulk of Indigenous art produced in Australia originates in these remote art centers (even though only about 10% of the Indigenous population live in remote Australia). Statistics are not reliable, but one estimate is that AU\$300–500 million/per annum is generated by the Indigenous art sector,

providing one of the few sources of income in an area where adult employment rates average 30%. Remote Australia is experiencing increasing poverty and unemployment levels despite both falling among Indigenous Australians nationally (Altman 2019a, para 40). We proposed to record oral histories with the actual people on the ground in these art centers and collectives, to enquire if Aboriginal art really was “a white thing,” as Richard Bell (2002), an Aboriginal artist in the city of Brisbane, had provocatively declared in a manifesto, “Bell’s Theorem – Aboriginal Art: It’s a White Thing.” Against Bell, economic anthropologist Professor Jon Altman, who has been researching the sector for twenty years, judges art centres a success (Altman 2005) and “one of the few remaining vestiges of community-led development from the self-determination era; it is instructive of what can be achieved with devolution and relatively at arms-length support” (Altman, 2019, p.13).



Artist Richard Bell, author of the manifesto “Aboriginal Art—It’s a White Thing,” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, May 2018. Photo: Siobhán McHugh

» [listen] audio clip 1: Artist Richard Bell: Aboriginal art, it’s a white thing.
Dur: 0:10 liminalities.net/16-4/1-whitething.mp3

Between 2015 and 2017, our project conducted field research in three locations: Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Arts in Yirrkala, Northern Territory (NT); Warlukurlangu Artists at Yuendumu, NT; and an urban Indigenous collective propaNOW, in Brisbane, co-founded by Bell. Our primary fieldwork investigated the collective activity and relational agency of various players in the routine processes of art centers, from artists to managers, dealers, researchers and others. The project yielded 30 oral history interviews, which will be preserved as a public collection, digitally accessible, subject to any conditions set by interviewees. But we also decided to disseminate the research findings in a narrative podcast. The distinguished Italian oral historian, Alessandro Portelli once declared that “an interview is a performance in search of a text” (Portelli 2006). The podcast format beautifully preserves the performative elements of dialogues, keeping intact the rhythms and tonalities of speech, emphasis and emotion, pauses and pronunciations. It becomes the text. We do not adopt a studio-based talk format, as in *Heritage Voices*, but follow the aesthetic principles of crafted audio storytelling, in which *sound* plays a pivotal role in telling story, along with voice, so that the oral history and the built audio artifact inform and elevate each other (McHugh 2012a, McHugh 2012b). In the following sections, each of the three investigators reflects on their process and on the outcomes of this innovative practice-based research and the award-winning podcast, *Heart of Artness* (2018), it created.

Part One: The Irish oral historian and audio producer

Siobhán McHugh

One hot, humid day in Nhulunbuy, on Australia’s tropical North-Western coast, my colleague Ian McLean and I took refuge in the airconditioned cool of the local Woolworths supermarket. We needed to stock up for a trip later that day to the small remote Yolngu community of Gangan. Three hours’ drive down a red dirt track, it was one of the largest homelands in east Arnhem Land and home to several of Buku-Larrnggay Mulka (Buku) Art Centre’s most successful artists.

In what now seems a strange decision, I had at first declined to participate in this unusual project. In 2012, Ian had recently been appointed to my university, University of Wollongong (UOW), and happened to attend a seminar by me, on how oral history can give voice to marginalized groups. I had recorded such voices for decades and translated them into books and radio documentaries, preserving the associated oral history collection as a public archive. I had also recorded many Indigenous voices: the last living leader of a strike on Palm Island in 1957, a place where Indigenous Australians were subjected to apartheid-like conditions; survivors of the Stolen Generations—Aboriginal people forcibly removed from their families under government policy; and life stories of Aboriginal people in all kinds

of circumstances, from social housing tenants to political leaders. My seminar had alerted Ian to how oral history could provide a more transparent way to access Indigenous knowledge about contemporary Aboriginal art—and include a voice that had been conspicuously absent from the discourse, as Bell had asserted. But when Ian invited me to join the team—a tremendous opportunity—I piously demurred. “I’ve never been to a remote Aboriginal community,” I explained. “I don’t think I’d be an appropriate person for this project.”

Later that year, I met Margo Neale—who was researching “Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters” (2018), an award-winning exhibition she was curating—at a Non-Fiction Conference in Melbourne. I mentioned why I had turned down Ian’s invitation, expecting a pat on the back for my righteous self-disqualification, but to my surprise, Margo was outraged. “They’re human beings—they’re not from bloody Mars!” she blasted me, as if my wimpish fear of engaging was a disguised racism. She reminded me I had three decades’ experience as an award-winning oral historian and that my relative lack of expertise in the Indigenous art field was actually an asset. As Alessandro Portelli commented on his forty-year study of the miners of Harlan County, USA: “the most important things I had to offer were my ignorance and my desire to learn” (Portelli 2010, p.7). And, Margo added, the research was focussed on cross-cultural intersections, so I could not wriggle out of it because I was white. The project would turn out to be one of the most rewarding experiences of my life and I am eternally indebted to Margo for her blunt appraisal.

We went through the elaborate (and important) process of ethics approval from UOW, yet one of the most important interviews in the collection came down, in the end, to serendipity. As we headed towards the checkout in Woolworths, Ian spotted the senior Yolngu artist Garawan Wanambi (b.1965) across the aisles. We had met Garawan earlier that day at the art centre, introduced by the manager, Will Stubbs. Garawan was one of the key people I was to interview. He had told us he would see us in Gangan—but now, as we chatted, he asked if we could give him and his wife a lift out, as their transport options had changed.

Garawan was a thin man in his fifties, with a faintly melancholic air. At Buku, we had been mesmerized by the shimmering abstract diagonal patterns of his paintings but in Gangan we would get a glimpse of their meaning, which is specific to the seasons and lifeforces of the Koolatong River, its lagoons and waterways, that are ancestral to him and other Dhalwanju people. The innovative optical effects and subtle tonalities of his barks recall the Yirriṯja ancestor Barama who emerged from the river at Gangan, his body covered in patterns made by salt water, and evoke the rich nutritional habitat where fresh and saltwater meet in the tidal currents that move up from nearby Blue Mud Bay. In the wet season, the river’s floodwaters return the favor. A powerful force of renewal and rebirth that spreads across the plains, it sends great plumes of muddy fresh water back out into Blue Mud Bay.

But that was to come; we still had to drive for several hours along the red mineral-rich dirt road to Gangan. On the journey, we exchanged small talk, but by the third hour conversation had slowed, and a pregnant silence hung in the air, as if each was taking its measure of the other. Garawan mentioned a waterhole ahead, which was a special place for him. That, and this redolent story-filled landscape, somehow took me back to one of my own special stories of place, an Irish legend called “The Salmon of Knowledge” (O’Mahony 1990). I explained to Garawan how an old man, a poet, had spent years trying to catch a magic salmon that possessed all the knowledge in the world. Whoever ate him would obtain it all. Finally, the old poet caught the salmon. He had brought a youth called Fionn to help him, and bade Fionn cook the salmon, warning him not to eat any of it. Fionn roasted the salmon on an open fire and brought it to the poet. But when he tasted it, his eyes dimmed—the knowledge was not there. “Did you disobey me?” he asked Fionn. “Did you eat the fish?” “No!” said Fionn. “But I burned my thumb on the skin when I was turning it, and I sucked it, to ease the pain.” The old man sighed. “You have been imparted with all the knowledge of the world—suck your thumb again and it will be there for you.” And that is how Fionn Mac Cumhaill became the wisest man in Ireland, and the leader of the *Fianna* warriors.

