Plugged in: Remote Australian Indigenous Youth and Digital Culture

I. Kral

SERIES NOTE

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ABSTRACT

For most Indigenous people in central and northern Australia the encounter with the western world has been relatively recent. Yet even in the most remote Indigenous communities, global influences pervade everyday life and new forms of media and communications are reshaping youth culture. This paper draws on ethnographic case study data from research with Indigenous youth who are participating in non-formal community-based media and music production and digital community archiving projects in remote regions. For these young adults the generational shift has been rapid, as many of their elders once lived a pre-contact nomadic existence. Now they are firmly part of global youth culture, taking on the role of mediating between old cultural knowledge and new digital technologies. Such generationally differentiated arenas of social practice are also changing the ways in which youth in remote Indigenous Australia are using oral and written language.

Keywords: Indigenous youth, media, technology, Indigenous education, multi-modal literacies, lifespan learning

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INTRODUCTION

Over recent centuries, communication in the western world has shifted from traditional modes of oral, face-to-face interaction to new forms of information exchange enacted through spatially and temporally distanced interaction (Thompson 1996). Just as the printing press changed the nature of written communication, so the later inventions of electricity, radio and film profoundly altered the nature of oral communication. Now the digital revolution has ushered in new forms of media technologies and multimodal communications. Digitisation began with the launch of compact discs in 1982 and the world wide web in 1991. Now DVDs, digital cameras, mobile phones, MP3 players and various forms of web-based communication and social networking are commonplace (Osgerby 2004).

Digital technologies have brought about new approaches to thinking about literacy and the emergence of new social practices. Such technologies have enabled new forms of media production and the composition of multimodal texts that incorporate visual, oral, gestural and written modes of representation and communication (Hull 2003; Hull & Nelson 2005; Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001; Livingstone 2002). According to some literacy theorists what counts as literacy and how it is practiced are now in historical transition, and young people are 'at the vanguard of the creation of new cultural forms' (Hull & Zacher 2004: 42). This is leading to generational social differences in the approach to the production of texts and the logic of reading (Kress 2003). Digital media is now so pervasive in the lives of urban youth around the world that it is difficult to recall what life was like before mobile phones, digital cameras, iPods and the internet (Ito et al. 2008). In mainstream contexts 'the pace of technological change may seem dizzying' (Ito et al. 2008: 4). By contrast, in the remote Australian Indigenous world, where the encounter with modernity has been extremely recent, the pace of technological change is even more profound.

In this paper I begin by reviewing the short encounter with technology and media production in remote Indigenous Australia as a background to understanding the current youth digital media context. I then describe a current three-year research project investigating learning and multimodal literacy practices in youth-oriented arts, multimedia, music and community archiving projects. In this ethnographic study a picture is being constructed of what is going on in relatively invisible learning environments, where young people are voluntarily engaging in self-initiated, self-directed activities that increasingly incorporate a multimedia aspect. It is in these locations that we are beginning to see how digital technology is leading to new practices and forms of cultural production and, moreover, altering the modes of oral and written communication being used by the youth generation.[1]

CHANGING MODES OF COMMUNICATION IN THE REMOTE INDIGENOUS WORLD

Modernity, the advent of globalisation (Appadurai 1996) and massive technological changes over recent decades have radically altered the course of everyday life and communication forms in remote Indigenous Australia. Indigenous youth are now firmly part of 'digital culture' and are playing an increasingly salient role as the mediators of new media. However this participation has firm roots in a tradition of media production that has been evolving in remote regions since the 1980s.[2]

Since the 1930s Indigenous people in the Northern Territory have been exposed to images of worlds other than their own beginning with outdoor cinemas in regional towns, and film nights in remote reserves and missions. Before television (TV) was accessible in most parts of remote Australia some Indigenous communities began engaging with analogue video or film production and viewing. VCR home video cassette recorders became common in the Australian market in the late 1970s. However, it wasn't until 1982 for example that the first home system was taken into Yuendumu, a remote community in the

Northern Territory—yet by 1983 every extended Aboriginal family in this community had access to VCR recorders (Michaels 1986). In those pre-TV days the popularity of home videos, the cost of buying and repairing machines and renting videos, and the short life span of tapes and machines drove the impetus to establish local TV station transmission (Michaels 1986). In tandem Indigenous broadcasting services were initiated under the federal Labor government policy of Indigenous self-determination, which began in the early 1970s. In 1979 the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) was established as the first federally funded remote Aboriginal media association broadcasting Aboriginal radio: it later also engaged in film and music recording and production.

