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The Dancing Between Two Worlds Project: Background, Methodology and Learning to Approach Community in Place


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Cover Page Footnote

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The Dancing Between Two Worlds Project: Background, Methodology and Learning to Approach Community in Place

Anindita Banerjee, Shaun McLeod, Gretel Taylor, Patrick West (Deakin University, Australia)

Introduction

Australia's Deakin University has auspiced various enterprises aimed at contributing to the well-being of targeted communities through scholarly and practice-based activities reified at the intersection of the creative arts and various versions of place. The host element for most of these projects has been Deakin's School of Communication and Creative Arts (SCCA). The locations of Deakin's campuses have to a large extent determined which communities have been approached with a view to forming a partnership. Besides its virtual or Cloud-based campus, Deakin has four on-the-ground Victorian campuses: Melbourne Burwood Campus, Geelong Waurin Ponds Campus, Geelong Waterfront Campus and Warrnambool Campus. Three Deakin Learning Centres are located at Craigieburn, Dandenong and Werribee.

Deakin's geographical spread extends from Melbourne, westwards via Geelong, to Warrnambool. Geelong is approximately 75 kilometres west of Melbourne and Warrnambool is a little under 200 kilometres westwards past Geelong. Deakin's physical footprint is capital-city focused (Burwood, in Melbourne, is the largest campus by student numbers), urban concentrated (in Melbourne and Geelong) and water hugging (around Port Phillip Bay and along the Bass Strait coastline).

Locations

Deakin has five campuses in Melbourne, Geelong and Warrnambool, which feature world-class facilities and a friendly, welcoming atmosphere. Our Cloud Campus is an innovative online learning environment offering a premium study experience. We also have corporate and learning centres that provide meeting, study and event spaces. Explore our locations in more detail and make the most of what we can offer you.

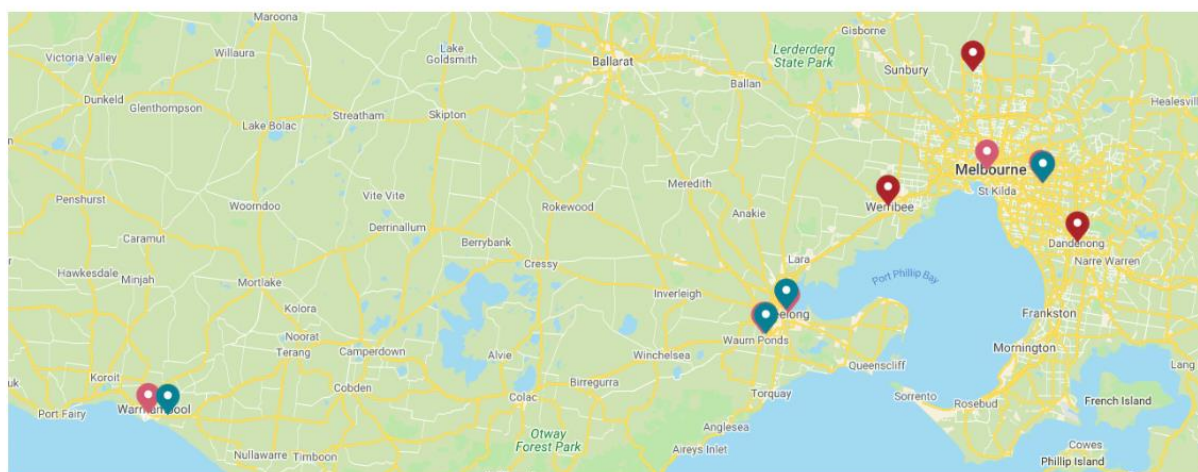


Figure 1: Map of Deakin locations courtesy of Deakin University Website.

The *Dancing Between Two Worlds (DBTW)* project that is the subject of this paper involved Indian-Australian artists in a series of workshops that culminated in a site-specific performance along a riverside path and the main street of Werribee, in the vicinity of Deakin's Werribee Learning Centre. Werribee sits on the outer western fringe of suburban Melbourne and is just under halfway to Geelong from the centre of Melbourne. Werribee is the original suburb of the City of Wyndham Local Government Area (LGA).

Contextualizing *DBTW* in relation to similar SCCA creative-research enterprises is useful for several reasons. It underscores how geographically overlapping projects may engage with the same general community in different ways. There are many vectors of approach to the same community and any community is never just a single community. Furthermore, communities may have intensive and complex relationships with other geographical places—either locally, nationally or internationally. This is especially pertinent to the local Indian community at the heart of *DBTW*. Finally, the

comparison in the following section of this article between *DBTW* and two other creative-research enterprises with a similar remit helps in drawing out how SCCA researchers have become more nuanced in their activation of enterprises that combine (qualitatively measured) well-being, the creative arts, and place. One aspect of this, to be considered later on in this article, is the choice research enterprises may (choose to) make between constructing themselves as a project or as a group. A group will, of course, carry out projects, but projects do not need to be carried out by a group. There is a discursive tension between the terms ‘project’ and ‘group’ that rewards consideration. More immediately, the two enterprises to be looked at before moving to a closer engagement with *DBTW* are the *Flows & Catchments* group and the *Treatment* project.

The *Flows & Catchments* Group and the *Treatment* Project

The *Flows & Catchments* group emerged in 2011 with a cluster of SCCA staff at its core. Its geographical area of concern was the Volcanic Plains Region of Western Victoria, which the group understood to extend from the western fringe of Melbourne, where the Maribyrnong River runs, deep into Western Victoria. Deakin’s Warrnambool campus approximately marked the western boundary of the group’s activities. The chapbook *Flows & Catchments: Place* is a comprehensive introduction to the group:

Flows & Catchments is an experiment in comprehending our global state from the ground up rather than from the top, or sky, down. It’s a matter of the systemic and what feeds it, which means thinking and acting in the smallest and deftest of ways while, at the same time, also seeing the planet from afar. (Perazzo 2014: 5)

Flows & Catchments was most active in the period 2011 to 2015. In 2012 and 2013 members of *Flows & Catchments* were heavily involved with the Lake Bolac Eel Festival. The Creative Partnerships Australia (formerly the Australia Business Arts Foundation) 2012 and 2013 Creative Partnerships Regional Awards were won jointly by Deakin University and the Lake Bolac Eel Festival. Since 2015 the group has been less active. However, the

sort of work originally attached to *Flows & Catchments* has always been available for re-activation, either under the same banner or another. Some *Flows & Catchments* members are now *DBTW* members. *Flows & Catchments* is a part of Deakin's institutional memory—and thus also of its present—in the space of creative research with a community, place-based inflection.