As I talked, Garawan listened intently, nodding. When I finished, he said, “yes, I know that story.” And when we got to his waterhole, he told me about the water goanna (a type of lizard), his special totem creature, that lived there—“like your salmon,” he said. While our stories were worlds apart, we had found what Margo later described to me as “a point of connection.” It’s an important factor in any interviewing situation, but for Yolngu, for whom everything is relational, it is vital—otherwise you effectively don’t exist. I believe that this simple but crucial exchange made what happened next day possible. We had been invited by Garawan and two other local artists, Gunybi Ganambarr and Yinimala Gumana, to visit a memorial not far from the settlement of Gangan, an important traditional wet season camping ground and ceremonial site, “sunk in a clump of brush on a low knoll close to a lily lagoon on the river” (Thomson 1949, p.3). The memorial, a small humble affair, commemorated the site of a massacre there in 1911 of about thirty Yolngu, in a “punitive expedition” by police. Yinimala read out the inscription and described on tape for me how his grandfather, Birriktji Gumana, had returned from a hunting trip and found the bodies of his friends and family floating in the river. “He only recognized them by their armbands,” he said. We fell silent, subdued by this terrible image. Then Garawan gestured to the riverbank. “Let’s talk about the *gapan* (ochre) and how we share our art with the world.” Back in Buku, he and Gunybi (b.1972) had agreed to be interviewed for our project, but nobody had settled on when. Now it appeared the interview was imminent.



Yolgnu artists Gunybi Ganambarr and Garawan Wanambi at the site of the 1911 Gangan massacre, Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. Photo: Siobhán McHugh

» [listen] audio clip 2: Massacre at Gangan. Dur: 0:51
liminalities.net/16-4/2-Massacre.mp3

Usually, when I prepare to record an oral history interview, I choose the place carefully, to optimize quiet and comfort. I set up and test my equipment and work out which microphones will suit (fixed or lapel). These in-depth interviews are meant for posterity after all, and orality is at their center, so it's important to get good sound quality. This situation was different. In one fluid movement, Garawan and Gunybi had sat down by the riverbank. The time was NOW. Panicked, I checked my batteries, wedged my bad back against a tree, close enough to cover both men with my hand-held mic, and banished my colleagues from the scene. For the next hour and a half, amid birdsong, flies and the odd splash of river life, Garawan and Gunybi attempted to explain to this ignorant “nappargi” (white person) their philosophy of life. They were now willing to talk to me, I believe,

because they had gauged that my intentions were honourable: a vital consideration in any research interaction, and one which can transcend gender and cultural difference. As Dr Shandine Pete explained, in *Heritage Voices*, in the context of collecting oral histories with Native Americans: “Intent really is the biggest factor, no matter what you look like or how old you are... Everyone has a sense of intent.” (Pete, 2020, Episode 41, timestamp 28.50).

The Yolngu make art by using the *gapan*, or natural ochres, of the land. Different colors denote different aspects, but basically, so far as I could understand, Garawan was not just painting the country, he was part OF it. English was not his first language, yet his soft rhythmic intonations were eloquent and persuasive. He pronounced “art” as “heart.” It might have been a linguistic tic, but it added poignance to what felt to me like mysterious revelations. Here is an excerpt (*Heart of Artness*, Episode 2, 2018):

GARAWAN WANAMBI (GW): Into the heart/art, into the color, into the shapes, but a story can be story.

SIOBHÁN MCHUGH (SM): And you told me you used special colors, why did you change from the black and the red?

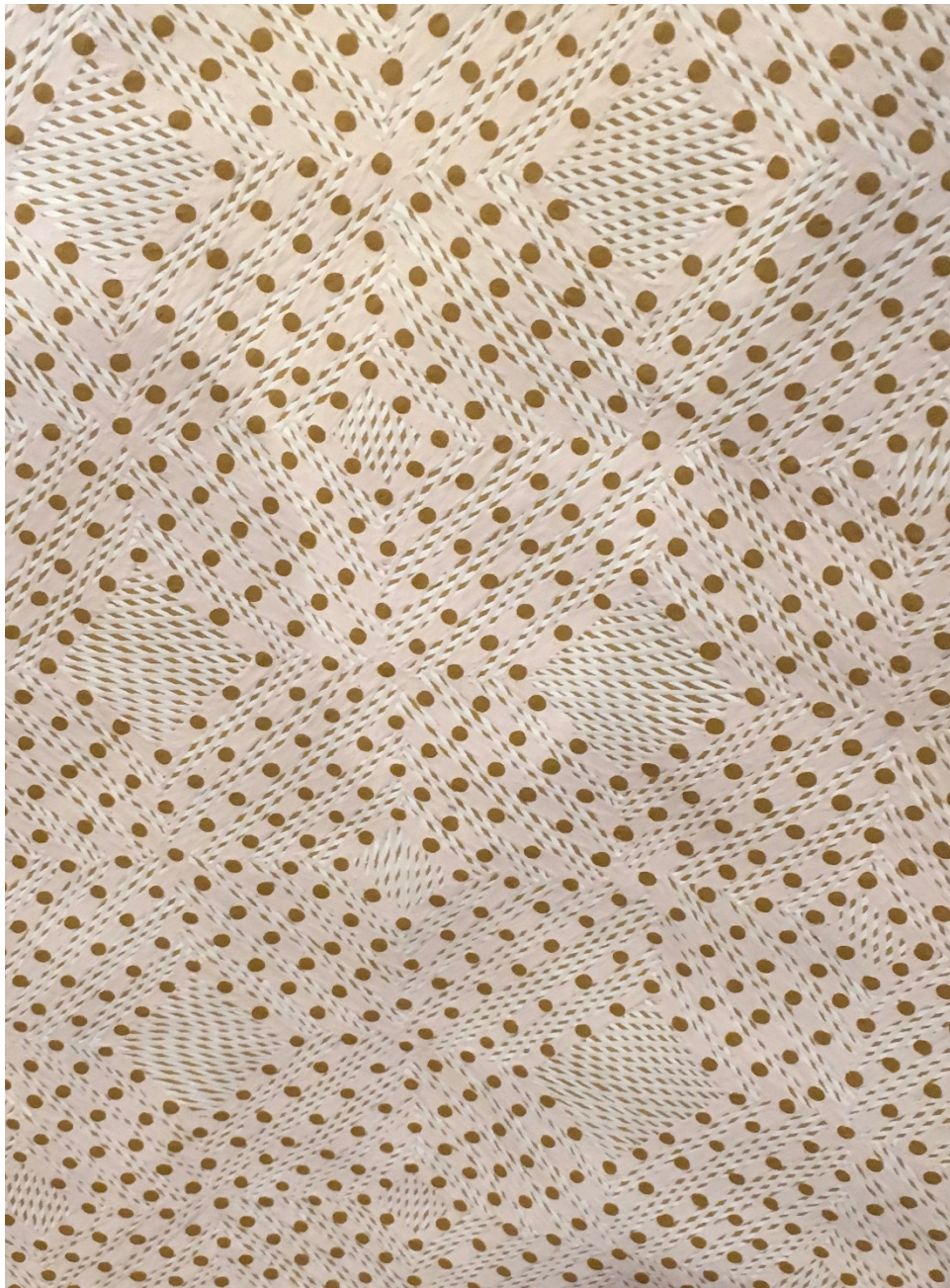
GW: From that color, it’s also a reference to Yolngu itself; the Yolngu, the sun, the land, the blood, you know. And sharing the heart/art to the world; from the Yolngu to the modern world.

And we share our way of the knowledges of the river, the land, out to the sea, connected to the painting the story. Its story is always here, you know. It’s there. And sometimes Nappargi can’t see... They don’t see what is there...

