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He Puts Out His Hand. You Put Out Your Hand.
Emerging, Urban, Aboriginal Theatre-Makers.
What Does it Take to Emerge?

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A Thesis submitted to the University of Sydney in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for admission into the degree of Masters of Arts
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Abstract

The largest percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia live in Sydney. Despite this large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, there is very little recorded evidence of a prominent artistic presence of Aboriginal theatre-makers who are creating new, contemporary expressions of urban culture. From 2007-2011, PACT centre for emerging artists (PACT) created a series of Aboriginal-specific opportunities and programs for emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers who were interested in experimenting in new methods of creation and exploring their urban, lived experience. These opportunities generated a small, critical mass of Aboriginal theatre-makers. The program was in many aspects successful, however it also faced various challenges and misunderstandings.

When one of the participating artists, Björn Stewart, presented a new performance work that expressed confusion, dislike and a sense of manipulation in the opportunities he was being offered as an artist by various organisations, it highlighted that perhaps the opportunities being offered to these theatre-makers were not what was perceived as being needed, and that there are varying motivations, agendas and expectations behind such opportunities by those providing them.

This study identifies three key stakeholders who contribute to different points of the development of opportunities and new Aboriginal works: the funding body, the arts organisation and the artists. Using PACT's Aboriginal-specific opportunities as a case study, this research set out to discover: (i) if current opportunities being offered to urban, emerging, Aboriginal theatre-makers are effective; (ii) what are the stakeholders' perceptions about what is required; and most importantly, (iii) do these perceptions align with each other, and if not, what is the impact on Sydney, urban, emerging Aboriginal theatre-makers?

To date, there has been no record of emerging, urban, theatre-makers having been consulted or given the opportunity to voice what they believe an emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-maker requires to "emerge". This study begins that record.

Acknowledgement of Country

I would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional owners of the land we are on, the Cadigal people of the Eora Nation of the Sydney Basin. I express my sorrow at the legacy we have inherited together. That my ancestors played a role – however large or small – that has led to the pain and loss of so much of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and rights, is a responsibility I choose to acknowledge and hope to help to heal in some small way through this research.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

With his left hand placed in his pocket, he gives no indication of his Aboriginal heritage – he seems intent on visually confirming he is a city boy. Lowering his eyes, he glances absently at his shoes and the powder that surrounds him. Whispering into the microphone he hisses: “puts out his hand”. His arm stiffens and moves as if against his will. His palm is open. He again laughs breathily into the microphone and says in a slightly louder voice, which becomes more and more demanding in tone. “He puts out his hand. You put out your hand”. He gazes directly at us, challenging us almost. “You see, I don't want to use it. I don't want to use my card. I don't want to play the card. I don't want to play the racial card”. He pauses, long enough for it to feel uncomfortable. He then abruptly states, “I am owned. I am owned. I am owned by this land. I am owned by the government”. Placing his hand casually back into his left jeans pocket he continues, “I am owned by God.” Singing softly the audience hears his rendition of the infamous Australian song “I Am Australian. I am Australian.” He stops singing. “Sorry. Sorry. I said I'm sorry.”

Björn Stewart.¹

1.1: Aims and Significance

The largest percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia live in Sydney.² Despite this large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, there is very little recorded evidence that there is a prominent artistic presence from Aboriginal theatre-makers who are creating new, contemporary works. There are, of course, various scripted works being presented occasionally by some of the larger theatre organisations in Sydney, however, the more experimental, interdisciplinary works by practitioners such as Aboriginal theatre-makers exploring a new era of Aboriginality within an urban environment is mostly unseen. In fact, there is a distinct lack of a critical mass of emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers. As illustrated by Björn Stewart's (an urban, emerging, Aboriginal theatre-maker) work, there is conflict and confusion about what is needed to generate a critical mass of

¹ Excerpt of performance by theatre-maker Björn Stewart as part of *Incubate* (2009) at PACT centre for emerging artists

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) “Population Distribution, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006”. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Accessed 15/08/12. Available From: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/b06660592430724fca2568b5007b8619/14e7a4a075d53a6c2569450007e46c!OpenDocument>.

skilled, emerging Aboriginal theatre-makers who engage with contemporary issues and ideas. This study asks: what exactly is needed in order for an urban, emerging, Aboriginal theatre-maker to successfully “emerge”?

To answer this, I have engaged three key groups of stakeholders in Sydney to describe their perspectives of Aboriginal-specific opportunities and how these facilitate emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers. I chose stakeholders that contribute to different points of the development of new artistic works, including a funding body, an arts organisation and a series of artists. The stakeholders engaged in this study are: The Australia Council for the Arts (OzCo) (The Funding Body), PACT centre for emerging artists (PACT) (The Arts Organisation), and four artists who participated in PACT’s Aboriginal-specific opportunities and programs (The Artists).