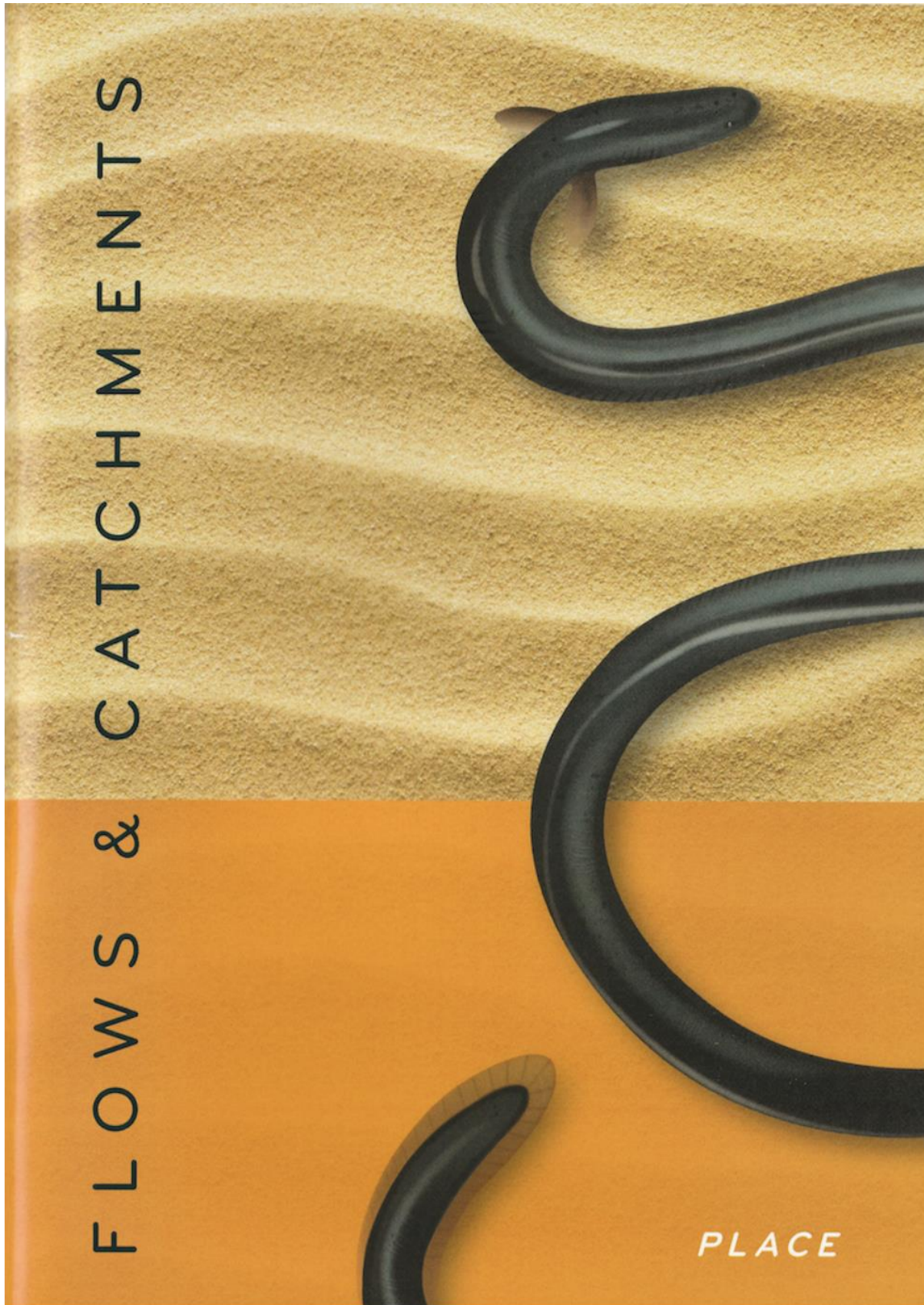


Figure 2: Front cover image of *Flows & Catchments: Place*.

The *Treatment* project is a more recently developed enterprise than the *Flows & Catchments* group. *Treatment* is a public art event held at the Western Treatment Plant, which is where Melbourne Water treats 50% of Melbourne's sewage. The Western Treatment Plant is located in the semi-rural locality of Cocoroc, which adjoins Werribee South and is part of the City of Wyndham LGA. *Treatment* was first held in 2015 (the year that *Flows & Catchments* wound back its activities) and then again in 2017. Unlike *Flows & Catchments*, *Treatment* has, as a project, thus far been a curated two-day event. Different versions of *Treatment* are planned. *Treatment* is run in close collaboration with one of Deakin's industry partners: Melbourne Water. In 2015 and 2017, *Treatment* consisted of a number of public art events and performances, all held on the grounds of the Western Treatment Plant. The lineage of *Treatment* may be traced back to *Flows & Catchments* and there is membership cross-over spanning *Treatment*, *Flows & Catchments* and *DBTW*. Unlike *Flows & Catchments*, *Treatment* is an actively ongoing Deakin enterprise, taking place just a few kilometres from the focus site of *DBTW* in downtown Werribee. Both enterprises energetically situate themselves within the City of Wyndham LGA. Further information on *Treatment* may be found in the limited edition book (600 copies) *Treatment: Six Public Artworks at the Western Treatment Plant*.