I noted in my narration script, months later, as I reviewed the transcript back in Sydney:

I’m shocked by how flat the words seem on the page. But when I listen to the tape, I’m transported back to the magic of our meeting. English does not do Garawan poetic justice, but in person that day, he was electrifying. I felt that he’d shared a great truth and though much of it eluded me, I felt its authority. (ibid)

» [listen] audio clip 3: Color can be changing (Garawan Wanambi)
Dur: 0.23 liminalities.net/16-4/3-Colour.mp3



Garawan Wanambi , Marrangu, 2016. Bark painting, 77 x 45cm. Private Collection.
Photo: courtesy of the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka art centre.

Because I have always placed great emphasis on the affective power of sound and voice, in preparing the interviews for publication, I used the recording itself as the anchoring element for what would be a narrative podcast artifact (McHugh 2012). As a media format, audio storytelling has its own grammar, logic and aesthetic conventions. Audio is first and foremost a temporal medium. Unlike film, you can't freeze-frame it: it only exists in real time. Unlike print, you can't easily skim a passage and jump ahead. This performative listening-in-real-time creates a pact of intimacy between speaker and listener and an accompanying sense of "liveness" not found in print (McHugh 2018). The absence of any visuals removes the subliminal evaluation that creeps in when a person's likeness is known: the old, the bald, the beautiful, are made more equal, while factors such as racial origin can attract less judgment, a relevant consideration for this project.

Sounds are also relational: if you layer voice over music, it will have an entirely different impact than either the voice or music would have on its own. The same applies to non-musical sound: the ambient noise I recorded, of children playing and laughing, and the sharp sound of art center workers stripping bark from trees in the forest to be cured as a canvas, all helped to build the sense of the broader community. This careful choreographing of sound, music and voice into a crafted audio story can create what acclaimed UK audio feature producer Alan Hall (2017, p. 129) calls a "portal" to another world. When the mix of these three elements achieves its most potent form, the synergies can cause a "creative combustion" (Hall 2017, p.130). This is what I was aiming for, in selecting the interview excerpts, writing a narration script around them, and situating them in a bed of ambient sound and music as a podcast series. Audio documentary productions such as these are a delicate blend of art and journalism, in which editorial considerations have to be balanced against creative choices. The very act of editing is a personal intervention by the producer, as John Grierson, the Scottish "father of the documentary," acknowledged back in 1933, when he described the documentary form as "the creative interpretation of actuality" (Grierson 1933, p.8). Almost ninety years on, Grierson's pithy dictum still resonates, and informed my approach. I will describe here how I made Episode Two, "Art With Heart: A Two-Ways World," a 40-minute format which features these three Yolgnu artists and is set in North-East Arnhem Land.

» [listen] audio clip 4: An example of a crafted audio mix in *Heart of Artness* podcast, Episode 2. Dur: 1.03 liminalities.net/16-4/4-Example.mp3

In choosing which sections of artist interview to include, I made assessments based on how fresh and original the content was and how it fitted with and extended other interview excerpts, but also HOW it was said—in what tone, with how much feeling, and how comprehensibly. In using ambient sound, sometimes



Yolgnu artist Gunybi Ganambarr departs from tradition to use power tools and found objects to create works such as this sculpture of a brolga, displayed at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka art centre, 2016. Photo: Siobhán McHugh

producers will enhance their audio show with open access location sound (water lapping; a car starting; a clock ticking) available in vast quantities on the internet on sites such as freesound.org. But to uphold authenticity, I made the editorial

decision to use only actual sound I had gathered *in situ*: children running up to speak in their language into my microphone, or playing football, or in the school playground; tourists commenting on artworks in the Buku gallery, or the manager answering the phone; the thwack of an axe starting the process of removing bark from a tree; a kettle whistling as we made tea. The music was derived from two sources: one was a commissioned soundtrack, in which the composer deliberately used instruments such as mandolin and woodblocks, which had an acoustic feel rather than a studio-based electronic sound, so as to fit better with the artists' very outdoor lives. The other music came from the "Mulka" museum attached to the art centre, which records and preserves the many ceremonial practices of the community, from funerals to the "songlines" that orally declaim knowledge of country in a powerfully performative manner. I was privileged to be given access to it and used it sparingly, to illuminate the spoken word content and denote cultural depth.

I assembled all these elements—interviewee voice, my host/narrator voice, music and ambient sound—into a crafted audio documentary that was placed online as a podcast: outcomes the interviewees had formally agreed to, on our Consent Forms. The unedited interviews will be preserved as an oral history collection for future researchers and archived, probably at the National Library of Australia. A copy will be lodged at the art centre for Yolngu community use. I sent the draft podcast through to the art centre, for comments and/or approval by those involved. It was signed off and duly published online as "Heart of Artness" (2018) on standard podcast platforms such as Apple iTunes and Google Podcasts. The series, co-hosted by myself and Margo Neale, has six episodes to date, with three more planned. Reaction so far has been very positive, from participants and the public. The episode described here, centred on that riverside exchange over a century after the awful massacre there, seems to have touched a particular nerve: it won a gold award in the Arts and Culture category at the New York Radio Festival, 2019. [Listen to it here on smartphone for [iOS](#) or [Android](#).]

At the core of what makes it so special, I believe, is the deeply human empathy that emerged in our interview. The chord was struck on the journey out, not at the art centre when we first met Garawan, who then, quiet, austere and without emotion, seemed little interested in us excited strangers from afar. In 1935, Donald Thomson, the first anthropologist to visit east Arnhem Land, commented on the "etiquette to be observed" here, on this part of the Koolatong River (and elsewhere) when strangers first meet:

This was the critical moment. There was no loud exchange of greetings, no shouting, not a word was spoken aloud at first ... etiquette, good manners and good taste, much as we know it, are nowhere more important ... At last two or three of the old men advanced, unarmed, slowly towards us without haste and with a casualness that was too studied, too formal. (Thomson, 1949, pp. 3-4)



Recording the Yolngu process of cutting bark, to be used as a canvas. Photo: Siobhán McHugh

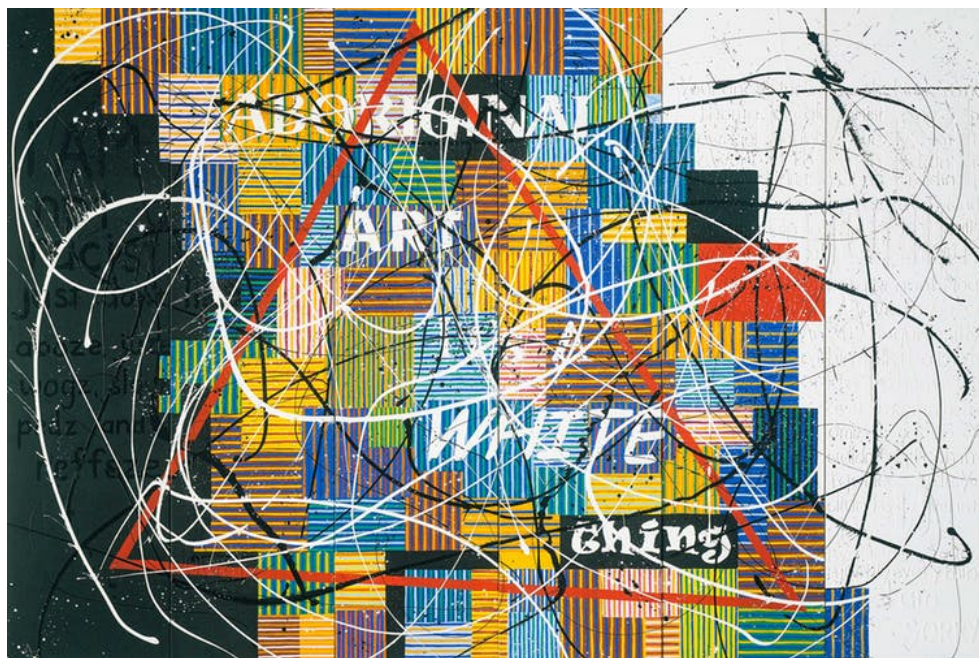
The production of empathy is still something you can't train for or count on. But if there is mutual goodwill, and if the interviewer has curiosity, respect and a genuine desire to listen and learn, and the interviewee the will, that empathy can matter more than anything else in oral history research—including all the preparation and regulations that go into the ethics approval process. I believe Garawan could sense my sincerity. Our interview was one of the most profound I've ever recorded—and yet it might never have struck such a chord if we hadn't both been in Woolworths that hot June day and communed over ancient stories, from Ireland and Australia, on that long ride.