Here, I will briefly outline what is meant by “emerging artist” in this context. The term “emerging artist” has become a rather convenient term for policy, industry and funding bodies to compartmentalise a group of artists. The term, as defined by OzCo, describes an artist within the first five years of their practice, or under 30 years of age. This idiom divides artists by age and experience. Interestingly, this type of compartmentalisation is something that the Aboriginal artists interviewed were often attempting to avoid, as is discussed more in Chapter Six. However, as Australia attempted to reinvigorate and support the next generation of creators, as discussed in Chapter Five, being an emerging artists had its swag of benefits such as extra funding, more accessible opportunities, and more arts organisations providing opportunities for this specific group. Identifying with this group also provided a certain room for creative failure and therefore these particular artists could create in a safe environment. Conversely, as is the nature of all labels, being an emerging artist also carries with it associated characteristics such as being a beginner, requiring help and assistance, and having only minimal experience and exposure in their field. As will be seen later, several of the artists interviewed had been involved in, and surrounded by, various arts practices since early childhood. However, as they fitted the emerging artist category they were seen to be (whether desired to be or not) at the

beginning of their career and that they needed to, as Kate Beckett describes in her interview “earn their stripes” before they could be considered legitimate creators.

Using the term “emerging artist” also requires one to question what is meant by “emergence”. The concept comes from the Latin term *emergo*, which means to arise, to come up, to come forth, to occur; “I emerge”. Over the last thirty years there has been a strong movement in philosophy and science to interrogate this concept. Pier Luigi Luisi describes this movement as a reflection of a new belief that instead of interrogating isolated components of a subject, idea or cause and effect system, that these compartmentalised areas are actually linked and integral to each other. He explains, “It is a switch caused by the evidence that the study of isolated fragments is no longer satisfactory, due to the fact that these fragments are actually linked to one another and are generally strongly affected by their interaction. Think of climate change, pollution, or simply of cellular life—these are things that cannot be understood in terms of one or more single components”.³

Unfortunately, this study does not have the capacity to interrogate the experiences of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait artists. So here, the term is used to identify a specific group of artists who have been targeted by OzCo and provided opportunities due to this targeting. Emerging, in this study, describes the passage of coming from a safe place of support, skills development and learning, into an established practice with the tools and networks to establish a sustainable career within the arts industry. This is the outcome that defined success for me for these artists in this study. Though this idea of success was quite different amongst the various stakeholders, (OzCo deemed success for emerging artists to be seen as providing opportunities and funds for the next generation of Aboriginal creators, the artists saw it as having creative control, receiving respect as a creator and not just an Aboriginal participant and having the ability to establish a sustainable career, and PACT saw it as generating a hub of Aboriginal theatre-makers working in alternative practices and producing new, experimental performance work), all parties did wish

³ Bersini, Hugues; Stano, Pasquale; Luisi, Pier Luigi; Bedau, Mark A. (2012) . “Philosophical and Scientific Perspectives on Emergence” in *Synthese*. Volume 185, Issue 2, p. 168

for the artists to “emerge” and succeed. The following programs demonstrate how these three stakeholders intersected in order to attempt to achieve this.

PACT centre for emerging artists (PACT) in Sydney is the only arts organisation in Australia working exclusively with emerging artists.⁴ From 2007-2011 it provided a range of opportunities for a small group of Aboriginal theatre-makers, many of whom have since gone on to forge careers within the Sydney arts industry. This program faced several difficulties and obstacles along with its successes and these vicissitudes provide the primary focus of this research. Using PACT’s Aboriginal-specific opportunities (2007-2011) as a case study, the aim of this research is to discover: (i) if current opportunities being offered are effective; (ii) what are the stakeholders’ perceptions about what is required; and most importantly, (iii) do these perceptions align with each other, and if not, what is the impact on Sydney, urban, emerging Aboriginal theatre-makers? What measures could be considered to ensure there is a new, contemporary Aboriginal voice, identity and place in the Australian cultural landscape now, and in the future?

The performance described above was written and performed by emerging Aboriginal theatre-maker Björn Stewart through *Incubate* (2009), an Aboriginal-specific program being offered by PACT. PACT’s range of opportunities provided theatre-makers a creative avenue for those who were in some respects disconnected from, or not particularly interested in creating performances through a “traditional”⁵ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander framework. The programs on offer from 2007-2011⁶ were:

1. *StepUp* (2007)

⁴ There are various arts organisations throughout Sydney and its regions that provide opportunities for emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait artists such as The Performance Space (www.performancespace.com.au) and Urban Theatre Project (www.urbantheatreproject.com.au). Due to the limited scope of this study, PACT was selected as a focal point as it works exclusively with emerging artists.

⁵ Syron (*DA Thesis*, 2012) argues that “traditional” is quite often used to refer to cultural practices that pre-date colonisation (p. 20). This term is complex and practices aren’t necessarily restricted to a frozen past, but can be living, evolving and contemporary interpretations. However, applied here in this study by many of the participants, it does refer to pre-colonial forms of cultural expression.