At this time people started moving from the pre-TV world—where communication was still based substantially on face-to-face interaction utilising a rich multimodal oral and gestural repertoire (Michaels 1986) and technology was still the two-way radio (in fact, in some locations telephones did not arrive until the 1990s)—to intensive exposure to broadcast TV and a western lifestyle. By the 1980s a 'telecommunications revolution' (Hinkson 2005) was underway. With the launch of the national AUSSAT satellite system by the Australian Government in 1985, many remote Aboriginal communities were able to access broadcast TV and radio for the first time. Some observers saw the proposed launch of AUSSAT and the introduction of TV as a challenge to remote Indigenous culture (Michaels 1986). Indigenous people in the Western Desert feared their language and culture would be lost.[3] These concerns drove initiatives at Yuendumu and Ernabella (in north-east South Australia) where 'Warlpiri Media' and 'Ernabella Video and TV' (later Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara Media) were established as local low-powered, unlicensed, 'pirate' TV stations between 1982 and 1986. The Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association was established in 1989 for the provision of satellite coverage across the Top End (Deger 2006).

BRACS:
Broadcasting in Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme

In 1987 the Broadcasting in Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS) was implemented by the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs, equipping remote communities with the technology for local video and radio production and local retransmission. BRACS represented a federal government response to the perceived threat to Indigenous languages and culture posed by the launch of AUSSAT (Deger 2006: 3–4). Between 1987 and 1996 BRACS was launched in 103 remote communities thereby giving them choice regarding what channel to view: local BRACS media or introduced mainstream TV. Irrunytju Media was established at Wingellina in Western Australia in 1992 as one of the later BRACS initiatives, and it was initially supported by Ernabella Video and TV. In 1998 it was renamed Ngaanyatjarra Media and is now supporting some 14 BRACS communities in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and south-east Western Australia. Ngaanyatjarra Media has since been responsible for training and promoting language, culture, music and stories through video, radio and multimedia production and broadcasting. In 2001 Warlpiri Media launched the PAW (Pintubi, Anmatyerr, Warlpiri) radio network linking communities across north-west central Australia (Hinkson 2004). In 1993 Batchelor College began to deliver training in the nationally accredited Certificate II in BRACS (Broadcasting and Operations). Overall, however, BRACS was given little support: there was minimal training for operators and the nature and expense of the media technology available at the time required high levels of non-Indigenous intervention. Furthermore, many BRACS programs were not so successful, although the situation improved after a BRACS revitalisation strategy in 1993. It can be concluded that most remote Indigenous adults 45 years of age or younger have grown up with fairly constant exposure to western media through listening to radio and watching free-to-air TV, as well as observing or participating in local media production throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Deger 2006; Mackinolty & Duffy 1987; Michaels 1986).

PAW:
Pintubi, Anmatyerr, Warlpiri Radio Network

BRACS TO ICTV

In 1998 the first remote Indigenous video festival was held at Yuendumu and it has since become a regular annual festival event in remote Indigenous Australia. Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) was established at the third Remote Video Festival in 2001 by Ngaanyatjarra Media, Warlpiri Media, Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara Media and Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media. Between 2001 and 2002 broadcasts were predominantly live football from Alice Springs organised by Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara Media. However by 2004 ICTV was mirroring the increased access to new digital technology and by 2006 a resurgence in remote community video production was palpable. ICTV was now being transmitted to some 150 remote communities and 8–12 hours of new content was being generated from communities per week, with 80 per cent of that content in Indigenous languages. In July 2007 ICTV was taken off air to make way for the launch of NITV (National Indigenous Television), the predominantly English-language national Indigenous TV network, effectively turning off ICTV to all the remote communities accessing it and contributing local productions (Rennie & Featherstone 2008).

ICTV:
Indigenous Community Television

NITV:
National Indigenous Television

Early BRACS initiatives represented local productions, local messages, and local ownership and dissemination, where people were telling their own stories and documenting local narratives. At this time, people's exposure to media was coupled not only with the opportunity to consume western media, but also to create new media that reflected their own worldview (Jason Gibson, pers. comm. June 2009). The move from BRACS to ICTV further represented a successful model of non-market media production, building on the local, where people in remote communities were both the producers and the audience. It was also an important mechanism for identity formation as positive images of Indigenous culture, especially youth culture, were broadcast and circulated throughout the remote world. With ICTV:

> Suddenly people saw the reason for video and really took to it and wanted to make films and were coming up with really creative ideas and it suddenly sparked ... . that hasn't disappeared since ICTV was taken off air as they're still looking for those ways of validating and getting that feedback (Anna Cadden, interview, March 2009).

As I discuss further below, many of these elements are still prevalent in contemporary youth media practice and production associated with digital technologies and online communication.