Part 2—The Australian art historian

Ian McLean

I have worked as an academic art historian in the Australian postcolonial art arena since I completed my PhD in the mid-1990s but until 2015 I had only occasionally written on remote Indigenous art. My expertise was urban Indigenous art. The distinction between urban and remote Indigenous art is a pervasive one in the discourse of Australian Indigenous studies. It is also problematic, indeed insidious, because it inherits the biopolitics of colonialism based on categories of racial purity (“full-blood,” “half-caste”) that continue to be played out in the media, the political arena and everyday life by those determined to delegitimise the category of “urban Aborigine.” It's also a misleading distinction, as so-called remote Australia is plugged into the modern world. The communities are only remote in the sense of being physically distant from the centers of population and state power, even though this doesn't diminish the impact of the state on their lives.

Remote and urban Indigenous artists participate in the contemporary art world and their art engages with the legacy of colonialism in Australia. However, the distinction is not going away because it signifies the very different legacies of colonialism in different parts of Australia. In so-called urban Australia, much of the language, clan relations and cultural practices of Indigenous groups have been lost due to the severity of the genocide that occurred in these areas. Here, sovereignty was not ceded—which is a mantra of contemporary urban politics—but its basis in cultural practices and kin relations has been lost. Indeed, some urban Indigenous artists understand their cultural practice in political terms as a recovery and repair of this lost sovereignty. This is not the case in much of remote Australia as here dual unresolved Indigenous and settler-nation sovereignties reign. There are few places in Australia in which Indigenous sovereignty is as powerful as it is amongst the Yolngu. This is why they are wonderful hosts: the guests are never allowed to forget that they are guests.



Richard Bell, *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)* 2003, Acrylic on canvas, 240 x 540cm. Collection: Museum and Art gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin. Photo: courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

Before this project I had not visited the remote Yolngu community of Yirrkala, which is famous for its art centre Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, though I was well schooled in its history and art, knew people who had worked there and had also met some of the artists. I also have colleagues such as curators and art centre managers who have worked extensively with remote artists, including Margo Neale. My wife worked as an art centre manager on a remote Indigenous community, and so I was quite familiar with her Aboriginal acquaintances from remote Australia when they visited our part of the world.

This anecdote illustrates that an interest in the urban Indigenous world inevitably brings you into contact with the remote Indigenous world—or that at least has been my experience. Nevertheless, this difference has produced two very different academic trajectories in the study of Indigenous art. Remote art is still mainly studied by anthropologists who have undertaken significant fieldwork in the area, often speak the language, and have been inculcated into the kin relations of the community. The few Australian art historians like myself who study Indigenous art tend to focus on urban artists. There is also the relatively new field of Indigenous Studies, which does work across these differences, though its focus has been social policy and history rather than art. Barry Judd, who works in this

field, describes it as a multidisciplinary “area studies” rather than a “discipline” because of “a lack of its own theories and methods” (Judd, 2014, p.145).

The discipline of art history in which I work has well established theories and methods. Much of it involves research in the archive but the study of living artists does include fieldwork in the form of interviews with artists mainly, and depending on the nature of the project, also associated professionals such as curators, dealers, collectors and critics etcetera. My own experience has mainly been with interviewing artists, rarely in a formal sense, more usually informally in their studios or other sites. Such fieldwork is often a tram ride to a studio, a local gallery opening or a beer in the pub. Most of the artists have tertiary qualifications and like other urban artists work directly with regular dealers. Thus, it barely resembles the sort of rigorous fieldwork conducted in remote Australia by anthropologists.

» [listen] audio clip 5: Artist Jennifer Herd: our story is an urban story.
Dur: 0.25 liminalities.net/16-4/5-JenHerd.mp3



Artist Jennifer Herd (right), founding member proppaNOW artists' collective, with her grand-daughter, Carmen, and some of her work. Photo: Jennifer Herd.

The focus of my research has been the transcultural postcolonial practices that typify urban Indigenous artists and also settler-Australian artists who have worked closely with Indigenous artists and/or postcolonial themes. This was also the subject of our project, which focused on the transcultural mediations in the postcolonial contexts of two very different remote art centres and an urban Indigenous art collective. From my limited experience of remote Indigenous Australian art, I knew that researching such practices in remote art centres was a project beyond my capacity, until I happened upon a talk by Siobhán on her work as an oral historian. It gave me the idea for this project and talking it through with Margo, who had lived and worked on remote communities for over 40 years and is a great sounding board for most things in life, we developed the broad outlines of the project, which Siobhán finessed when she came on board.

Previously, I had never associated art history with oral history. If anything, it might be called visual history, but visual and oral imagery are not the binary opposites they may seem. First, what is often considered the most or “purely” visually orientated art, abstract art — because it seemingly lacks narrative and literary content — often aspires to that other abstract artform, music. Second, writers often seek to evoke pictures. The synaesthesia of the senses reminds us that the five senses work relationally to create images in our minds. Third, visual and oral imagery are never pure, each acquires meaning by the contexts of their expression and reception. This project reminded me that the discipline of art history has its origin in oral histories as much as visual ones, as its original method was based on anecdotes handed down the ages — its founding text, Vasari’s *Lives of the Artist*, being a classic example. While this association is generally one of scepticism — the modern discipline devotes much of its research in archives to either confirm or discount such anecdotes — interviews with respected first-hand authorities such as the artist or the patrons are highly valued as primary research. At the same time, art historians are wary of taking such interviews at face value. Leaving aside the critical problem of the “intentional fallacy” (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1946), the artist has a motive, an investment in the artwork — as do others in the artist’s circle, such as the dealer and collector, including the institutional collector or museum. The cult and hype of the individual genius artist, which has never been higher, leaves it particularly prone to not just hyperbole, but also to elevating the artist’s voice and word to holy writ. Much writing on art, especially at the more popular and commercial levels, is little more than hagiography in the guise of biography that, when it can, draws heavily on personal anecdotes. Thus, the professional art historian feels a duty to mediate such “oral histories.”

As the cult of genius took hold in the modern period, the more the artist has become the subject of art. Thus, interviews with artists have become increasingly valued. Famous early modern artists born in the latter nineteenth century, such as Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), were the first generation to be extensively interviewed. Both were generous interviewees be-

cause, no doubt, they recognised the leverage that an interview could have for their reputations. Duchamp was humorous but evasive—as if seeking to impress the interviewer and readers with his wit and irony as a diversion from giving too much away—while Matisse was more serious and seemingly open and revealing. Yet like Duchamp, he too was a careful manager of his word. Like many artists, each was wary of being pinned down or saying things that might limit the meaning of his work. With typical sardonic wit, Duchamp said to one interviewer: “My position is the lack of a position, but of course, you can’t even talk about it, the minute you talk you spoil the whole game” (Schwarz, 1969, pp. 194-5). Asked about his theory of color, Matisse shot back: “I have no theory of color. I haven’t any theory, even of drawing” (Harrison 2015). Even after extensively re-writing one extended interview—it went for some 300 pages—he refused to grant permission to publish. Only 60 years after his death, and presumably after the copyright expired, was the interview published (Matisse 2013).