⁶ Details of these programs can be found on the PACT website www.pact.net.au

A six-week residency program for four interdisciplinary and emerging Aboriginal artists. *StepUp* was an opportunity to develop skills and the foundations of a work with a professional mentor (20 hours of mentor time). The program culminated in a three-night public showing for an invited audience. **Participants:** Katherine (Kate) Beckett, Issac Parsons, Matthew Shields, Björn Stewart. **Mentors:** Kyas Sherriff, Lisa Duff, Wesley Enoch and Kirk Page

2. *StepUp* (2008)

A four-week residency program for interdisciplinary and emerging Aboriginal artists. *StepUp* was an opportunity to develop skills and the foundations of a work with a professional mentor (20 hours of mentor time). At the end of the residency the artists showed their work-in-progress to an invited audience. **Participants:** Katherine (Kate) Beckett, Naomi Bonney, Cecilia Geissler, Willurei Kirkbright, James Saunders, Nobuko Shimizu. **Mentors:** Henrietta Baird, Fred Copperwaite, Lisa Duff, Lachlan Philpott, Vicki van Hout, Graeme Watson, Support Artist Adrienne Semmens

3. *Incubate* (2009)

A three-week performance laboratory that consisted of three strands (although strand three did not take place): 1) a chance to be part of a small ensemble of performance makers to participate in a creative process facilitated by Wayne Blair. 2) a chance for independent artists to explore a performance idea, in residence for 4 weeks and spend 20 hours with a mentor. 3) students from local youth groups and schools participate in a workshop and get to know the artists through Q & A session. **Participants:** Sonny Dallas Law, Colin Kinchela, Katie Leslie, James Saunders, Matthew Shields, and Björn Stewart. **Facilitator:** Wayne Blair

4. Opportunities for Young Emerging Artists (OYEA)⁷ Commissioned New Work (2011)

A new contemporary work developed and performed by some of the artists who were part of *Incubate* (2009). Titled *Bully Beef Stew*, it was facilitated and directed by an established Aboriginal director and culminated in a professional season that is available for touring. **Participants:** Sonny Dallas Law, Colin Kinchela, Björn Stewart. **Director:** Andrea James

Björn's ironic apology in his *Incubate* (2009) performance was provocative. As the manager of PACT at the time, I was thrilled to be part of what I perceived as being an excellent opportunity for Aboriginal theatre-makers. I was perched enthusiastically on the edge of the uncomfortable wooden seating bank, surrounded by many members of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community – a community of which I do not identify as being a member. My history is White. I believe it is important for me to acknowledge from the outset of this study that I am an “outsider” to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. I do not have an intimate, lived understanding of an urban, Aboriginal experience. However, I do have an “insider” experience of working closely with the young artists who participated in this study as the manager of PACT during the development of these works, and as an arts practitioner myself. We shared some common ground.

Wedged together on the hard benches, I was one of the few White faces in the audience; it was interesting to be surrounded by members of local inner-city suburbs such as Redfern, Alexandria, and Newtown. Many of these audience members were experiencing for the first time a contemporary, creative expression of an urban, Aboriginal experience. The space was buzzing with energy and bursting with community support for the artists. It had taken years for this program to evolve into what the PACT artistic team believed was the right formula and the right opportunity for the artists. We believed this year we had finally achieved it. The artists had been recruited, attended scheduled sessions, experimented with contemporary practices that included new media, interdisciplinary approaches and devising processes, and

⁷ The Australian government committed \$6.6 million over four years (2008-2011) to stimulate opportunities for young and emerging artists. Opportunities for Young and Emerging Artists (OYEA) was a government-funded initiative, managed by OzCo.

had an outcome to perform to the community. Their commitment and approach to the program seemed positive and hopeful.

Five minutes into the evening's proceedings however, Björn's performance subverted my idealistic assumptions about the opportunity we were providing. Björn's words made me feel conflicted, uncomfortable, confused and curious. I realised that the opportunities we were providing had a different motivation and agenda to those of the artists who were participating. Surprisingly (and naively in hindsight), this was something that had never occurred to me before. More surprising was the realisation that perhaps what was being provided wasn't what was actually perceived as necessary by these theatre-makers. The Aboriginal-specific programs PACT has been offering over the years had increased in effectiveness and positive outcomes according to the standards we had created for ourselves, or that we had imposed upon us by our funding bodies. We had ticked all the boxes and could walk away from the year's program satisfied. However, Björn's work forced me to think differently.

1.2: Thesis Outline

This Chapter describes the motivations and aims for this research. In Chapter Two some historical background that primarily looks at the period from colonisation in 1788 to the present day is provided. Australia's history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural oppression throughout the years, and the movement from traditional to urban lifestyles are examined. This Chapter also introduces two prominent pieces of literature that have created the parameters for the study. Maryrose Casey's *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre* (2004) provides a comprehensive history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre in Australia, and its political and cultural frameworks of operation; Lee Lewis' essay *Cross-Racial Casting. Changing the Face of Australian Theatre* (2007) in contrast, attempts to institute re-casting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into established Eurocentric roles on mainstages as one possible solution to the absence of Aboriginal theatre in Sydney. I contend that the importance of more experimental theatre-making approaches in less prominent spaces has been more capable of establishing relevant

opportunities, but these organisations have been overlooked and under-resourced by funding bodies and the public.