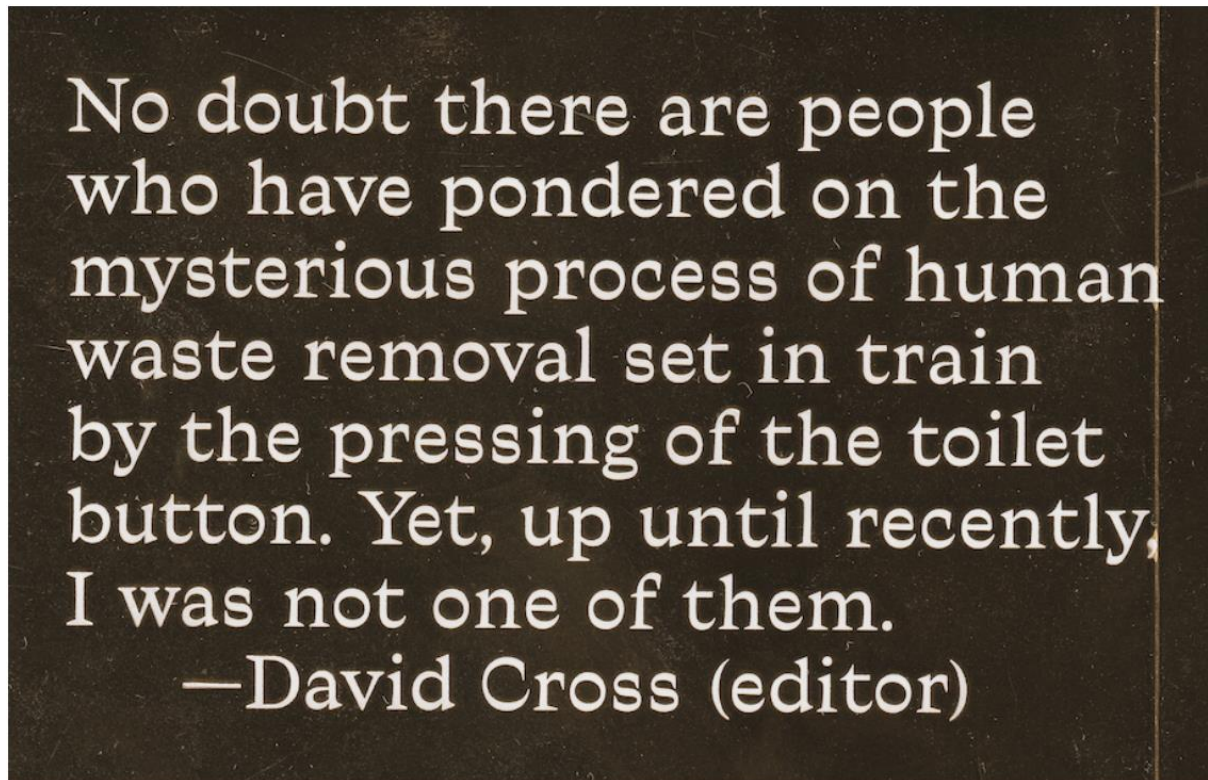


Figure 3: Back cover image of *Treatment: Six Public Artworks at the Western Treatment Plant*.

Flows & Catchments and *Treatment* are just two of a number of multi-person creative-research enterprises, involving Deakin academics and people external to Deakin, operating in the same space: that is, at the juncture of well-being, the creative arts, and place. We have chosen to highlight these enterprises because they also tick the box of sitting within Deakin's geographical footprint.

The Dancing Between Two Worlds Community Project: Space, Place and Site

The *DBTW* project was initiated in 2018 by two ongoing Deakin academics, a research fellow, and a PhD candidate (the authors of this article). The predominant artform represented in the group, at its inception, was dance. In effect, we came together around a shared interest in the creative arts (broadly speaking), communities of place, and relationships with India. Shaun, now resident in Melbourne, was born in India and cites a long association with that country, while Anindita had, in 2018, been living in Wyndham, as part of its prominent Indian community, for over five years. A notable difference between the *DBTW* project and previous Deakin enterprises is that the

former is place defined *and* defined through our intention to work with a certain culturally and linguistically diverse community (the Indian community in Werribee).

Seed funding for *DBTW* came from Deakin, whose research leadership is appropriately careful in how it administers public funds, promulgating the expectation that internal funding will lead to successful external funding applications. Across 2018 and 2019, the City of Wyndham Council provided additional funding to the project, and in 2019 the group also received small grants from Wyndham Community Cultural Foundation (Arts Assist) and Multicultural Festivals and Events through the Victorian Government.

The title *Dancing Between Two Worlds* immediately signifies one mode of dual spatiality: that is, the two ‘worlds’ of India and Australia. Complementing and overlapping this doubleness, in the early days of the project’s existence, were two other spatialities of our thinking. One of these was the desire to bring an internationally renowned dance group from India to Victoria for a series of high profile performances, which would be associated with some more community-based events involving the local Indian-Australian, and more broadly Australian, communities. The other spatiality consisted in the development of more locally focused activities, conducted exclusively with and within various Melbourne communities. Werribee in Wyndham, with its large Indian population, was an obvious geographical fit with both these project spatialities. (Unfortunately, we have not, yet, sourced sufficient funding to enact the international element of our project, an ambition further complicated, in 2020 and possibly beyond, by COVID-19.)

In Australian academic and creative arts discourses, ‘place’ has come to pertain to a whole gamut of complex identity relations to do with belonging, ownership, history, politics and experience, and has become a major field of interdisciplinary inquiry. Geographer Linda McDowell notes that the extensive movement of peoples from their places of birth and ancestry, through imperialism, immigration, refuge and simply through travel, has created a globalised sense of place, changing the notion of place as ‘authentic’ and ‘rooted in tradition.’ According to McDowell, place is now defined by

the intersection of particular socio-spatial relations that create a place's distinguishing qualities (4). She writes:

[following the enormous changes of the twentieth century] ...the commonsense geographical notion of a place as a set of coordinates on a map that fix a defined and bounded piece of territory has been challenged...[and now] places are contested, fluid and uncertain. It is socio-spatial practices that define places and these practices result in overlapping and intersecting places with multiple and changing boundaries... (3-4)

The new authenticity of place McDowell describes is 'made up from flows and movements, from intersecting social relations rather than stability and rootedness' (5). That place is characterised by greater fluidity and instability now than in the past represents a major shift in the organisation of people's lives and as such is the impetus for the sizeable body of work being produced across a broad range of fields of knowledge on the subject of place.

Also recognising the changing conditions of place in the contemporary world, art historian Miwon Kwon in *One Place after Another* identified a contradiction between 'the nostalgic desire for a retrieval of rooted, place-bound identities on the one hand and the anti-nostalgic embrace of a nomadic fluidity of subjectivity, identity and spatiality on the other' (8). Kwon commented upon shifts in site-based art practices at the turn of the millennium, which reflect the global destabilising of place, and that encompass a new notion of site as an 'intertextually coordinated, multiply located, discursive field of operation' (159). Kwon suggested finding a terrain between this trend of deterritorialised mobilisation and a more traditional, grounded site-specificity, and imagines a new model of 'belonging-in-transience' (166). A clue to this model might lie in considering the range of seeming contradictions *together*, to inhabit them at once and find a sense of belonging with the instabilities: 'to understand seeming oppositions as *sustaining relations*' (166). Kwon advocates 'relational sensibilities', emphasising relationships between things, people and places. *DBTW* shares some of this sense of inhabiting transience. Kwon extends the possibilities of 'site' to encompass a network

of social relations (5): a community, which has propelled the emergent field of site-based performance as community cultural development (Taylor, 2017).

Diasporic communities have a potentially more open relationship to place as a dimension of their citizenship than dominant cultures. As much as cultures are re-cast in their relationship to new places, specific sites are reimagined through performance. The site in site-specific performance, says Victoria Hunter, ‘...is metaphorically freed from its everyday, normative meanings and associations and its identity becomes mobilised through the individual’s processes of experiencing and perceiving the site in a different manner’ (259). Performance has the capacity to enact the embodied potentials, dynamics and movements of ‘...people migrating countries or crossing a city; the movement of cultural ideas and social practices’ (Douglas 7). Yet despite all the possible fluid and open-ended responses to site-based performance, the context is an accessible one for the communities in which the performances take place. In this sense, ‘...site art is above all, a means to create and affect communities and their quality of life’ (Kloetzel & Pavlik 233).