The desire to publish interviews of artists and celebrities has not abated, and since the 1960s it has become a substitute for serious criticism and a principal means of promoting artists. In 1969, Andy Warhol, who knew how to handle an interviewer better than most politicians and took Duchamp’s interviewing skills to a whole other level, launched a magazine called *Interview*, which was blatant pop culture for the celebrity junkie. Today exhibition catalogues rarely omit an interview with the artist, especially if it’s an Indigenous artist—as if the artist’s voice and presence provide a level of authenticity that cuts through the hype. There is even a growing tendency to print interviews with remote Indigenous artists in their first language, not to be read (for there are few readers) but like Latin once was, as an icon of authenticity. Thus, there is good reason for the academic art historian to be wary of the interview format. What then makes our interviews any different?

First, our subject was not the artist but the inter-subjective relations of production and to some extent consumption of Indigenous contemporary art objects. We sought to cast light on the mediations which deliver a prized artwork to the market, not just the role of the artist, though this was also important. Because artworld branding has so much riding on the genius of the artist, the apparatus that supports this star system is kept invisible. Behind every successful artist is a team, and this team keeps out of sight. In order to illuminate the structure or system of Indigenous art production that has been rendered invisible, we interviewed as many players or workers as possible, not just the boss artist. Our podcasts feature a medley of voices, not just the artist’s (master’s) voice.

While the invisibility of this artworld system is true of all contemporary art production, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, the legacy of colonialism has made it especially the case in the Indigenous sphere. In her essay on women art coordinators in Indigenous art centres, Una Rey pointed to the long history of the cross-cultural Indigenous art industry—what Richard Bell provocatively tarred with

the accusation that “Aboriginal art, it’s a white thing,” but which Rey, with more nuance and artspeak, described as the “white interlocutor, whose presence is essential but paradoxical within the [post-contact] Indigenous art story” (Rey 2018, p.43). Rey called it paradoxical because the white interlocutor invariably downplays his or her role in order to emphasize the genius and agency of the Indigenous artists. Rey reported that “all the coordinators I have spoken to are unequivocal in advocating the artists’ agency and thereby continue by and large to reinforce Western assumptions of artistic greatness” by downplaying their own creative roles in the production process—which Rey goes to some length to detail.



Art center manager Will Stubbs with Yolngu artist Wukun Wanambi at an exhibition of ceremonial poles or “larrakitj” in Singapore in 2010. Photo: Buku-Larrnggay Mulka art centre.

» [listen] audio clip 6: Manager Will Stubbs describes himself as a dung beetle.
Dur: 1.07 liminalities.net/16-4/6-dungbeetle.mp3

Rey argued women mediators were particularly good at being invisible, as a few male mediators have written about their experiences. Geoffrey Bardon, the legendary art coordinator at Papunya, in Central Australia, is the classic example, having written several books on his contribution to the Papunya movement (Bardon, 1979; Bardon 1989; Bardon 1991, Bardon and Bardon, 2004)—though in recent times there have been concerted efforts amongst scholars to return agency to the Papunya artists (Johnson, 2010; Scholes, 2017). Even “finding photographs ... featuring female art coordinators on the job was surprisingly difficult,”

said Rey—surprising because photographs proliferate in the many coffee table books on remote art centres; but not surprising because evidence of such intercultural exchange is taboo (Rey, pp. 50-51). While Rey is one of the few female “white interlocutors” to write on the subject, unlike Bardon she reveals little of her own interventions.



Cecilia Alfonso and Gloria Morales, Chilean-born managers of the Warlukurlangu Art Centre in Yuendumu, Central Australia. Photo: Cecilia Alfonso.

» [listen] audio clip 7: Art center managers Cecilia Alfonso and Gloria Morales.
Dur: 0.27 liminalities.net/16-4/7-pastlifemoney.mp3

Second, the particular sites of production we investigated were transcultural places with highly diverse participants. In this situation the interview format as conducted by Siobhán was important because it produced a more level playing field amongst our many subjects than conventional art historiographical methodology could achieve. Our interviewees ranged from highly literate university professors in the western system to highly culturally literate subjects in the Indigenous knowledges from remote communities, whose system of knowledge transfer is predominantly oral, visual and performative. The language of the interview was not their first language—though our Indigenous subjects were proficient English speakers.

The research design incorporated the inclusion of qualified translators, if required, but the respective art centre managers deemed this not necessary in the case of the specific artists who participated, and we followed this advice. Gender was also taken into consideration, especially since gender is an important structural component in remote communities. At one remote centre (Buku), the significant figures put forward for interview were almost all male, despite there being several very successful female artists—perhaps because the manager was male. At another art centre (Warlukurlangu), Siobhán interviewed mostly females. How gender played into the inter-subjective interview framework is beyond the scope of this article: the female gaze can be appreciated in the first episode in the series, broadcast on ABC Radio National: *The Conquistador, The Warlpiri and the Dog Whisperer* (2018), which features four prominent women. Here, the two Chilean managers, from diametrically opposite socio-political backgrounds, articulate very different connections with two female Warlpiri artists, but all the relationships are deep and personal. Siobhán believes that here again, having right “intent” mattered more than gender or cultural difference.

Advice we received when planning this project confirmed my intuition that the remote Indigenous voice and perspective is more likely to be heard in oral histories than conventional Western historiographical methodology that privileges documents, statistics and texts. However, to collect such stories orally required an experienced interviewer who has at least worked in culturally related situations. Art historians tend to do their own interviewing, believing they are the most expert on the subject at hand. However, art historians generally have little experience or expertise as interviewers outside of their field and professional art-world group, which rarely includes remote Aboriginal artists. In this project, Margo and I provided Siobhán with knowledge, ideas and the general frame in which we wanted the discussion to operate, but Siobhán, the experienced and expert interviewer, knew how to nurture a conversation—to open the language so it became a field in which thoughts gathered. As the Native American Indigenous environmental anthropologist Dr Shandin Pete notes in the aforementioned episode of *Heritage Voices* podcast (Episode 41, 2020, timestamp 36.44), “it’s really all about developing a good rapport with the person you want to interview.” As the interviewer in all the interviews, Siobhán brought a consistency to the process. The most significant decision that Margo and I initially made in developing this project was to invite Siobhán onto the team, and to on the frontline of the investigation, keeping ourselves in the background—invisible like the mediators we were investigating.

» [listen] audio clip 8: Dallas Gold, art dealer and “drug pusher,” with Warlpiri women singing in the background. Dur: 11 secs.
liminalities.net/16-4/8-DallasGold.mp3

While the raw interviews will be available for future researchers, the most valuable outcome of the project in terms of its reach and impact are the podcasts that Siobhán created from the interviews. As described above, this is a highly skilled process of weaving together the range of voices or players at each site into a narrative that creates an emotional as well as intellectual presence. Siobhán is thus the linchpin of this project. As interviewer and oral historian or storyteller, she is the artiste who has constructed a portal for Margo and myself, and hopefully future scholars, who wish to understand the transcultural habitats that produce Indigenous contemporary art. In so doing, she is using the audio medium to communicate new knowledge to both academic and popular audiences, in an inclusive, inventive and collaborative way, as Makagon and Neumann have recommended (2008, pp. ix,x).

That Indigenous art centers are leading sites of transculturation is not surprising, as Indigenous cultures evolved to facilitate multiple clan relations. Each clan speaks its own dialect, which the Yolngu consider distinct languages. In the vicinity of Yirrkala there are about 14 clans— meaning that not only do one's parents speak different languages, one's grandparents are likely to as well. Not surprisingly then, instead of a simplistic oppositional binary structure of the colonizer and colonized existing in art centers, what comes through strongly in the podcasts is a multiplicity of voices and forces at work. The podcast format is particularly good at conveying this in a quite visceral way that is difficult to convey in academic writing that privileges clarity.