Chapter Three provides insight into my qualitative methodological approach that has been informed by Grounded Theory. In Chapters Four, Five and Six I present the findings from the research with the three primary stakeholder groups included in this study. Chapter Four focuses on the perspective of the funding body (OzCo), and traces the history of funding and policy relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. It concludes by highlighting current policy in regards to the rights and opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural expression, and how this relates to the PACT opportunities and the artists themselves. Chapter Five is from the perspective of the arts organisation (PACT). It outlines the history of PACT, its development of the Aboriginal-specific opportunities, and the perspective of the artistic team who developed and executed the opportunities from 2007-2011. Chapter Six is from the perspective of four emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers who took part in the PACT opportunities. It reveals a range of conflicting perspectives (in comparison to the funding body and arts organisation) about the opportunities they are being offered, what they perceive as being needed for them to successfully engage in opportunities, and what is required for them to emerge in the Australian arts ecology.

In Chapter Seven these three perspectives are juxtaposed, beginning with highlighting the significance of this research; summarising the findings; and emphasising the misalignment of several perspectives amongst the stakeholders. Finally ways in which these findings can be used for further research in order to create opportunities that are relevant, accessible and successful are proposed. Such opportunities have the potential to generate a critical mass of emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers in Sydney for future cultural production and promotion of the urban, Aboriginal experience.

CHAPTER TWO

An Ancient Culture on the Periphery: How Did We Get Here?

In an interview with The Sydney Morning Herald,⁸ Aboriginal theatre director Andrea James (also the facilitator and director of *Bully Beef Stew* (2011)) claimed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories were not being told in theatres. She stated “theatre continued to be dominated by white, middle class men, with few works by indigenous writers being staged.” The dearth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance on Australian stages is not surprising when Australia’s history since colonisation is considered. Hundreds of years of oppression and silencing affected the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in myriad of ways, the effects of which continue to infiltrate every aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life. To better understand how this ancient culture was thrust to the periphery of Australian culture and society, the social, political and artistic history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders since the landing of the First Fleet in 1788 is briefly detailed below.

Today, Australia boasts of being home to the oldest continuous living culture; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture was established perhaps as long ago as 70,000 years.⁹ The arts and culture for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inhabitants are not just an extra curricular activity or an industry to be tapped, but a concept and a practice that is thoroughly enmeshed into every aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life.¹⁰ Many ancient practices are now recognised globally, from exquisite dot paintings depicting images from the “The Dreaming”¹¹ to the reverberating sounds of a didgeridoo, to the traditional performance of coroborrees.

⁸ Taylor, A. (2013). “Indigenous Stories Not Being Told in Theatres”. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 28. Accessed January 28, 2013. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/indigenous-stories-not-being-told-in-theatres-20130127-2det6.html>

⁹ Rasmussen, M. *et al.* (2011). “An Aboriginal Australian Genome Reveals Separate Human Dispersals into Asia”. *Science*, 2011, 334, pp. 94-98

¹⁰ Albert and Anderson in Bourke, E. (1998). *Aboriginal Australia: an Introductory Reader in Aboriginal Studies*, 2nd Ed., St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, p. 202

¹¹ This concept is known under a variety of different names throughout different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations. The Dreaming is a mythical-based series of stories and references that connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the spiritual realm. This realm sits outside time as we understand it and provides a way to understand and give meaning to life around us.

This ancient, vibrant culture has since colonisation in 1788, nevertheless been unrelentingly thrust to the peripheries of Australian culture and society.

This peripheral existence evolved through an implementation of discriminatory policy and public perception that has become so socially ingrained that even now, there is racism, cultural ignorance and disadvantage present throughout the country. As cultural economist David Throsby succinctly claims, “we recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians as amongst the most disadvantaged in our society, yet we continue to show cultural insensitivity in trying to remedy the situation.”¹²

Whilst the Australian colony was establishing itself, generating laws and precedent drawn from the English common law traditions that increased White rights and freedoms, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was slowly losing theirs. Policies were focused on control beginning with the various Protection Acts, the first being ratified in Victoria in 1869. The Protection Acts gave extensive powers to Protection Boards, which established themselves throughout Australia and had ultimate control over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives. This power enabled the colonialist regime to regulate everything in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including place of residence, employment, and even marriage. These policies gave the authorities the right to forcibly remove Aboriginal children from their families; these children are now referred to as the “Stolen Generation”. It is only recently that victims of policies such as these mentioned, are receiving appropriate recognition and apologies for the adverse affects of oppressive policies. One highly publicised example of this was the 2008 national apology by the Australian Government and Parliament to the Stolen Generation, delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd:

It is time to reconcile. It is time to recognise the injustices of the past. It is time to say sorry. It is time to move forward together. To the stolen generations, I say the following: as Prime Minister of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the government of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the parliament of Australia, I am sorry. I offer you this apology

¹² Throsby, D. (2006). “Does Australia Need a Cultural Policy?”. *Platform Papers. Quarterly Essays on the Performing Arts* No.7, Sydney: Currency House Inc., p. 46

*without qualification.*¹³

This apology, amongst many things, did finally and publically recognise the real experience of being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander for over 200 years; Aboriginal people were forced to suffer disparagement, segregation, and oppression under early colonial policies. These policies progressed and changed throughout the years, however they remained restrictive and culturally insensitive on the whole. The adoption of assimilation in 1937 as the official national policy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs highlighted the desire for the “black problem” to simply (and quite literally) disappear. The primary aim of this policy was to control the reproduction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and for them to be ultimately absorbed into the very culture that had been oppressing and destroying them for years.