Working With/Out Landscape

Our commitment to site based performance is accompanied by a wariness of the term ‘landscape’, which is often used in conjunction with projects like ours. While the *DBTW* project is consciously set in the Deakin University footprint or ‘landscape’, we situate our place-based project at Werribee at a conceptual distance from the term ‘landscape’.

The definition of ‘landscape’ limits experience of place to the visual sense: ‘...scenery, as seen in a broad view’ (Moore, 2008). Site-specific performance in relation to place engages all of the senses, including the visual sense, in not only a ‘broad view’ but also the close range, in a relation of surrounded-ness, immersion and inter-relation. This multi-sensory immersion posits the body within the place, whilst *landscape* connotes (and we would suggest, promotes) the observation of an exterior point of view, placed at a distance from the body (Taylor, 2009).

The term ‘landscape’ is homologous with the distanced approach to viewing/knowing/mastering of a place critiqued by Michel de Certeau in ‘Walking in the City’ (in *The Practice of Everyday Life*) and is also reminiscent of colonial forms of vision. Stephen Muecke in *Textual Spaces* notices about Aboriginal narratives ‘the complete absence of a *specular* version of the landscape’ (167). The metaphor of walking the city streets as an epistemology of embodied immersion in or amongst the world (in contrast to the disembodied aerial view) could be compared to the experience of Aboriginal Australians’ knowing of country via walking and singing its ancestral tracks. In a later work, Muecke observes that the tradition of landscape painting in Australia reinforced the colonial gaze that ‘captures’ and claims ownership; he asserts that ‘framing Land as pictures of landscape [makes] possible the recontextualisation of the environment at a distance from ourselves and, by implication, under our control’ (2004 75).

Thus, in the Indian artists’ performed interaction with sites of Werribee, we suggest the emphasis was on participation in place, with consciousness as recently arrived residents on ancient Indigenous Country—within the complexities of a colonised society—rather than on a positioning of themselves/ourselves in relation to the *landscape*.

Reaching Out to the Local Indian Community in the City of Wyndham

In these early stages of *DBTW*, which involved the development of its identity and sense of its own future as a multi-person project, *DBTW* aspired to bring into collaboration—or better yet, to weave together—international and local Indian elements and personnel. The long-term, funding-dependent goal was to bring renowned Indian dance artists, Mallika Sarabhai and Revanta Sarabhai, to Victoria for a large-scale performance. However, this performance, we hoped, would be preceded by, and grounded in, creative-arts activities developed in association with the local Indian population in Wyndham. So it was that, with Deakin ethics clearance in hand, we composed the following single-page communication (reproduced here with its original formatting):

Call out to Wyndham-based artists of Indian origin

Dancing Between Two Worlds

Are you a dancer, performer, musician or artist who comes from an Indian background?

Would you like to participate in a series of creative exchanges in Werribee exploring experiences of place and culture through contemporary performance practices?

Dancing Between Two Worlds is an artistic and research partnership between Wyndham Council and Deakin University that hopes to engage the participation of local Indian-Australian artists. Initiated by Australian artists with a strong empathy for Indian culture, this project invites Indian artists living in Wyndham to participate in a series of workshop-based exchanges to share arts practices and experiences.

We are interested to explore these kinds of questions and themes through dance, sound, text, video and site-specific performance:

What if home is not only the place where you were born or the culture you were raised in?

What if home is a reimagining of the old culture mingling with the new?

What is it like to be Indian-Australian?

What do you miss and what do you bring with you, to overlay or merge with this new place?

What challenges have you faced gaining acceptance or being heard as a new citizen?

How do you feel you can contribute, and how might you imagine the country's future?

Creative exchanges will take place from July to September 2018 at a community venue in Werribee.

There is no payment available for your participation, but the exchanges are free of charge.

This is the first stage in the development of what we hope will become a major contemporary performance work about place, connection and citizenship, led by choreographers Shaun McLeod, Dianne Reid and Gretel Taylor, and renowned Indian dance artists, Mallika Sarabhai and Revanta Sarabhai, for which we are currently seeking funding. We hope to involve some local Indian artists in this project in 2019.

Expressions of interest:

You must be 18 or over, come from an Indian background and be available on the following dates:

Creative exchanges: Saturdays 21st July, 4th August, 18th August, 1st September and 15th September, 2-5pm

Venue: To be confirmed (Werribee or nearby)

Register your interest by sending your name, phone number, email address and a brief artist's biography or a few lines describing: what kind of artist you are (or were, back in India) and any of your artwork or projects you would like to show us.

Enquiries and EOIs: Greteltaylor@gmail.com or shaun.mcleod@deakin.edu.au

Figure 4: The artists callout.

This call for Expressions of Interest resulted in a significant and pleasing response from our target community, but before developing this chapter of the *DBTW* story, it is appropriate to pause in order to further consider the methodology and approach for the *DBTW* project.

Methodology and Approach to Data Set Analysis for the *Dancing Between Two Worlds* Project

At the most general level, the *DBTW*'s methodology is artform practice-based and almost exclusively qualitative. Within the broader category of qualitative methodology, we worked mainly with a Practice-Led Research (PLR) approach.

Research linked to creative-arts practice is not yet as well established in the university research ecology as other methodologies, and to this extent the definition of PLR, as well as its relationship (or lack thereof) to allied methodologies, is yet to be fully pinned down. Writing in 2007, Brad Haseman refers to how PLR is caught up in what he calls “methodological churn” (4). Within this so-called ‘methodological churn’, we suggest, there is a significant cross-fertilization between, and overlapping of, PLR and its inverse: Research-Led Practice (RLP). This is no bad thing. Research may well be led by practice within PLR, but it would be foolish and dogmatic to hold to the position that practice, within PLR, is not substantially if not equally well informed by research. Within both PLR and RLP, practice and research circulate promiscuously. One might say that PLR and RLP do not represent distinctly different methodologies within the broader ambit of the research-creative-arts practice constellation. Rather, the existence of both PLR and RLP in the discourse of research fundamentally underscores the two-way movement of research and practice within the research-creative-arts practice constellation. PLR and RLP might be glossed as tendencies or opportunities of practice and research within their ongoing churn.