» [listen] audio clip 9: Vernon Ah Kee, Aboriginal artist and founding member, proppaNOW artists' collective.
Dur: 0.40 liminalities.net/16-4/9-Vernon.mp3

While the podcasts will have the most immediate impact, the raw interviews from which they draw potentially have more to give. To give you a sense of this, I will conclude by selecting several extracts from the interviews conducted at the Buku Art Centre at Yirrkala, which in their details are very revealing of the empowering transculturation occurring in contemporary Yolngu culture and art— empowering because in extending their traditions, it is also strengthening Yolngu ownership of their future.

Buku-Larrnggay Mulka is a highly successful and vibrant art center which serves an intact modern Yolngu culture that has retained a stake in its own history and established a footing in the Western world. In other words, it has two closely related functions which are implicit in its name: Buku-Larrnggay facilitates the making of modern art and its dissemination into the Western art world; while the Mulka centre is an archive that is gathering together everything it can about Yolngu history and traditional cultural practices. The artist Gunybi Ganambarr, who like all the Yolngu interviewees is speaking to us in English, which is not his

first language, described it thus: “There’s a Buku and there’s Mulka. Buku is leading us ... forward. Mulka is looking back.” This reflects the Yolngu sense of life being a river constantly flowing from an ancestral source to an unknown future, between which the present is held. “We’re in the middle,” says his friend, the senior artist Garawan Wanambi: “this is that earlier people. Here, I’m standing here. I’m waiting for my kids. To step into my footsteps, and into my hand, so I can give [to] them and we can move along to another stage.”



Traditional and contemporary art practices on display. Photo: Buku-Larrnggay Mulka

Ishmael Marika (b. 1991), a young artistic director of the Mulka project with a successful contemporary art practice in film, performance and installation formats, expressed his own sense of agency in this transcultural process of moving between worlds: “I’m standing in the middle, holding two cultures: Indigenous culture and non-Indigenous culture; just standing in the middle, holding the cultures in both hands” (Tan, 2014). In this respect, the art centre is a place where two people sit down together. Despite his relative youth, at the time of the interview, Yinimala Gumana (b. 1982) was Chairman of Buku-Larrnggay Mulka and a clan leader. He put this meeting of peoples facilitated by the art centre in historical terms:

YG: We all, we got all different knowledge, different cultures, different languages, different, um, nations, eh? Around the world. But Yolngu [have]

been here many thousand, forty thousand years ... I don't know who brought our cultures to this world, and to our father's world: to our forefathers, or to our great-great-grandfathers ... [but] it's our eternity. And it's our life; it's our culture. I follow, you know ... other cultures ... but first of all I learned from my cultures first: before I get the other cultures.

He continued:

YG: I think the white people [are] the second people of this Australia. But now, today, some of the [white] Australian citizens [have] been born here, been grow up here, got job here. Like that, you know? ... we're living in two worlds now: we, Yolngu and [you white] nappargi, we [are] working together now. And we [are] living together now in this particular area ... we're living in two laws now ... The naparggi [white] law, and the Yolngu law. But we [don't] compare them. And it's good that we can work together and to have this, because we're part of the land: we're living on the ground, eh? We're working on the ground. All of us, whoever we are. No matter [who] we are: [what] tribe, colors, whatever. We own the land. We own the land: that's how we want to work [with] each other, eh?

It would appear that Buku's role of mediating with the Western world through art has introduced a new freedom of expression into Yolngu art, such that, said Yinamala, "we [are] all learning [from] each other: all of us. All of us, not even one... person, or one clan, or one group, you know? Like one nation."

Nine non-Yolngu associated with Buku were also interviewed: five were outsiders associated professionally with Buku, and four worked at Buku: the manager Will Stubbs; the coordinator of Buku-Larrnggay, Kade MacDonald; the coordinator of the Mulka centre, Joseph Brady; and Jeremy Cloake, a former coordinator who returns for several months every year to oversee the grading and sale of the Yidaki (musical instruments). Jeremy, who valued his Maori and Australian-settler descent, is a professional musician and recognized by the Yolngu as a Yidaki expert, who initially came here to immerse himself in the Yidaki world. However, it would be misleading to think that these four non-Yolngu "managers" have introduced outside innovations to modernize Yolngu traditions. Stubbs—who has worked at the centre since 1995 and is married into one of the clans—says: "you'd be very far off the mark to think that creativity begins ... because of the action of outside players. [Rather] it's inherent in the Yolngu life to be creative." It's inherent in all human life and a decisive factor in survival, but it's also inherent in the competitive nature of clan politics that, says Stubbs, is invisible to the outside world:

WS: So all of our artists—many of our artists—are taking risks ... there are a whole lot of disciplines going on within the society, and being finessed and avoided and opposed and contradicted and challenged and complied with

all the time, that's in a vocabulary, in a language, in a system that's really unknown to the outside world.

Stubbs gave the example of a committee of Elders decreeing that all art using sacred designs (*Miny'tji*) produced at the center follow traditional practices of being made from the country—from bark, tree trunks and ochres—though with typical Yolngu pragmatism they let acrylic binder (for the ochre) slip through. The decree was made because a printmaking studio was being built which used wholly foreign materials imported from other places—paper and ink. This prohibition on *Miny'tji* in prints was a spur to innovation that spilled over into the paintings of women (who have other prohibitions that have also fostered innovation)—notably in the work of Nyapanyapa Yunupingu (b. c. 1945) and Nonggirnga Marawili (b. c. 1939), who are the current stars of Buku.



Yolngu artist Nyapanyapa Yunupingu with bark painting. Photo: courtesy Buku-Larnggay Mulka art centre.

The prohibition was further tested when Gunybi began incising *Miny'tji* with electric grinders into discarded bits of industrial material from the nearby Bauxite mining – rubber, PVC and galvanized iron. In part, says Gunybi, he worried that the demand for bark painting is killing the trees, but one senses on meeting this large personality that his main inspiration is his affinity with electric tools and industrial materials, no doubt developed from his days as a carpenter. Gunybi defended his practice by arguing that in lying in the land, this industrial refuse had absorbed its spirit—an argument that eventually won the day and produced a new genre of contemporary art. So, said Stubbs, since about 2001 we have “been using recycled as well as naturally occurring materials in representing the land.” Gunybi’s reasoning went beyond saving trees and smart thinking. There is a whole transcultural philosophy behind his practice, which envisaged Yolngu contemporary art as the mediating agent between these two worlds: “it’s Yolngu Law putting into Nappargi Law,” he said.



Paintings by Yolngu artists stored at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka art centre. Photo: Siobhán McHugh

Similar painterly innovations are responsible for the increasing abstraction of Yolngu art in the 80 paintings made by 47 artists in the latter 1990s as part of a legal battle to gain Sea Rights, finally won in a decision known as Blue Mud

Bay case. After completing the paintings, it “became obvious that something had changed in the signature Yolngu style,” said Stubbs, which broke with the convention of figurative painting that had been established in the missionary period, partly in response to market demand and partly because it served “as a protective ‘cloak’” that hid the power of sacred *Miny'tji* designs. Yolngu Elder Djambawa Marawili used his authority “to loosen up this protocol,” but said Stubbs, “he had a very hard road to hoe: persuading people to ‘unlock’ designs that hadn’t been seen previously.” “He had misgivings about it,” added Stubbs, “because it was an intentional breach of this convention,” but he nevertheless persisted because he believed it made the paintings more powerful. Stubbs quoted Djambawa:

WS: And we can't be bound by conventions that were suitable for people 70 years ago. Let's get over ourselves ... We will paint the identity of the sea in its full power: we won't hold back. We won't hold back ... and show them the power of these designs because that is their purpose. Their purpose is to protect this country.