NEW INDIGENOUS YOUTH PRACTICES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Modern youth culture is no longer formed in isolation.[4] All over the world we are seeing a ubiquitous, universalist youth culture with young people reconfiguring and creatively re-embedding internationally circulated media, images and icons that are a product of globalised sameness (Osgerby 2004). Remote Australian Indigenous youth are no exception. Like their urban first world counterparts they are attired in 'brand label' clothing emblazoned with Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent hiphop logos. Media forms and digital technologies are integral to daily life. Significantly however, these young people are also interacting with the artefacts of digital technology as cultural forms—by producing locally-oriented videos, photos, and music to be disseminated on CDs and DVDs or uploaded onto the internet—rather than as 'information communication technology' to be learned in classrooms (Gibian 2003).

Over the last five years media communications in remote Australia continues to evolve as digital technology has been slowly rolled out to remote contexts in a quest to bridge the digital divide and provide improved broadband access. We are witnessing change as telecommunications, information technology and traditional broadcast media have 'converged into a digital realm' where the camera, computer, editing and production have become embedded in one accessible unit (Jason Gibson, pers. comm. March 2008). In very remote

Fig. 1. Young people using the Telecentre at Ngaanyatjarra Media, Wingellina

Source: Kral 2008.

communities internet use has been inhibited by slow dial-up connections. However, with the introduction of satellite technology, new practices are developing as the internet and mobile phones start to be used for instant access communication that suits the remote context. In communities where there is mobile phone coverage, young people are quickly acquiring the practice of SMS text messaging, 'bluetoothing' converted video files, and uploading instant action videos and photos. Irrespective of coverage, phones have become requisite accessories for style-aware remote youth and are popular as private mobile storage spaces for personal digital photos, songs and short films. Online practices including social networking are developing rapidly. Young people typically use the internet to visit Afro-American hiphop music video sites, (for example: Akon, xzibit, Bow Wow, Omarion, D12, DMX and Snoop Dogg), sports and games sites, utilise Google Earth, engage in internet banking, and purchase secondhand cars and musical instruments online. Young people rarely use email for text-based interaction, yet social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Bebo, and MySpace are increasingly being accessed for uploading films and photos, messaging and maintaining social relationships.

The recent explosion in digital media practice among remote Indigenous youth can be attributed to two main factors: the common use of digital media in youth-oriented programs in the out-of-school hours; and the increased ownership of affordable, small, mobile digital media technologies such as MP3 players, iPods, mobile phones and digital cameras. I explore both of these factors in the following sections.

Fig. 2. Musicians Nathan Brown, Anthony Nelson and Chris Reid recording on GarageBand, Wingellina

Source: Copyright Ngaanyatjarra Media.

YOUTH PROGRAMS: AN INVISIBLE LEARNING SPACE

Internationally, an increasing body of research has focused on youth-based organisations as sites for non-formal learning (Fine et al. 2000; Vadeboncoeur 2006). Projects or activities that excite and engage youth are being posited as additional learning environments (Heath & Smyth 1999; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman 1994). Community youth groups have been recognised as organisations that have the 'freedoms of time, space, activity and authority that schools as institutions seldom provide' (Heath & Street 2008: 5). In central Australia over the last five years a number of youth-oriented initiatives have contributed to the development of young people's media and online skills (Fig.1).[5] Such initiatives have tapped into multimedia as a means of engaging young people in meaningful activity, skills development and arts practice, as well as a diversion from substance abuse.

> Interestingly, in central Australia it has been Indigenous youth in bush communities, rather than those in town, who have often had greater access to media and computer-based resources, especially in the non-school hours. In small communities where there is some sort of media organisations there is a welcoming freedom, space to use the resources and relationships with whitefellas to allow you to do things that kids in town have to get to a drop in centre, well there's not many places where they can go ... (Jason Gibson, interview, March 2008)

In remote areas young people are accessing resources through remote community organisations such as Ngaanyatjarra Media and Warlpiri Media, youth centres, youth arts programs, and the remote community Library Knowledge Centres. In these locations early expertise is acquired by 'mucking around'

with technology—using iTunes, downloading music, playing computer games, looking at and labelling photos, playing with Word Art and so forth—as an initial stage before moving onto more interest-driven participation (Fig. 2). This is an important first step in gaining independent, non-directed computer experience and problem-solving confidence. This stage involves experimentation and exploration with relatively low investment where there are few consequences to a trial-and-error method and making mistakes. More sophisticated multimodal practices may later be acquired in digital film-making and music workshops provided by media organisations. Here youth are introduced to the multimedia iLife suite (including iPhoto, iMovie and GarageBand) available on Macintosh computers. Further competence is gained informally through observation, peer learning, trial and error, practice and interactions with non-Indigenous mentors. In some locations young people have proceeded onto independent video-making, using complex computer editing programs leading to DVD production. In other sites they are recording songs on the GarageBand software program and producing their own CDs.