The 1970s brought recognition of the need and the right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to re-claim their own culture, and establish their own institutions and policies through self-determination. Though a more tolerant policy, the groundwork from previous policies had been firmly set; there are today various Aboriginal organisations, peak bodies and boards who exercise a degree of self-determination, yet it is usually within the Eurocentric frameworks set up by the dominant paradigm which has existed in Australia since 1788.

Despite these oppressive policies, many of the early settlers and modern politicians alike have found it is not easy to ignore a vibrant, ancient culture. As the national apology to the Stolen Generation and responses to it hopefully indicate, this has the potential to be an era of reconciliation and respect for the ancient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions, as well as encouraging new, contemporary expressions of culture. Notwithstanding the oppression of a White colonial regime, the resilience of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is apparent.

¹³ Rudd, K. (2008). “Speech by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to the Parliament”. Australian Government. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2008) Accessed 15/8/12. Available from http://www.dfat.gov.au/indigenous/apology-to-stolen-generations/rudd_speech.html.

Through many more recent initiatives both private and public, Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have begun to reclaim, preserve and promote their traditional cultural heritage.

2.1: Definition of Terms: "Aboriginal" and "Theatre-Maker"

There are two significant terms that are being used throughout this study: "Aboriginal", and "theatre-maker". The following discussion outlines how these terms will be used.

2.1.1: "Aboriginal"

What exactly is meant by the term Aboriginal? Indigenous, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, First Nations, First Peoples: these are all terms used to describe some, and sometimes all, of the original inhabitants of the land now known as Australia. These terms of description and reference are all heavily loaded with historical meanings, ongoing disagreements and future hopes about their use. They are also sometimes deeply contested. As someone who does not identify as a descendent of the original inhabitants of this land, I believe I have no right or claim to determine what is the right language to use. So I will defer to here to Liza-Mare Syron, a well-respected Aboriginal academic who has worked closely with several of the artists involved in this study, and her excellent description of her choice of terms in her thesis *Actor-Training in Australia and the Indigenous Student Experience: Traversing Cultural and Pedagogical Domains*.¹⁴

Syron explains that the term Indigenous is usually applied by various groups as a generic term for all first inhabitants around the globe, and is not appropriate to describe the diverse cultural, linguistic and historical experience of all Indigenous peoples. She writes:

The term does not take into consideration specific or significant differences in social, cultural and linguistic customs among various

¹⁴ Syron, L.-M. (2012).

*Indigenous groups of the world, nor, in the local Australian context, does it prompt consideration of any variations within and across 16 different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups.*¹⁵

Syron instead prefers the use of the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as a way to term the experience of the first peoples collectively throughout Australia and its islands. Torres Strait Islanders often do not identify specifically as an Aboriginal, which usually refers to mainland Australian and Tasmanian Indigenous peoples.

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples has also arrived at the same conclusion as Syron. In December 2011, the Board of Directors agreed that the generic term "indigenous" was unsuitable, and recommended instead to promote the use of "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples". The Board resolved:

*to promote the use of terms that better represent our peoples and reflect what are used by our mobs. In 2012 Congress will start a campaign to encourage Government and the Australian community to refer to our peoples as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and not use the generic and clinical term 'indigenous'.*¹⁶

I will, therefore, use the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. However, as the majority of my study does not include participants from the Torres Strait Islands, I will often use the term Aboriginal. This will refer to those participants and the community that identifies as being a descendent from the original inhabitants of mainland Australia (but not the Torres Strait Islands), and are so recognised by the Aboriginal community. It should be noted that these terms are not definitive and will perhaps evolve and change over time as Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community continues to emerge from the history and inheritance of colonisation and its imposed terminology.

The term Aboriginal, however, doesn't capture the diverse range of

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁶ National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (2012). "National Board Communiqué. Meeting No.4 Adelaide, December 2012". Accessed 15/5/12. Available from: <http://nationalcongress.com.au/wpcontent/uploads/2011/12/NationalBoardCommuniqueDec2011.pdf>.

experiences, cultures or sense of identity and place that occurs within Aboriginal communities. Historical and popular imagery often associates being Aboriginal with being “aboriginal”, that is, a “native” in the bush, living a traditional lifestyle, separate from urbanised centres. This is not always the case and many urban, Aboriginal artists are looking for new stories and new ways to communicate their modern, urban experience. It is my belief that theatre-making processes are one way to achieve this.