Djambawa submerged figurative elements into the water, so that they were “almost invisible, or *Buwayak*,” and “bent” the sacred patterns that embody the law so that they rippled like water.

WS: So all of the designs are some state of water ... [which] is one of the major tools for philosophizing in Yolngu culture. And seen as the vessel for the spirit as it passes in its cyclical passage. And also the nature of country is defined by the essence of its water.

To my mind, Garawan has taken Djambawa's exhortations to imbue imagery with the fluidity and life force of water further than any other Yolngu artist, giving his work a conceptual as well as physical opticality, which in part explains why Australia's most conceptually orientated contemporary art gallery—Milani Gallery in Brisbane—has taken him on as the only remote Indigenous artist in its stable. Garawan's nuanced abstraction comprises a finely painted *Miny'tji* that lies partly disguised in a gently pulsating patterned field. If Gunybi pushes tradition into new media, Garawan adopts a seemingly very traditional perspective in which the mediating power of art is drawn directly from the country, literally from the clay or *gapan* with which he makes his colors and from which springs all life.

GW: ... The way that I look at the art into from the tree—or from the roots, OK?—from the tree [as bark] ah, what the (he)art is all about ... But first I want to tell you about the *Gapan* [which holds the roots]. How I look at and how I use... and how I focussing about it. How it can be change into how we like it, you know? Into the art, into the color, into the shapes ... it can tell a story of the colors and what's the beautiful-ist and how the beautiful-ist a color can be. To match into the land, tree, river, sea.

By “match” I presume he means that he produces in his colors an equivalent sensation to the meaning of the land, as if in this way he is translating Yolngu law into a more universal and so transcultural expression that the artworld calls “aesthetics.” Garawan is a colorist, mixing his ochres to produce subtle effects, and most fits the bill of the pure artist. There is a certain irony in this. Despite its very contemporary look by artworld standards, his painting at the same time adheres to the most traditional conventions of Yolngu aesthetics. Yet there is no ironic intent on Garawan’s part: his translation of tradition into a modern idiom is not ironic play. For him, becoming modern is being Yolngu, not effacing tradition.

Part 3: The Indigenous Australian Art curator

Margo Neale

Around November 1971, as a young teacher aged just 21, teaching in the Yolngu community of Manangrida as part of the homelands and outstation movements, I took a busman’s holiday from one Aboriginal art settlement to another, to Yirrkala. The missionaries had only just vacated but their presence was still palpable; it was a tidy, orderly place where whitefellas still dominated and Aboriginal people were the subjects, controlled and managed. Going back there in 2015 for this research project, it was very different. It had a totally, “This is our place. We’re proud of it.” atmosphere. There were some pretty amazing houses, some even architecturally designed and the kids seemed to be happy, healthy and very friendly, but I was not unaware of the terrible youth issues which beset many Aboriginal communities. Ceremony was in progress, not far away. Buku, the art centre, was thriving. The high school is well attended. And now, every year, they have the Garma Festival close by which is high on the national calendar and where Indigenous people and supporters from all over gather for a few days of culture, companionship, and discussions. Top politicians attend—sometimes even the Prime Minister—as well as luminaries and other interested people from the cities. There was a strong sense of, “This is our place, we’re making it work, and we run everything.”

I readily accepted an invitation to be part of this research project because cross-culturalism is my life’s work, having worked in this space both personally but researched the cross-cultural aspects of Australian Indigenous culture in the context of other First Nations culture all my professional life (Neale & Kelly, 2020). It is, after all in my bones. I have Aboriginal and Irish ancestry and I am proud of both. We are all Australians now. We share the continent, we share the history, we share the art centers, the commerce if you like, the commercial production, the artistic production. We’re intermarried. So it’s unrealistic to say that other voices can’t be heard in this cross-cultural interaction because that’s what it is; a cross-

cultural interaction. There's a multiplicity of voices and the whitefellas that we're talking to, they're talking about their story in relation to Indigenous experience; their own experience of things Indigenous.



Margo Neale and Siobhán McHugh at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, featuring an installation, “Manbuynga,” by Yolngu artist Barayuwa Mununggurr, 2018. Photo: Siobhán McHugh

The motherhood statements of, “no one can talk about anything Aboriginal except Aboriginal people” is just craziness. It presumes amongst other things that we are homogenous—a stereotype we fought against for decades. It’s all about relationships at the end of the day between people with goodwill and judgement on where the power lies and sharing it appropriately. Certainly, it is not appropriate for a non-Indigenous person to tell an Indigenous story without permission of the Indigenous person whose story it is, but people who work closely in Indigenous communities or in the industry, invariably on the invitation of an Indigenous person or organization, also have their stories. So, I think making rash generalized statements of the sort that only Indigenous people can talk about Indigenous things is potentially damaging and certainly needs unpacking. One disturbing

example of this “black only” phenomenon is generated by white people, notably gatekeepers in communities and prevalent in some art centers. They talk for Aboriginal people saying that it is the Aboriginal view. A corollary of this is the use of Aboriginal artists (like paid-off school monitors) as instruments for furthering their own ambition. The gatekeepers celebrate their invisibility in a highly visible way. In other words, this is control without accountability— the most pernicious form of cross-cultural interaction.



Host Margo Neale, executive producer Claudia Taranto and producer Siobhán McHugh at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 2018 making the radio documentary “The Conquistador, the Warlpiri and the Dog Whisperer,” episode one of the podcast Heart of Artness. Photo: Siobhán McHugh

» [listen] audio clip 10: Margo introduces Cecilia, manager of Warlukurlangu.
Dur: 0.39 liminalities.net/16-4/10-pragmatism.mp3

At best we risk learning nothing about each other if we don’t have the right kind of interaction and at worst it perpetuates conflict, enhances racism and flies in the face of the whole reconciliation movement. Take Will Stubbs, the white manager of Buku, who has been immersed in the community at a personal and

professional level for over twenty years. Siobhán's first question to him in the oral history interview was deeply revealing—and the learning came out of her (understandable) but useful ignorance, in asking an unanswerable question. The podcast format allowed us to perceive that fully, as we hear from Stubbs' initially gruff tone, that there was a gap in understanding.

SM: You know, you're clearly living between two worlds here; the white, the Western world, and the Yolngu world. Can you try and explain for people who aren't able to experience it, what the difference between those two worlds is?

WS: Uh no [laughs], which is probably the starting point—is to accept the inability to explain, to accept, you know, the inability to represent either world successfully in the other dimensions.

» [listen] audio clip 11: manager Will Stubbs can't explain the two worlds. Dur: 1.05 liminalities.net/16-4/11-twoworlds.mp3

I found it helpful to mentor Siobhán in cultural protocols and to help her understand concepts she had never heard of, such as the word “humbug,” used in an Aboriginal context (not the Dickensian reference she was used to from *A Christmas Carol*). What do we mean by “humbug?” Well, it varies, of course, from community to community, but there seems to be a general consensus that it seems to come mostly around money, or things that money can buy: cars, or things that are needed. In my experience, an Aboriginal sense of money is different from the imperatives that are driving the dealers, good and bad: where there's money, there's a need for it, where there's a capacity to make more money, there's a greater need for it and therefore there's greater pressure.

Aboriginal sense of money is not a materialistic one. Aboriginal people from remote communities in particular are not materialistic or acquisitive, thus have no need for bank accounts and to save for later or to put a deposit on a house or such Western capitalistic concepts. Money is something that goes in and comes out, goes in and comes out, goes in and goes out; it just oils the wheels of life on a daily basis. So, they need it now, not in six months' time. So, if they do an artwork, they need the money now. But businesses don't tend to run like that, so in that intervening period there will be a “humbug” for money.