International research on youth media practice has commonly located the 'digital bedroom' as one of the most vibrant kinds of digital learning spaces for youth (Livingstone 2002; Sefton-Green 2006). Mainstream adolescents in urban contexts may be 'hanging out, messing around and geeking out' (Ito 2008: 10) with computers, the internet and online social networking sites alone or in small friendship networks in the privacy of bedrooms. However, this sort of 'bedroom culture' is not available to adolescents in remote communities, who tend not to have access to computers or the internet at home. Access to resources such as TVs, Xboxes, computers, digital cameras and even the internet is therefore more likely to be found in shared, communal spaces such as youth programs or media centres. Accordingly, it can be surmised that these sites represent the *communal* 'digital bedroom'. Here activities are public, yet the privacy that is so difficult to attain at home may be found for individual production as well as the safe storage of virtual and material texts. In these spaces young musicians are also able to safely store musical equipment, organise band rehearsals in preparation for festival performances, and access computers to record songs using GarageBand. In some communities computers for music recording and film editing are located in relatively private 'studio' spaces. In such spaces young people can experience a sense of ownership, belonging and control. They can determine how time is spent and experience the self-directed and iterative engagement that so often leads to creative cultural production and perfectionism. In this space individual specialisations emerge and innovations are occurring as young people experiment with new media.

TECHNOLOGY, CONTROL AND INNOVATION

In the post-contact remote Indigenous world, learning outside the family has mostly been controlled by institutions: the school, a training provider or a workplace bounded by rules and controlled by non-Indigenous people. In fact, there are few public spaces in communities that Indigenous people do control. Until recently the control of technology has also mostly been in the hands of media organisations or institutions. In the BRACS era described above, equipment was expensive, sophisticated and bulky, and participation required high levels of assistance, skill and professional input. Editing studios were often not accessible without permission, especially for Indigenous youth. Thus with minimal access to resources and spaces Indigenous people were more disengaged from production processes and had fewer opportunities to independently initiate and complete creative projects than is apparent today.

As mobile phones, digital cameras, MP3 players, Touch iPods and even laptop computers have become affordable, this has placed smaller mobile technologies in the hands of Indigenous people, predominantly young people under 25. The control of technology has shifted away from institutional locations or non-Indigenous authorities and young people are now initiating productive activity in ways that were previously unimaginable. Digital technology is firmly part of people's everyday lives. Additionally, young people 'don't need to be taught it, they are just doing it' and this has influenced people's understanding of technology

Fig. 3. Music video from Ngaanyatjarra Media on YouTube
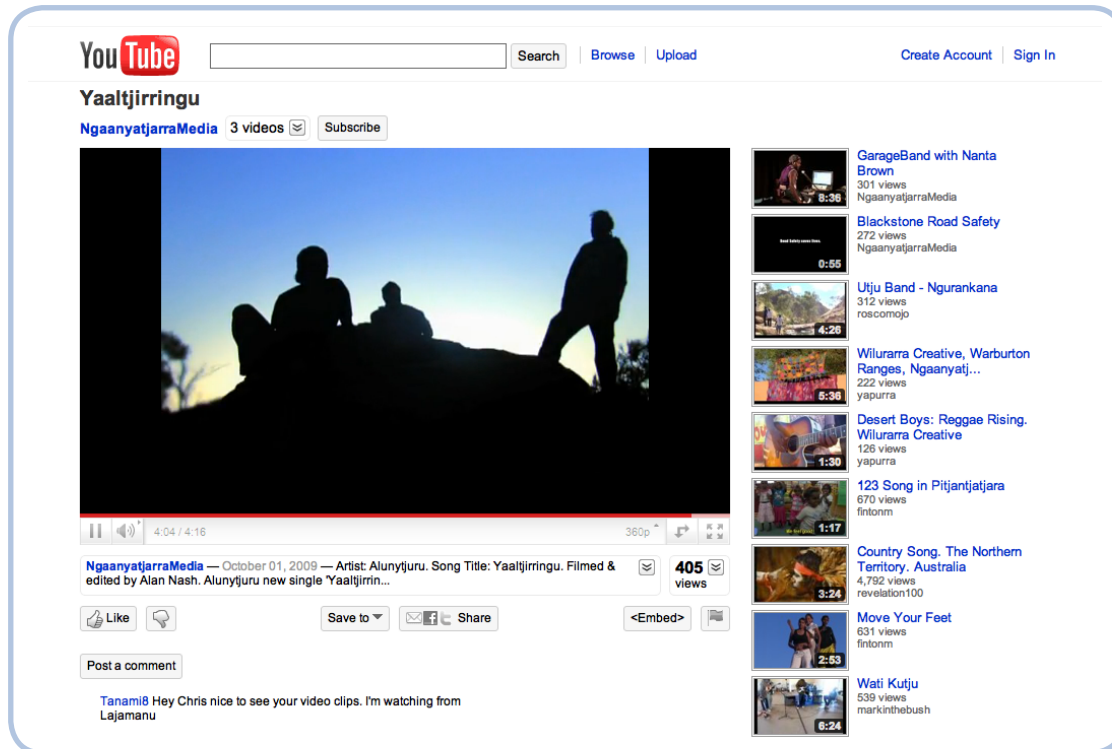
Source: Screenshot of YouTube page at <**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ_vqAmM5dw**>.