All this said, we employ the term PLR for *DBTW* because the research is, at this stage of the project's life at least, very clearly being led by the practice. This is evident even in the call out to Wyndham-based artists of Indian origin, as copied above. This piece contains a series of loosely associated questions—fully six of them—rather than what one might expect in a RLP project, not to mention in any project lodged within a more conventional or traditional qualitative or quantitative methodology. A single, tightly expressed research question is a marked absence. Haseman has something to offer on this too: 'many practice-led researchers do not commence a research project with a sense of "a problem" that has to be answered. [...] Many are led by what is best described as "an enthusiasm of practice": something that is exciting, something that may be unruly, unmanageable or mysterious' (5). In a sense, the six call-out questions stood in, and continue to stand in to some extent, for the single, more formal research question still in development.

Thus, the *DBTW* project currently lacks a conventionally or traditionally constructed research question as such, but that does not mean one is never going to emerge. One of this article's authors, Patrick, in his article 'Practice-Led Research: Wandering from "Nhill" to "Nil" to "36.3328°S, 141.6503°E"' notes that: 'To the extent that the creative arts does not operate along a linear question-answer continuum, questions and answers dance with each other, for a while, before resolving into a more conventional research shape.' In a similar vein, Graeme Sullivan observes that PLR reverses the traditional ordering of the methodological research question and answer, to the extent that it travels from the 'unknown to the known,' through which 'imaginative leaps are made into what we don't know,' which leads to 'critical insights that can change what we do know' (48).

We anticipate the ultimate development of a research question, achieved through the specific means of creative-arts practice, that will have tucked away within it the answer to that question by virtue of its (the research question's) built-in richness and complexity. We further anticipate that, given the long-term nature of *DBTW*, this cycle will repeat, as new iterations of the project suggest new calls and response of question and answer.

The social justice aspect of PLR is another element of the *DBTW* methodology we want to highlight. Wyndham experiences high levels of socio-economic disadvantage: ‘There are concerning indicators that some of the Wyndham population is not fairing [sic] well socio-economically; unemployment is higher than Greater Melbourne and Victoria and there are high levels of rental evictions and mortgage delinquency, and [sic] as well as growing levels of family violence’ (Wyndham City 2). The Indian community is, however, among the most successful diasporic group in Australia, and many of the artists in *DBTW* came to Australia for postgraduate study and are from high socio-economic situations. Their concerns were more about the dearth of opportunities to practice their arts and to connect with other artists in the area. In any event, *DBTW* allies itself with the definition of PLR advanced by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, which places a high premium on the social justice value of PLR, and how it privileges the interests of marginal political, historical and social actors: ‘An innovative dimension of this subjective approach to research lies in its capacity to bring into view, particularities that reflect new social and other realities either marginalized or not yet recognized in established social practices and discourses’ (4). By visually activating public sites with the cultural arts of a marginalized group, we aimed to give positive and nuanced presence to this group (Taylor 2017).



Figure 5: *Dancing Between 2 Worlds* in Watton Street, Werribee (Artist: Joshinder Kaur Chaggar, photo credit: Laki Sideris).

The artforms with the greatest presence in *DBTW* are dance and music, with additional representation of film-making, screen arts, creative writing, installation art and public art. We welcome the multi-artform and/or interdisciplinary labels. In this sense, *DBTW* is indebted, technically speaking, to a multi-method methodology. As membership of the group grows and fluctuates the constellation of its artforms will change too. We welcome this also. To draw Haseman's notion of 'methodological churn' across to a related space of practice and thinking, the 'artform churn' of our project can only accelerate and intensify its capacity, as PLR, to generate a string of research questions—and ultimately a string of research answers—framed by the thematic preoccupations of our ever-evolving group (4). Furthermore, and very significantly, our Indian community (non-Deakin) collaborators for our first major project—*Dancing Between 2 Worlds*—added further artform-specific practices to the pre-existing mix of artforms represented by the Deakin members of *DBTW*. The near identity of the name of the overall project—*Dancing Between Two Worlds*—with the performance project

name—*Dancing Between 2 Worlds*—underscores just how much *DBTW* is fundamentally a project rather than a group. We will return to this point shortly.

Five semi-structured interviews with members of this local Indian community cohort gave them a voice to supplement their performance contribution to *Dancing Between 2 Worlds*. These interviews have proven to be an incredibly rich data set, and in this article we will only scratch the surface of their potential for shedding light on the developing themes of *DBTW*. The present article is designed to provide the foundation for subsequent, more thematically focused research and associated publication outcomes.

Interviewees were asked questions from this list, which we created under three sub-headings:

1.) Background

What part of India are you from and when did you come to Australia?

Why did you move here?

2.) Art

What sort of art do you do / did you do?

How has your practice of art changed here in Australia?

How did you find the artistic exchanges?

What were some new experiences or ideas that arose for you from this project?

Was there anything that arose that you might explore further beyond the project in your own art or life?

3.) Identity & Citizenship

Do you have a sense that there is such thing as being Indian-Australian? If so, what is it like?

What do you miss about India?

What do you bring with you from India, to overlay or merge with this new place?

What challenges have you faced gaining acceptance or being heard as a new citizen?

How do you feel you can contribute to, and how might you imagine, Australia's future?

As with the six call-out questions, these interview questions, to some extent, occupy the place of the currently absent, single, formal research question. Not all questions were necessarily used in every interview, depending on time factors, the direction of the interview, and other such circumstances. Many of the questions asked were generated on the spot, for one-time-only use, in response to the responses of the interviewees. Thematic coding of the interviews will commence at a later stage of our project, when we plan to use the NVivo qualitative analysis software package for coding purposes. In this, we will be following in the footsteps of the data-analysis approach employed by the *Flows & Catchments* group. NVivo is useful, in particular, for gathering together, and making sense of, different *forms* of data (Warren and West).

Dancing Between 2 Worlds: Creative Exchanges, Interviews, and First Performance

DBTW's first major project—*Dancing Between 2 Worlds*—took place in November 2019 at downtown Werribee in Wyndham. The performance was the culmination of a series of so-called creative exchanges and, positioned between these and the performance, as noted above, were five semi-structured interviews with some of the Indian community members involved in the performance. The combination of the creative exchanges, interviews and the performance itself offers a multi-faceted mode of engagement with the central themes of this article—not to mention the developing themes of *DBTW* in general.

In this section, we will briefly describe the creative exchanges and the performance, concluding with a lightly curated list of extracts from the interviews with local Indian artists related to our project's developing themes of civic belonging, cross-cultural artistic identity and the performance of Indian diaspora in outer suburban

Melbourne. The intention here is to let the voices of the interviewees infuse and give life to the thematic preoccupations of *DBTW*.