2.1.2 “Theatre-Maker”

Theatre-making by its very nature is an unfixed term, indeed an unfixed practice, that is constantly in flux with the changing ideas of artists, arts organisations, funding bodies, audiences and the media. With such an ever-evolving term, it is difficult to clearly provide the exact parameters of this term, nor a clearly defined method of practice. Therefore, I begin by defining what it is not in the broadest terms: traditional modern theatre. Traditional modern theatre performance within this research refers specifically to inherited European processes of creating a piece of theatre that is focused on the performance of playscripts. This practice conventionally involves a playwright who develops a text; a director being appointed to determine the interpretation and presentation of the text; actors cast as the prescribed characters, who follow stage directions provided by the playwright and/or the director. They learn their lines, develop the characters and present these characters for a season of performance. Other practitioners are appointed for a range of specific tasks such as set and scenery, props, lighting, composition and musical direction. The end product takes place within a traditional theatre venue with audience sitting in the dark and the performance lit, with the actors reproducing their rehearsed work in the designated performance space.

Australia has a wonderful and vibrant tradition of producing and consuming this type of theatre with it’s own, uniquely Australian, essence. However, it does not appeal to some and many contemporary theatre-makers view this model of creation as restrictive, and not an artistic reflection of contemporary existence but instead a method of reinforcing old narratives and perceptions of the world held by European

colonisers. Reflecting this opinion is academic Baz Kershaw, who states that “theatre is a 'disciplinary system' and 'system of cultural production' that encourages audiences' passive acceptance of the status quo”.¹⁷

Though what I call theatre-making draws on these traditions, practitioners in this study also attempt to challenge this “status quo” of cultural production and reception, drawing on post-modern ideas of ways art and culture could be produced within more flexible framework. Jon Whitmore gives an explanation of such methods:

*theatre artists have concluded that the spoken word does not always need to be the central force of a performance. They may use playscripts, new and old, as a place to begin a production, but they do not feel compelled to treat the playscript as a sacred altar to be devoutly worshipped. Instead, these artists are deconstructing playscripts in order to speak more directly to the contemporary audience; or they are finding highly innovative ways of presenting unaltered scripts in altered environments, styles, and aesthetic contexts; or they are working with playwrights or performers to develop scripts through the rehearsal process, rather than the other way around. Some theater artists are ignoring playscripts altogether; they are developing performances through experimentation with objects, visual images, soundscapes, improvisation, or bits and pieces of disjointed language or information.*¹⁸

In short, theatre-makers draw strongly on the collaborative and multidisciplinary components of post-modern theories for creation; shifting and challenging the rigid framework of theatre production historically inherited from classical and modern European theatre traditions.

Whitmore describes a process of ignoring playscripts altogether and generating a new type of performance through various interdisciplinary methods. This process is often referred to as devising and provides a loose framework for those wishing to break down traditional theatre boundaries. Heddon and Milling describe devising as “a mode of work in which no script – neither playtext nor performance score – exists

¹⁷ Govan, E., Nicholson, H., and Normington, K. (2007). *Making a Performance. Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 7-8.

¹⁸ Whitmore, J. (1994). *Directing postmodern theater: shaping signification in performance*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, p. 1.

prior to the work's creation by the company".¹⁹ They go on to explain that it offers a way to create new theatre works, not in one restrictive model but through collaboration, blurring of roles and plural approaches.

Like many metropolises, Sydney has a tradition of experimental and contemporary performance practice. This emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. The movement was led by groups such as Entr'acte Theatre, All Out Ensemble and The Sydney Front, working in conjunction with organisations like the Performance Space.²⁰ These groups created using a range of disciplines and were creating works that were not dictated by text; they were responding to changes in how performance was perceived and created, engaging with more exploratory practices. Despite this legacy, there is a lack of Aboriginal-centred performance included in this heritage.

So why are these methods of creation important? The current popular Australian mainstage format over-identifies with one group within the community; that is, white, middle class, middle-aged Australians, whilst alienating others – namely those who fit within minority groups. This applies to both producers and consumers of cultural content. New devising and collaborative creation processes are more inclusive, accessible and responsive; an opportunity for all involved in the process to envision and collaborate on a new Australian narrative and voice.

Theatre-making and devising processes also enable artists to step outside traditional theatre spaces. As the only requirements are what the collaborating artists themselves stipulate, it means venue, location, resources et cetera can be adjusted according to the resources available to the artists; therefore changing what is usually perceived as a range of restrictions into frameworks that can be utilised for more experimental performance outcomes. These more exploratory processes also open up space for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaboration. As Julian Meyrick points out in *Trapped by the Past* (2005), new creation processes have the potential to remove language barriers, be produced at low cost and provide niche marketing

¹⁹ Govan *et al.* (2007), p.6.