beyond these small, mobile devices (Anna Cadden, pers. comm., March 2009). Through regular interactions with media devices, young people are less fearful of technology and more competent at manipulating it than their elders. Consequently, even those with low levels of literacy are quickly able to grasp the intuitive problem-solving logic of digital cameras, MP3 players and computers. Young people are confidently using cameras, editing software like iMovie and Final Cut to manipulate the medium and the images in order to create the story that they want to tell. They are in control, and it is this control factor which is allowing productive processes to take place.

Until recently, music recording and editing was also an arduous process requiring the intervention of non-Indigenous 'experts'. Now easy access to computers and simple GarageBand recording software has given young musicians new control over music production. At Ngaanyatjarra Media, a series of short, informal GarageBand training workshops have been conducted. New roles are now emerging for producers, artists, and song-writers who are recording and producing CDs and developing the artwork and text for CD covers using the one computer—and all within a short period of time. GarageBand works because the recording process is simple and all embedded in the one 'box'.[6] Furthermore, the software is relatively indestructible and lends itself to fearless experimentation. Youth participation is not contingent upon prior literacy or technological competence, but on a desperation to read the symbols on the computer screen in order to record their own songs. The young men in this study are fearless of the technology and this fearlessness has allowed them to stretch the boundaries of what is possible, and to find myriad ways of achieving the oral/aural outcome that they have visualised in their minds long before entering the studio. These young musicians are seeking perfection; they rework the tracks over many hours and days of improvisation, practice, recording, re-recording and re-editing. There is no such thing as a mistake, as everything can be deleted and reworked and it doesn't matter. The GarageBand process provides an opportunity for young

Fig. 4. 'Plugged in'—youth participants at a workshop for the Australian Research Council Linkage Project, March 2009

Source: Kral 2009. For further explanation of this research project see Kral 2010.

men in particular to privately focus on something that really matters and to do it well. It is a collaborative endeavour that also allows individuals the space to excel. In turn these new local young producers are training musicians in other communities: here they demonstrate their skill to others and their peers aspire to rise to the same high level (Daniel Featherstone, pers. comm. 2009). Some musicians have progressed onto recording and producing music using the more advanced Pro Tools editing suite, and uploading video clips to to social networking sites such as YouTube (Fig. 3).

In the Northern Territory Library 'Libraries and Knowledge Centres' youth with computer and media skills are responsible for archiving and documenting local community knowledge in databases of heritage materials. In the database repatriated items are enriched with annotations and new material is included through the use of digital media technologies (Gibson 2007). Young people import media items, convert file formats, add metadata, and work with elders to record, transcribe and translate texts in the local vernacular and English. In one location young men who have acquired media skills through non-formal training with Warlpiri Media are independently accessing film-making resources in the 'old BRACS room'. Here they are making music videos and cultural documentaries with elders, subtitling them in the local language or English, and uploading them onto YouTube, in tandem with creating contemporary digital artefacts for the community database.[7]

Access to resources is allowing such young people to be the controllers of productive processes that generate unique resources and new forms of cultural production. The projects are allowing participants to experience what it is to be self-motivated, to self-regulate the process and self-evaluate the product. In this process there is freedom for specialisations to emerge, and individuals are setting high skill attainment levels for themselves that are not based on a programmatic system of institutional learning. As a consequence, innovations are occurring as young people experiment with new media. Simultaneously young people are engaging in language and culture maintenance activities as the facilitators of digital media. Such media work is validated by elders who need young people to mediate between old knowledge and new technologies. As one young Warlpiri man commented:

> It bring two ways together … And that's the best way to learn … . We got all these things, like technology, we can record all these story, video, songline everything … when we go, as long as we leave something behind so all the kids can look after it and so they can pass it on … to the next generation … . We knowing this technology like media, started knowing this, started use this thing in the right way because old people going away. From knowing this media I'm starting to know these old people and knowing what they got (Maxwell Tasman, interview, August 2008).

In conclusion, young people are engaging in this work because these are the domains of knowledge that they can control—culture, arts, country, new technologies and positive self-representation (Fig. 4).

THE LOCAL IS ALL: POSITIVE SELF REPRESENTATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION

> Young people have been taking up the challenge—learning and doing things for themselves. The young people are like the eyes for the old people seeing into the future … It's not up to someone else to show the way we are or control how we are seen. We are trying to do this ourselves in our own work. We are watching too. You can see the young people standing up for themselves, speaking out. Now is the right time for people to take notice (West 2009).