The creative exchanges were held across five Saturday afternoons during the period July to September 2018, at various community venues and other locations in the City of Wyndham LGA. Seventeen members of the local Indian community signed up: most self-identified as either dancers (almost 50% overall), musicians or theatre makers, while a few situated themselves in relationship to film or the visual arts. The first creative exchange involved a 'meet and greet', with many of the participants meeting each other for the first time, in person at least. An initial discussion of the project was followed by a Welcome to Country and short walk along the Werribee River led by Indigenous leader, and Bunurong elder, Aunty Fay Stewart-Muir. Aunty Fay contributed a great deal to the atmosphere of that first meeting. It was observed by the participants that respect for elders is as important in Indian culture as it is in Australian Indigenous culture (This Indigenous underpinning of our place-based performance-making was later followed through by Anindita's Acknowledgement of Country in her *DBTW* performance, which included a participatory ritual element). The next four creative exchanges included a screen-dance (movement and video) workshop, a creative-writing storytelling workshop, a sound and music workshop, and lastly, a site-focused movement workshop. These final four creative exchanges were all led by members of the *DBTW* group, with occasional involvement from invited guest artists, such as composer Myfanwy Hunter (Min), who led the penultimate gathering (the sound and music workshop).



Figure 6: Screen-dance (movement and video) workshop (artist: Janani Venkatachalam, photo credit: Dianne Reid).

There were four evening performances of *Dancing Between 2 Worlds* across one weekend in late 2019. Each performance lasted approximately 45 minutes. Audiences were guided on a brief walk through Werribee: the first half of the performance took place alongside a short stretch of the Werribee River and the second half comprised a stroll down Watton Street. The seven local Indian artists involved, all of whom had responded to the initial Expression of Interest communication, were Madhuri Vasa (and her son), Janani Venkatachalam, Zankhna Bhatt, Writabrata Banerjee, Nayana Panchal, Joshinder Chaggar and Divya Jayam (these were all named as ‘Local artists’ in the programme). Deakin-affiliated members of *DBTW* were credited in the programme as follows: Shaun McLeod and Gretel Taylor as the ‘Directors/Curators’, Anindita Banerjee as the ‘Installation artist’, and Dianne Reid as ‘Screen-dance artist’. Bringing together diverse contemporary and traditional Indian arts, the genre of these works included folk dances, performance art, screen-dance, installation art, tabla drumming and classical singing.

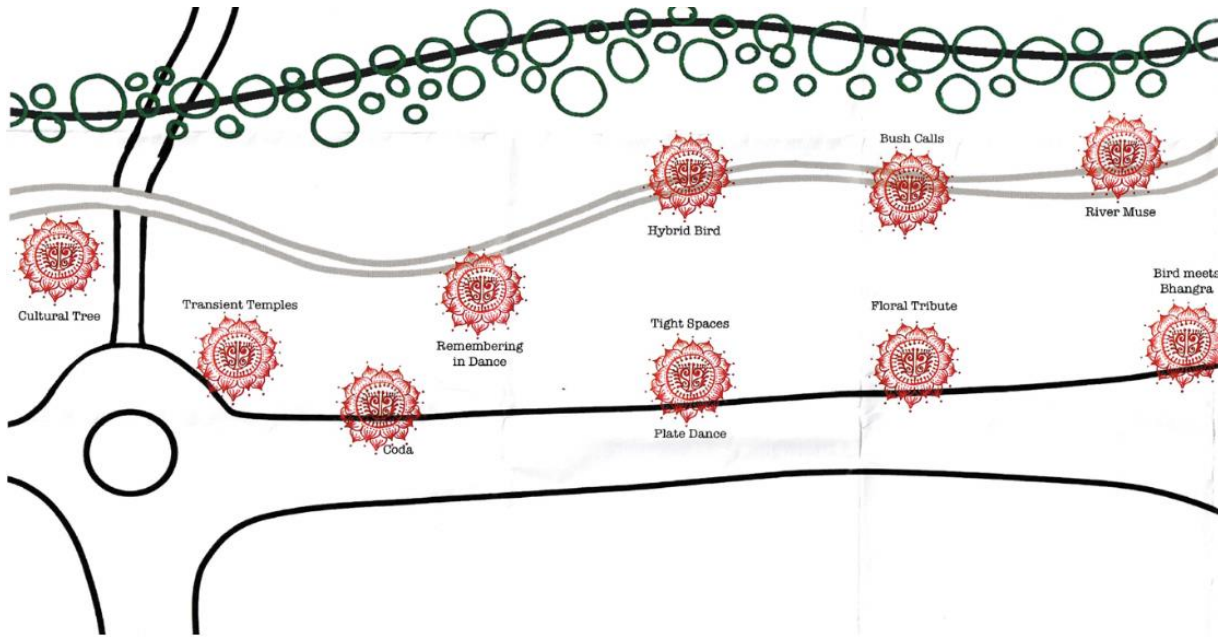


Figure 7: Dancing Between 2 Worlds programme of events.



Figure 8: *Dancing Between 2 Worlds* in Watton Street, Werribee (artists from the front: Shweta Pandya, Pushpa Vanere Manwaktar and Naveen Kumar Kasa, photo credit: Laki Sideris).

The interviews brought out responses linked to the central interests of *DBTW*. Here is a preliminary taster of these responses, categorized according to some developing themes, and appended by some of our early-stage, thematic research observations:

1.) Civic Belonging

‘So, I will tell you, for every, single Indian who is born in India, every single person feels you’re Indian-Australian... and there is a most important reason for that. The reason is we live in Australia, we work in Australia, we think like Australian, our lifestyle is like Australian, but, still, the spiritual, religious, and cultural beliefs, and food taste, it’s all Indian, and it will always be. It will always be like that, because, any, and it’s not only regarding Indian. If you have got any other country’s person who is, whose roots... when I say roots, the hereditary roots, from their parents, whose roots are non-Australian, they will always be that country, and Australian.’ [Arati]

The question of civic belonging is clearly complicated by the dual allegiances, and consequent uncertainties, that many Indian-Australians feel when faced with a *choice* between Indian and Australian cultural values. One of the aspirations of the performance of *DBTW* was to foster an artistic dialogue—an openness to the differences in cultural value embedded in the processes of choreography and performance making. When making the performance, this dual allegiance emerged when considering decisions about the form, tradition or aesthetic convention of performance images, motifs and activities. In fact, this ‘tossing up’ between the different cultural possibilities was felt by all of us involved in the performance making. But for the Indian-Australian artists these decisions were complicated by a need on their part for what they were doing to be deemed as acceptable, or even sensational, to an audience that included ‘established’ Australians. They wanted their work to *belong*, and consequently any hint of ‘strangeness’ was to be avoided. This raised the stakes for them when considering the less conventional framing of their work that site-specific performance facilitates. For the white Australians in the artistic team, an Indian musician playing tablas, placed in a Coles shopping trolley (see Figure 9), was a playful and ironic juxtaposition. For the

Indian musician it presented a complicated dilemma. Was this staging an affront to the traditions in which his music was steeped? Or was it merely odd? For the Indian artists, reading the cultural signals inherent in the shopping trolley image, was not straightforward. This challenge occurred in the opposite direction as well. One of the Indian musicians wanted to sing ‘Waltzing Matilda’ in Hindi (without any accompanying irony), a scenario that challenged the ‘Anglos’ in the group. This was seen as being too corny—too clichéd—to be acceptable in an art-conscious context. Yet the Indian musician saw this as a way for her to display the merging of her dual cultural allegiances.