My experience is, there's no sense of shame around money. So, you can humbug somebody daily without feeling embarrassed that you're humbugging about money. It's a very Western thing to feel embarrassed about asking someone for money. This cultural exchange on “humbug” was borne out by Will Stubbs' response to Siobhán in the interview:

WS: There is monetary reward but there is no wealth, so whatever is received is immediately shared and expended. So it's more of a means to an end to getting to that ceremony, to feeding the family; there's no ability to accumulate any wealth because it's existing in a different tense. The tense that's in our heads that's regretting the past and anticipating the future as we're trying to live in the moment, is all just our particular psychosis and Yolngu don't suffer from it. So when there's money; it's spent.



Authors Ian McLean and Margo Neale walking near Warlukurlangu Art Centre in Central Australia, 2016. Photo: Siobhán McHugh

In our third, very different setting, that of urban conceptual artists in Brisbane, Siobhán was probably on more familiar ground than in the remote community environment. So, she was able to bring in her own strong background of decades of deep listening and facilitatory interviewing and elicit some highly illuminating reflections, from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous players. In particular, this came through with the artist Richard Bell, who is known to enjoy sparring with his interlocutors. [Listen to the podcast episode [here](#).]

In this setting I saw Siobhán grasp concepts, gained in her fieldwork, of how the art world worked—but then also bring in a level of probing questions that insiders might not have asked. Richard Bell likes the limelight and being the *enfant terrible*. Siobhán went places others hadn't. For example, when Richard talked about losing his culture through colonization, a process that can “guilt” out white interlocutors and stymie dialogue, she stopped him short. “They practiced on us 600 years before they got to you—I’m Irish,” she said. That changed the dynamic, and perhaps allowed Richard to open up more, make himself more vulnerable, not just stick to a fairly well rehearsed script and cover the same ground we’ve heard quite a bit of over the years. I found the podcast format particularly useful here, in that it allowed us to hear Richard’s reflections first-hand. Yes, his remarks have been edited, which necessarily is an act of interpretation, but the audio medium of podcasting still confers a greater transparency, and a sense that mediation was minimal.

» [listen] audio clip 12: Artist Richard Bell: we paid the highest price. Dur: 0:11 <http://liminalities.net/16-4/12-paidtheprice.mp3>

Thus, at one point, Siobhán asked him if he felt a tiny bit envious that the Yolngu have preserved so much culture, and have language and ceremony in their daily lives, because they were colonized 150 years later than people from the Eastern mob like him. It’s provocative in its own way—just as his manifesto was. You can hear him thinking about it, at first vehemently denying any semblance of jealousy, saying he’s right behind them, then almost wistfully noting that there’s no point in wondering how else it might have been, he has to be pragmatic, deal with the reality he got—and so do they. Later, Siobhán took up a central accusation of Bell’s Theorem, that white folk controlled the Aboriginal art market, and asked if he wasn’t playing into that himself, by choosing a gallerist from the white elite.

SM: Is it not ironic then that you’re with the Josh Milani Gallery? Because he’s a white fellow who’s quite well established in the contemporary art world.

His answer hedges at first, but leads to a clear delineation in cross-cultural relationships, the theme of our project.

RB: No, not at all. Nobody thinks it’s strange that black people play in sporting arenas owned by white people, for teams that are owned by white people... Josh has an arena for us to play in, it’s the same deal. You know, the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] is the equivalent to Sydney Cricket Ground.

SM: So it’s like sort of, fight from inside the tent rather than being outside it?

RB: Well in this circumstance; yes. We've positioned ourselves inside the tent. But that doesn't stop us from getting outside and pissing on the tent.

» [listen] audio clip 13: Richard Bell, inside the tent. Dur: 0.06
<http://liminalities.net/16-4/13-insidethetent.mp3>

Conclusion

That's where this project took us: inside and outside the tent where contemporary Aboriginal art is made, bought, sold and critiqued. Obviously, our project had its limitations: getting to remote communities is expensive and difficult, so we were not able to allow relationships to mature. There are counter-arguments to having an interviewer who does not possess expert knowledge about art and cultural practice, especially in an Indigenous setting. Scholar Shandin Pete points out that asking too generalized a question about cultural identity can cause a Native American significant labor and effort to answer, as there is so much ground to cover and context to provide, whereas a "micro-question" can lead to a more fruitful exchange (*Heritage Voices*, Ep 41, 2020, timestamp 31.00). Nonetheless, we assert that our "intent" was well placed and that this ultimately served us and the project well. Furthermore, we believe that the podcast outcome we opted for provided an excellent showcase for our research findings, because of the unique characteristics of the built audio narrative format, which as prominent UK audio curators Eleanor MacDowall and Nina Garthwaite have noted (2020), often provides a "meeting of the meaning-making of language and the feeling-inducing of sound and music." This allowed us to bring the *relationships*—depicted by non-verbal tone as well as words, by the mood evoked by the music and location sound—behind the production of Aboriginal art to the fore, as well as discussing the art itself. The non-intrusive nature of audio interviews facilitated deep, revelatory discussion with both artists and their non-Indigenous entourage, which in turn helped listeners get a holistic understanding of the art, the culture and the community. For instance, one commented that hearing Buku manager Will Stubbs describe how the markings or *Mintje* in the art corresponded to demonstrating sacred knowledge that proved ownership of the land in the same way that white people use title deeds, was a paradigm shift in his understanding of Indigenous traditional ownership and relation to country. The use of an audio medium to discuss a visual product was not considered a limitation. The podcast prepares the listener to view the art with a more informed, critical gaze: in the credits, listeners are directed to the *Heart of Artness* website, where they can view works by the artists they have heard from.

As “impact” and “engagement” become priorities in academic research, the podcasting format has much to offer, especially if, as in our case, archived in-depth interviews are supplemented with narrative storytelling in a podcast. As such, it seems likely that optimal harnessing of the podcast medium for academic scholarship will require a collaboration with practice-based researchers in sound studies or podcasting studies, who can adapt research questions to achieve an engaging aural outcome that can have broad public impact as well as academic rigor. As a team, we drew strength from our differences, with Margo as an Indigenous Australian art curator, Ian as a non-Indigenous Australian art historian and Siobhán as an Irish oral historian from a nation also colonized by the English. From these diverse perspectives, we canvassed the canvas and found an eloquence of views.



Biographical Notes

Siobhán McHugh is an internationally recognised podcast scholar, producer, critic and teacher. She is founding editor (2013) of *RadioDoc Review*, the first journal to develop critical analysis of podcasts and audio documentaries. She has co-produced multi-award-winning podcasts, some with *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne. Siobhán has published widely on podcasting as a new media genre, in scholarly [journals](#) and mainstream outlets such as [The Conversation](#) and Harvard University’s Nieman Storyboard. She is [Associate Professor](#) in Journalism at the University of Wollongong, Australia.

Ian McLean is Hugh Ramsay Chair of Australian Art History at the University of Melbourne. He has published extensively on Australian art and particularly Indigenous art. His books include *Indigenous Archives - The Making and Unmaking of Aboriginal Art* (with Darren Jorgensen); *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art*; *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous art*; *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*; *White Aborigines Identity Politics in Australian Art*; and *The Art of Gordon Bennett* (with a chapter by Gordon Bennett).

Margo Neale is Head of the Centre for Indigenous Knowledges, Senior Indigenous Curator and Principal Advisor to the Director at the National Museum of Australia. She is a co-recipient of eight Australian Research Council grants and is the author, co-author or editor of 11 books including *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*. She is editor of a forthcoming series, *First Knowledges* (Thames & Hudson/NMA) and is co-author of its first volume, *Songlines: The Power and the Promise* (2020). She curated pioneering award-winning exhibitions nationally and internationally, most notably on the art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye and *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters* (2018), destined for Europe, UK, USA and Asia.

Note: All quotes in this essay are from oral history interviews conducted as part of the ARC project except those referenced below.

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