Remote Indigenous youth are encountering a greater plurality of lifestyle options and future choices than ever before, and domains of knowledge are in a state of rapid transformation. There has been a profound shift in the presentation of self in the public space in the remote world. Earlier generations were

more bounded by the parameters of ceremonial performance, whereas successive generations have been observing and participating in an expanded range of performance genres including sport, music and film (Kral 2007). As free-to-air TV was introduced to remote communities, MTV insinuated itself into everyday life and this expanded the performance repertoires available to Indigenous youth. Young people are now seeking new ways of expressing a contemporary Indigenous identity, yet access to elders and traditional knowledge remains a vital part of what matters to them. They are drawing on pre-existing knowledge and skills drawn from being members of the local community, but also seeking to know more about the outside world. Youth are now 'performing' themselves differently from their elders. They are exhibiting greater ease in the public space by using non-traditional direct communication styles and overcoming 'shame' by putting themselves forward. Consequently we are seeing 'new forms of mediated publicness' (Thompson 1994: 39). Despite the ubiquity of western media images and icons, many young people have also witnessed their elders using earlier media forms as a 'tool for cultural maintenance' (Daniel Featherstone, interview, April 2008). Accordingly we are seeing films and songs produced by remote youth forming a repertoire of strikingly persistent and predictable localised themes and discourses that bridge tradition and modernity. Through the merging of intercultural elements—global hiphop, Afro-American images and traditional Indigenous language, gesture and style—young people are forming 'semiotic reconstructions' and forging new cultural perspectives, understandings and identities (Mitchell 2001; Pennycook 2007).

As the mediators of new forms of cultural production, young people are also demonstrating control over how they are positioning themselves in the public domain. Until recently, productions were predominantly for a local audience. Now wider viewings of films at festivals, on ICTV and online are allowing young people to position themselves as productive contributors in the national and international domain.

> When you look at technology, which in a sense is all about communication in one form or another ... what has been sorely missing is that communication between mainstream Australia and remote communities and misunderstandings. ** and ** are perfect examples of tackling that head on in the sense that they are really clued in and think: 'How can we tell stories which other people will understand?', you know 'How can we bridge this gap between the cultures that exist in Australia?' And they see technology and media as a way of doing that ... They are after this connection and the connection is communication and bridging that gap and making life better for people in communities (Anna Cadden, interview, March 2009) [** replaces personal names].

Simultaneously, productions by youth media workers are helping to counter negative public perceptions associated with Indigenous youth in remote communities. Gaining control of the technology and being able to manipulate the medium and the images themselves means that there is no longer an outsider recording them. Thus, young people are in control of their own self-representation. Interestingly, productions by youth (writing, images, films, songs) developed independently or with peers, with little adult or non-Indigenous direction or intervention, tend to express a humorous, joyful, love of life and validate their contemporary Indigenous identity. I explore this further below.

MULTIMODAL LITERACY PRACTICES

Digital technology practice is reliant on the intuitive meta-textual skills of alphabetic literacy—standardised alphabetic symbols, left to right and top to bottom processing interacting with a visual symbol system. Visual, spatial and motor skills are simultaneously employed for clicking, dragging and dropping, cutting and pasting images and chunks of text or sound and scrolling to the next page, as well as the manipulation of fonts by type, size or format. In the various projects described here, literacy practice in the early stages may involve copying, and cutting and pasting song titles and playlists, determining song repeats and categorising genres. Initial explorations of the iTunes, iMovie and GarageBand applications do not require

Table 1. SMS text messages from the Katherine region, Northern Territory

SMS text	Standard Australian English
Wat u doing na?	What are you doing now?
you walking around there la town owat?	are you walking around there in town or what?
na katherine	in Katherine
I bin try call la baba phone	I tried to call to my brother's phone
Em der na indid?	He's there now isn't he?
mimi just bin txt me n em bin say that em der?	Mimi just texted me and she said that he was there?
watz up sis?	What's up sister?
najing i bin just get la camp i bin la grandpa camp	nothing I just got to camp I was in grandpa's camp
eya have sum ob ma ♥ and a lil smiley face to watch ova u☺	Here have some of my love and a little smiley face to watch over you
U turn ba tell me story na ...	Your turn to tell me a story now ...
ma right bro i mite go nxt payday la Darwin go look mine fren mob haha	I'm alright brother I might go next payday to Darwin to go and look for my friends haha
em rite sis i'll wait nxt week wen i cum bek from DARWIN ... ?	It's alright sister I'll wait till next week when I come back from Darwin?
hay iam from K-town 2 so keep it east gangsta	Hey I am from Katherine too so keep it east gangsta
na ibin fall a sleep yesday bcuz no rest ibin working al by my self	Now I fell asleep because yesterday no rest I was working all by myself
A txt u 2morrow bcuz dis mob bin cum bek from town ba mumy	I will text you tomorrow because this mob came back from town for mummy