2.) Cross-Cultural Artistic Identity

‘I think I miss the abundance of musicians, Indian musicians, if I needed them. Not Indian musicians, probably the wrong word, musicians with an expertise in playing an Indian instrument, is what I miss. So, I will still find them, but I’d probably find ten if I look for six months, right? Whereas, in India, I could just go to the third house, every third house and I’ll find a musician in there, ‘cause that was the culture, right? I do miss that, massively... yeah, it takes a lot more effort to collaborate here with artists with expertise in playing Indian instruments than it did back there. But that’s expected, right?... it’s such a specific style of music, it’s hard... to find everywhere. But, music is music, I guess.’ [Bana]

Interviews with participating artists revealed that, for many of them, practising (performing and/or teaching) their Indian art in Australia not only maintains, but actually enhances, their sense of cultural identity, intensifying their feelings of belonging and the responsibilities and attachments of citizenship, to *both* India and Australia. Through their practice of their cultural artform they were constantly reinforcing the strength of their ties to India—maintaining that sense of place identity; yet sharing it with people in Australia was their way of becoming present, of etching a place for themselves, here, with the accompanying satisfaction of being valued, here, as having something unusual and of significance to offer. Madhuri recalls:

‘... when I came to Wyndham when I read my first performance, not many people know about this art form at all. So when they heard, they really liked it and they said we will definitely come every year to your concert, we will definitely support you. I was very much happy—the supporting aspect was that way is really good.’ [Madhuri]

Now, having run her classical Indian music school for fifteen years in the City of Wyndham LGA, witnessing the community that has developed around the school, and performing professionally at venues and events across Melbourne, Madhuri reflects how this has reinforced her sense of belonging here, and her sense of self-identity as an artist:

‘I’ve grown as a person yeah, that’s what I feel. As a personality. I had my own personality, okay as a person I might be good in some ways and I might not be good in one way, but the music has changed to my life.’ [Madhuri]

She recounted also how she continues to return to her mentors in India and intends to research some rare ancient compositions next time she visits, exhibiting a reflexive process of continual learning and integration of Indian knowledge into her Australian-based practice. Whilst this could also be simply an expression of artistic maturation, several of the interviewees claimed they had a more total and consolidated sense of self-identity, of being and becoming themselves, from teaching and performing in Australia than back in India. In this sense, the evolving mobile identities that these artists embody are borne, woven, enacted and perpetuated by their creative practice. Dancer and dance teacher Zannie explained that, after an unsettled first few years in Australia, she established her own dance school and is performing regularly now:

‘I’m back to what I was in my school and the uni life and... I’m back to that person that I was. Even more so because you made it happen here exactly by yourself.’ [Zannie]

There is also a strong sense of responsibility to authentically and rigorously pass on artistic and cultural knowledge to the next generations of Indian-Australian children:

‘To the kids, because kids here won’t have the exposure to their own... culture or the tradition that we learned.... So then when I do my Bollywood classes, I teach them all this Indian folk as well, so it’s just not that; it’s everything. I do elements of all these different variety of folkdances that come from India... When they come to my school and I what I do that parents really love is when I play a song or something. They play in Hindi the Bollywood song, we’re learning Hindi so then kids here, they don’t learn that language in school, they only know English, so then I explain them these words and meaning of the words so that’s how they can express themselves better when they do dance and when they perform. Yes, teaching is teaching them the culture and why they’re doing through all these words.’ [Zannie]

Similarly, Janani was considering setting up a dance school, motivated by her son’s grappling with his identity:

‘Our children growing up here don’t have same access to music and dance traditions as in India. Every second house there is a music teacher a dance teacher...

Educating our kids here about identity and culture — our kids really struggle — my son asks me ‘am I Indian or am I Australian?’ He’s struggling with his own identity.

It is important for us to give them that exposure so that they can form that identity for themselves.’ [Janani]

She also saw value in sharing her cultural form with Australians and other immigrants:

‘To me it’s not just about Indian dance is for Indians, I would love to open it up for anyone who wants to learn from other cultures. It’s all about learning from each other. It’s a nation of immigrants. Let’s learn from each other.’ [Janani]

And so, it continues. It will be interesting to observe second, third, fourth generation Indian-Australians and the rich artistic forms that they contribute to Australia's cultural landscape.

3.) The Performance of Indian Diaspora in Outer Suburban Melbourne

'It's community and growing up here and maybe my life started here. Only majority—that's what I feel. My life started here, why? Because my passions. Even though I did my music studies back home, I was always a student, but here I as a teacher, as a professional adult, you know, as a real adult I'm doing my own research and I'm getting a lot of information and I really worked hard in my passion. I think that's why I feel like I've grown up, yes both ways—back home in India, of course without learning this wouldn't have come into play.'

[Madhuri]

Finding a balance between 'here' and 'there' is like a life-skill that migrant artists (like Madhuri) develop unconsciously but definitively. This was a recurring discussion that Indian-Australian artists in *DBTW* got into during the workshops, the rehearsals and during the breaks even in the final performance. They fondly remembered how the part of their life that they spent in India gave them a cultural foundation that they built on through the experiences and opportunities they found in Australia. This blended construction often results in a unique outcome that underlines the very nature of a diaspora. And when, as the audience, we step out of the diaspora and look at these compositions, performances and/or artworks from the outside, one cannot help but question what the artist is really offering through her performance? Is she performing her Indian-ness as a spectacle to wow the White Australian audience (or the non-Indian-Australian audience)? Is this exercise her way of holding onto what she has lost by moving countries? Or, is this performance an emergence of an authentic melded Indian-Australian identity through making?

Represented here is only a tiny percentage of the material harvested from the interviews. Once coding is completed, a fuller engagement with this material will prove productive.