²⁰ Performance Space is an agency for interdisciplinary arts practices that produces and presents across a range of sites in Sydney, including its anchor venue, Carriageworks. Performance Space is supported by the Australian Government through OzCo.

opportunities, providing more opportunities, and less restrictions for artists who do not identify with mainstream Australia.²¹

Perhaps even more appealing than the above range of possibilities in theatre-making is the ability to have more creative control over every aspect of the theatre-making process. By its very nature: collaborative, multidisciplinary and experimental, it creates the possibility for the artists' vision, voice and artistic intention to be heard, and for their story to be presented exactly how they wish it to be. There is no inherited script to be re-enacted or other people's words to be spoken. In particular, it is not a White person's words being spoken using an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to re-create what a White person believes is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience.²²

It is my assertion that the practitioners in this study draw upon a range of approaches. Their work is often collaborative, blurs roles and traditional positions, often does not have an established script and is interdisciplinary. It also frequently attempts to question the status-quo. Therefore in this study I will refer to the participants as theatre-makers and their practice as theatre-making.

The artists who participated in this study all considered themselves to be open to working in mainstream theatre, but that their real interest, space for creative freedom and opportunities lay within theatre-making processes. They identified with the title of theatre-makers, amongst other titles such as performance-maker. For the purpose of this study, theatre-maker will refer to an artist who is using theatre-making and devising processes as described above. It is important to note that PACT as an organisation does not identify as a "theatre" space. Its agenda is to not create, produce or present any traditional modes of theatre performance, but to support experimental,

²¹ Meyrick, J. (2005). "Trapped by the Past. Why Our Theatre is Facing Paralysis". in Golder, D. J. (Ed.), *Platform Papers. Quarterly Essays on the Performing Arts*. no. 3 Sydney: Currency House Inc., p. 50.

²² This mode of working creates the *possibility* for more creative control and ownership. It is not always successful, as can be seen later in Chapter Four when discussing earlier collaborative projects between PACT and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. It can also be seen however, that PACT did attempt to change flaws in the collaboration by relinquishing creative control over earlier projects such as *Gathering Ground* to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, and by creating new programs that better reflected this potential for Aboriginal voices to be heard.

interdisciplinary, collaborative new performance-based works. Through this artistic direction and encouragement of inclusivity and experimentation for new forms of urban expression, PACT was able to provide a platform, voice and a place for emerging, urban Aboriginal theatre-makers.

But why do they need this? This next section will look at the lifestyle and culture of the emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers who have grown up within the Sydney urban environments.

2.2: The Modern Aboriginal Urban Tribe. Sitting Between a Black and White World

there's more to us as Indigenous people, especially the Indigenous people who have grown up in the city and don't know anything but city life, you know what I mean?

Kate Beckett

Pre-colonial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in Australia was incredibly diverse. Considering the significant cultural differences that exist between nations that are physically as close to each other as those in Europe gives a good indication of the cultural diversity that occurs across a large expanse of land such as Australia. A modern comparison of cultural diversity could also be made between an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander growing up in the bush with a more traditional lifestyle, and the very different experience of growing up in an urban environment, removed from many aspects of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

In the 2006 Census 517,200 people identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. This made up 2.5% of the Australian population. Of those, 31% lived within Australian cities.²³ If we include towns closely surrounding these cities, this figure increases to close to 75%.²⁴ Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel simultaneously connected to, and disconnected from, a place and acceptance within

²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2006) *Population Distribution, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*, Accessed 15/8/2012. Available from: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/b06660592430724fca2568b5007b8619/14e7a4a075d53a6cc2569450007e46c!OpenDocument>.

²⁴ Bourke, E. (1998), p. 214.

both the White mainstream as well as within a traditional Aboriginal culture. Theatre-maker Björn Stewart describes this sensation:

I didn't grow up in any [Aboriginal] communities. We were brought up kind of away from that. It wasn't like we disowned our heritage or anything. My Dad and my Mum told us everything about our family and about where we came from and the languages and went "that's all you need to know." I've spoken to my brothers and sisters and they all feel it. When talking to other black fellas, we don't quite feel connected or there's the same kind of vibe there. We grew up in the Northern Territory, so when we went up there, it was like we understood that way, and that sense of humour, that Murri style. But we still didn't quite fit in with that 'cause we grew up in NSW. It's like...[pauses, tilting his head, as though struggling to explain]...inside and outside. We can relate to them, but also at the same time we've grown up separated from that. So we can connect to it but we can also pull out of it as well.

Kate Beckett describes it feeling as though she doesn't neatly fit in to either the White or Black culture, "when I go out to the country to see her Dad [referring to the father of her daughter, Pepper], they don't think I'm Black enough, and that's fine. But when I'm in the city, sometimes I'm too Black".

The Aboriginal participants included in this study have all spent a significant amount (if not all) of their formative years based in urban environments, particularly in Sydney. They have all sat within, between, beside and amongst conflicting cultural worlds. Participants of this study revealed that they derived their sense of place and identity from a Westernised, inner-city environment that included a mainstream education, living within urban hubs, and socialising and creating within mixed-cultural situations. Kate Beckett explains that she was never exposed to a traditional understanding of what it was to be Aboriginal: "I've never really been exposed to it a lot. I've been more exposed to contemporary through my family and everything". Björn agrees, stating, "...we grew up quite urban. We understand culture and tradition but it's different". James Saunders also identifies with this difference but highlights that, though different, he is still Aboriginal: "it's almost like it's the evolution from the traditional to who we are now. Just 'cause you live in the city doesn't mean you're not Aboriginal. You still have culture but it's just different to what you find in the bush".