Source: The Author.

high levels of literacy, for learners can remember processes spatially. Later productions may include non-narrative compilations of iMovie images and music that young people create autonomously without a pre-determined script or story-board. Through regular practice, competence is developed in constructing and framing multimodal texts using intertextual layering of image, text, song and gesture. It is multimodal in the sense that it is possible to 'integrate words with images, sound, music, and movement to create digital artifacts that do not necessarily privilege linguistic forms of signification but rather draw on a variety of modalities—speech, writing, image, gesture and sound—to create different forms of meaning' (Hull & Nelson 2005: 224–5).

The creative, icon-based approach embedded in the Mac iLife suite of programs lends itself to the rich layering of image, sound, text, and symbols typically found in youth productions.

SMS AND ONLINE MESSAGING

With SMS text messaging youth are reading and sending simple messages, and the more literate are texting in English and Indigenous languages, often using inventive short-cuts. The short-cut meaning-making style evident in SMS and online messaging is drawing on an established tradition of adolescent graffiti expression across remote Australia commonly representative of insidership and signifying 'belongingness' (Kral 2007; Nicholls 2000). Through graffiti, young people are well-versed in tagging, word play and composing initialisms, abbreviations and coded sequences of letters, as the following graffiti examples from the Katherine region indicate, although similar examples can be found in other remote regions.[8]

MJF	OU2
CNF	IN K-TOWN
O2BF	2008
S.D.G.J.	SDGJ
J.D.W	ONLy ME
L.J.D	My SELF
O.2.B.B.	in 2007
	OAO
OuMOb iya OK	FPK ALL FU
	BA GIRL NA
	MY SIDE ???
	OK SUCKERS
	07 ...

The lingua franca for the Katherine region, 'Roper River Kriol'—an English-based creole (Sandefur 1979)—lends itself to the inventive short-cut mode found in mobile phone text messaging, as seen at Table 1.

Graffiti-style collaborative coding is also extended to playing around with fonts and text in English and Kriol in the short-cut messaging found in online chatting:

lEt Me KnOw WeN eVa Ya WaNa CuM dis WaY

yEh ShE gEtN rEaLlY big

DaTs GwD u EnJoYd Ya SeLf

luV bEcCa N' nArNa

wat na u gin!!!

wat ya bin up ta???

With online social networking, Indigenous youth are uploading personal profiles, photos and films, using text and symbols in inventive ways, and writing longer texts, usually in English, about themselves and to each other. They are using SMS and online messaging as a tool for maintaining sociality and enhancing

written communication skills. Simultaneously, young people are taking 'delight in the generativity of texting conventions and the infectious new forms of speech play that texting enables' (Jones & Schieffelin 2009: 1058).

SONG-WRITING

In this research project it has been found that writing and productions by youth rather than about youth are providing insights into how these young people are developing their own style, reflecting on their circumstances and projecting positive futures.[9] Independent access to resources is stimulating the generation of unique multimodal texts particular to each locale. Song writing represents one example of youth engagement with oral and written text. Songs usually begin as oral texts and may be transcribed and translated from the Indigenous mother tongue to English and turned into written text for CD covers by those with the literacy skills. An analysis of a corpus of songs (2003–08) from young Western Desert musicians reveals that out of 101 songs, 78 are in Indigenous languages, highlighting the importance of the mother tongue in contemporary oral texts. However songs composed by youth reveal the amount of code-switching between the mother tongue and English and act as a marker of language shift between the generations.

Indirect communication is a feature of Indigenous social interaction (Liberman 1985) and this is evident in the moral themes addressed in songs lexicalised around contemporary issues such as petrol sniffing, drinking and fighting. Here young people are using songs to distance themselves from criticising unacceptable behaviour in the public domain. This is exemplified in a music video uploaded onto Bebo entitled 'Wati kura—Bad man'.[10] The song begins with a narrated introduction in English:

> Hello my name is _____. I'm in Amata Aboriginal Community in Central Australia. This is a song about a man who drinks too much grog and he starts a fight with his wife. He's a bad man, he's a bad man …

 … and continues in Pitjantjatjara with English subtitles.

Song-writing also reveals how traditional oral narrative schemas, verbal arts and speech styles have seeped into youth practices. The songs produced by remote youth reveal recurrent features in the cultural schema that writers draw on such as 'travelling narratives' from the traditional oral canon or Western Desert storytelling styles revealing empathy for individuals who are longing for country or kin. Songs by young people are also communicate deep respect for the country and traditions of their elders, such as *Ngura Alunytjuru* (Our country Alunytjuru):[11]

> Long time ago when I was young my
> grandfather showed me the places.
> I still remember the Dreamtime
> waterhole he showed me in the past.
> What a beautiful place to get the water from, *Alunytjuru-la*.
> What a beautiful place he showed me,
> I'll never forget.