Conclusion: The *DBTW* Projection of Projects

The *DBTW* project has been active for over two years at the time of writing this article. It has been a project with a single main performance at its heart: *Dancing Between 2 Worlds*. We are currently scoping opportunities for further projects. We have begun investigating the possibility of creating a performance with Indian office workers in Melbourne's Central Business District, specifically in the Docklands precinct, which is both the site of another Deakin University location (Deakin Downtown Corporate Centre), and the point of landing in Melbourne for many immigrants, including Indians. This would be a new work spring-boarding conceptually and structurally from the Wyndham *DBTW* project, bringing visual presence to the other 'world' of many of Melbourne's Indian IT professionals: their rich cultural life and highly developed artistic skills, which we/they practice outside of corporate life. While *DBTW* is very much a place-based project, its attachment to place is sufficiently flexible to allow migration to different places in the footsteps of Indian communities.

As alluded to above, we are also considering our options, at this significant stage of our project's history, for formalizing our existence as a research group. Meanwhile, for the purposes of this particular article, we have consistently referred to *DBTW* as a project.

This distinction between project and group may seem pedantic—even trivial. Still, it speaks to the issue raised earlier in this article regarding what community engagement by a university like Deakin means, or should mean. *DBTW* sits within a tradition of community engagement by Deakin enterprises operating at the intersection of well-being, the creative arts, and place. Reflecting on this tradition brings out how Deakin's community engagement (or that of any university) is always already a relationship of (at least) two complex and constantly mutating (broader and more

delimited) communities. *DBTW*'s engagement with the local Indian community around Werribee is inevitably inflected by the influences operating upon it from such other enterprises as *Flows & Catchments* and *Treatment*.

Enterprises such as *DBTW* are always susceptible to the charge of parachuting themselves into their community of choice, with all the problems this brings, to do with the operations of knowledge as power. We have attempted to defuse this charge by very deliberately and slowly integrating ourselves with the local Indian community—and the community more generally—in and around Werribee. Much depends on the ability to listen and respond, rather than to colonize through understandings and actions imposed from outside... and as if from above. The wariness we expressed above around the term 'landscape' repays value in this context; an immersive relationship to place, such as dancers express (in contrast, say, to the stereotype of film-makers peering down their camera lenses) strongly resists the parachuting charge. Moreover, the constant tension of being *here* and *there* was a further driver of our immersive relation to place. The spatial tension between *here* and *there* transformed into a certain form of temporality of working. We found ourselves operating intuitively over a prolonged period of time with the community, rather than working in a rapid-fire fashion (as might be imposed by an outsider). This expenditure of time expressed our commitment to working with the grassroots Indian community.

Despite sincere efforts to situate ourselves within the community, *DBTW* has raised further questions about the dynamics of exchange in intercultural creative projects such as this. The learning curve we have encountered has been about how to enable an equality of creative exchange such that we, as artist/academics (most of whom live and work outside the area), do not wield dominance in this process. In this instance, it would be true to say that, although we did not control the artistic content, to an extent we did control the objectives and format of the performance. We decided upon the idea of a site-specific performance, and the route this took; we chose the placement of the dancing vignettes and made suggestions about how the artists might engage with the site. Our values and positions were evident in these choices. Even though these choices were often negotiated with the Indian artists, our roles as 'directors' gave our

perspective extra weight. This imbalance is a feature which we wish to address in a future iteration of this project in which the sometimes difficult conversations between White-Australian and Indian-Australian artists become the substance of the performance itself. Sticky, uncertain conversations about how aesthetic, cultural and ethical choices get made, and especially as they implicate a sense of place, will be the starting point for another site-specific dance and movement performance in which we attempt a more equitable procedural dynamic from which to generate the work.

Similarly, the decision to become a research group or not—as opposed to remaining an enterprise defined more directly by its engagement with, and movement between, an (ongoing) series of projects—has significant implications for the nature of *DBTW*'s engagement with the local Indian and broader community in the Wyndham LGA. Such issues have been written about before. Paul Carter, speaking with collaborator Charles Anderson, writes that

this willingness to allow a certain spaciousness in the image text collaboration allowed us to articulate our scepticism about art practices which, despite their vociferous critique of representational conventions and bourgeois taste, continue to narrate what they do in terms of one 'project' after another. In an article called 'Against Projects', we argued that the rhetoric of projects repressed the spaces and times in-between acts of making. It treated as nothing those times (and places) of waiting, idling and dissipation in which what was usually overlooked as formless began to take form. Creative research which, under the influence of gallery schedules, publication opportunities or commissioning criteria, packaged its process, abruptly truncating the flow of material thinking, bracketed off the environment of making. (47)

We welcome Carter's thesis of the importance of the places, spaces and times that lie between projects, while simultaneously rejecting his analysis of how the project-to-project discourse works—at least insofar as *DBTW* is concerned. *Our* 'rhetoric of projects' allows us to emphasize, and draw energies and inspiration from, the 'material thinking' that will come in-between the project completed so far and the ones to follow.

Becoming a group would, possibly, improve our visibility as a research enterprise inside and outside of Deakin, and may improve our opportunities for obtaining funding—again, possibly. However, it would, potentially at least, come at the cost of introducing a certain ‘landscaping’ distance from the local Indian community, and associated communities, with which *DBTW* seeks to work and engage.

Another way of thinking about Carter’s ‘material thinking’—involving ‘those times (and places) of waiting, idling and dissipation in which what was usually overlooked as formless began to take form’—might be to see them as opportunities for immersing ourselves within community (47). The times and places between projects are possibly the times and places of immersion. Far from allowing such immersion, what we would like to call, at least temporarily, the ‘rhetoric of groups’—especially of those groups inevitably formed within the research, managerial and administrative ecology of a university, like Deakin—might involve a retreat and distancing (a ‘landscaping’, as it were). We seek, in other words, a refreshed remit for Carter’s ‘rhetoric of projects’, which highlights, not underplays, the ‘material thinking’ of PLR. By extension, by staying as it is, *DBTW* may remain an evolving community—one excitingly, responsively and mercurially in immersive contact with the Indian community it seeks to work with and research in an ongoing fashion. It is likely, we think, that we will decide *not* to become an officially defined Deakin research group.

The focus of this article has been the learning curve at Deakin University that indexes the development of its approach to community in place. *DBTW* is the latest in a series of Deakin enterprises seeking to work with community in place. By projecting ourselves into the future as an enterprise of projects (not a group), we hope to create a strong and enduring (immersive) ethics of engagement, which we see as essential to the production of academic scholarship about our developing thematic preoccupations: civic belonging, cross-cultural artistic identity, and the performance of Indian diaspora in outer suburban Melbourne. The present article sets the scene for further *DBTW* publications with a more thematic focus.



Figure 9: *Dancing Between 2 Worlds* in Watton Street, Werribee (artist: Bana, photo credit: Laki Sideris).

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