In summary, the songs provide insights into how young people are reflecting on current circumstances and, importantly, visualising and constructing a positive sense of self (Bauman & Briggs 1990) while projecting pride in their Indigenous cultural identity.

Language plays a critical role in the 'construction of social identity' (Ochs 1993) in adolescence. Youth around the world commonly use language as an important identity marker, often characterised by the development of patterns of linguistic variation or inventive teenage slang (Eckert 1988; Gibian 2003). According to mainstream standards of literacy, Indigenous youth appear to be failing, yet in the multimodal practices described here, young people are engaging in reading and writing and often producing their own creative literacies. This is empowering as even Indigenous youth with low levels of alphabetic literacy can now create technically competent products that are praised by their own community and by a non-Indigenous audience. Furthermore, for young people who are regularly engaging with digital technologies and experimenting with multimodal practices, the fear of literacy is dissipating. New forms of textual communication and linguistic creativity (Richardson 2006) are emerging among the youth generation where even the less literate are using digital technologies and alphabetic text to maintain social relationships. Their approach to literacy has, however, a new logic that is dissimilar to the alphabetic literacy processes acquired by their parents or grandparents.

CONCLUSION

I have shown here how remote Indigenous youth engagement with digital culture has firm roots in a tradition of film and video culture that evolved during the 1980s and 1990s. Young people have absorbed a model of media production as a tool for language and culture maintenance where local productions and local messages were created for local ownership and dissemination. I have suggested that through the growing use of digital media forms and communication technologies Indigenous youth in remote regions are acquiring new skills and roles. They are learning by observation, trial and error experimentation, peer teaching and learning, and everyday practice because the new digital technologies are meaningful and relevant. The manner in which Indigenous youth have taken up digital technologies reveals much about the way imaginative capacities have been moulded by digital technologies and their potential to be used as cultural tools when such technologies are 'deeply embedded in wider social concerns that reach far beyond their immediate interaction with the technological implements themselves' (Sneath, Holbraad & Pederson 2009: 18).

The research findings described above indicate that when young people have access to resources and activities are tied to meaningful community projects they are engaging as the mediators and facilitators of digital literacy in collaborative, participatory, intergenerational activities. These activities positively affirm their contemporary Indigenous identity as well as their 'belongingness' to globalised youth culture. Most significantly however, these outcomes are demanding a reassessment of preconceptions about youth literacy in this domain as through these multimedia platforms young people are exploring and developing new multimodal forms and creative literacies.

NOTES

1. For more background information see Kral (2010).

2. This section draws on notes from a presentation by Daniel Featherstone at the 2007 Governing by Looking Back Conference (Featherstone 2007), and an interview with Daniel Featherstone in April 2008.

3. This reference comes from a manuscript in the Ara Irititja database (filed as Manuscript no. 1090-3).

4. My thanks to Jason Gibson, Daniel Featherstone, Ben Foley and Anna Cadden for contributions to this discussion.

5. These programs have included: 'Deadly Mob', the Us Mob online video project associated with the Gap Youth Centre in Alice Springs, CAAMA Youth Media project, Ngapartji Ngapartji intergenerational arts project in Alice Springs and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands, Carclew Youth Arts APY Lands Project, Warburton Youth Arts Program in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, and the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust and Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation Youth Media Project.

6. A GarageBand training video made by local Ngaanyatjarra/Pitjantjatjara musicians from Wingellina, Western Australia can be found at <**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fd4pQaRa9El&feature=related**>.

7. Warlpiri videos made by Shane White and Maxwell Tasman, Lajamanu, Northern Territory can be found at <**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnRqUMu5uzs&feature=related**> and <**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFZq7AduGrc**>.

8. Some of the graffiti coding may be interpreted as follows: O2BF—only 2 best friends; SDGJ—so don't get jealous; OU2—only us 2; K-TOWN—Katherine; OAO—one and only.

9. Writing on Indigenous Australian youth participation in new media is sparse, however other observations in remote contexts highlight the positive identity affirmation aspect of media engagement (Hinkson 2002, 2004; Slater 2008).

10. See <**http://www.bebo.com/c/video?FlashBoxId=6252964664**>, accessed 3 May 2010.

11. Lyrics by Chris Reid and Nathan Brown, © Alunytjuru Band. '*Wati Kutju*' was produced by Ngaanyatjarra Media. See also the Alunytjuru Band's video performance of 'Yaaltjirringu' on YouTube at <**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ_vqAmM5dw**>.

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