Part of this culture referred to by James is that many Sydney-based Aboriginal people have grown up, or been involved with, the highly politicised and urbanised space of Redfern. Redfern hosts a block of public housing purchased by the Aboriginal Housing Company (the first Australian housing collective, established in 1972-3) and is Aboriginal-managed property. It is popularly referred to as The Block. From the early 1920s, The Block became a meeting point for many Aboriginal people, including those who were migrating from rural areas into Sydney looking for employment. It is now a symbolic space for Sydney's Aboriginal community, their resilience and hopes for reconciliation. The Block is where several important advancements for Aboriginal people in Sydney began in the 1970s such as the Aboriginal Legal Service, the Aboriginal Medical Service, and the Aboriginal Children's Service. These organisations provided a model for self-determined services in other areas of Australia. Redfern and The Block is also a space for activism and protest.

H.C ("Nugget") Coombs, who was at the time the Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Governor of the Reserve Bank and Government advisor to Australian Prime Ministers, asserted in 1973 that,

*The emergence of what might be called an Aboriginal intelligentsia is taking place in Redfern and other urban centres. It is a politically active intelligentsia...I think they are the most interesting group to emerge from the political point of view in the whole of the Aboriginal community in Australia.*²⁵

Many momentous occurrences – both inspiring and despairing – occurred at The Block. In 1992, Prime Minister Paul Keating made the “Redfern Speech” which recognised that colonisation was to blame for many difficulties faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders today. The speech acknowledged past wrongs and painted a vision of a more brilliant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander future. Sadly, 14 years later, there are still high levels of perceived discrimination and oppression felt by the community. In 2004 the “Redfern Riots” occurred after the death of 17 year

²⁵ Coombs, H.C. “Transcript of Q and A to University of Western Australia Summer School”. 26 January 1973, quoted in, Rowse, T. (2000). *Obliged to be Difficult: Nugget Coombs Legacy in Indigenous Affairs*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, p. 106.

old Thomas Hickey, who was critically injured when he believed police were chasing him. Today, property developers have recognised the value of Redfern, and the community is under considerable pressure to be removed in order for new, commercial developments to take place.²⁶

The participants in this study and in the PACT programs have been exposed to and immersed in this history. They are the new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are a street-savvy, politically aware and urbanised group. Several are looking to build on this heritage and move towards healing, reconciliation and creating a new interpretation of an Australian narrative for themselves. The Artistic Director of Bangarra Dance Theatre, Stephen Page uses the term Aboriginal Urban Tribe²⁷ to describe this group, and I have adopted this idea for this study. Page identifies Aboriginal Urban Tribe members as those who are hankering to develop a new culture, a new form of artistic expression; establishing a new identity and place in the Australian arts landscape that encompasses urban, contemporary ideas and concerns. As Page describes, he did not have a strong connection to a traditional Aboriginal cultural heritage and therefore lacked a sense of belonging or place. Consequently he and others like him created a new expression of an urban tribe living.

The term Urban Tribe was first coined by French sociologist Michel Maffesoli in his 1988 publication *Le temps des tribus: le déclin de l'individualisme dans les sociétés postmodernes*.²⁸ He describes the Urban Tribe as a social phenomena of people coming together when they share an “insider” understanding around certain ideas, emotions or values which they can experience together. Often these interests would sit outside the mainstream culture. Page uses this term to reflect the traditional Aboriginal idea of a tribe, or a community, and brings it into the urban environment; grouping together those who share a similar “insider” experience of what it is to be an

²⁶ Price, S. (2004). “The Redfern Block vs Developer Greed”. *Green Left Weekly March 03*. Accessed 20/08/13. Available From: <http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/30402>

²⁷ Page, S. (2012). “Art as Medicine”. Keynote Address presented at Australian Performing Arts Market. Perth, WA, p. 3. Available From: <http://www.bangarra.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Stephen-Page-APAM-keynote-2012.pdf>

²⁸ Maffesoli, M. (1996). *The Time of the Tribes: the Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. Translated by Don Smith. Sage. London, Thousand Oaks, Calif.

ancestor of the Aboriginal culture but to be immersed in a contemporary, urban experience. Aboriginal people do not necessarily feel connected to traditional Aboriginal lifestyles, nor do they feel they have a clear association with White, mainstream society. There is confusion about their place, identity and role within contemporary urban society – hence the need for an Aboriginal Urban Tribe to bring together artists into a community that shares this experience, and are creatively exploring the unique place of sitting between a Black and White world.

Through the PACT programs, the beginnings of an Aboriginal Urban Tribe was created with artists such as Beckett, Dallas Law, Saunders, Stewart, and the other participants. This small tribe that was forming was based on creative exploration and expression under the umbrella of contemporary performance practice through theatre-making. However, the formation of this small tribe was only possible through historical advancements in Aboriginal and Australian theatre practices and opportunities. Many developments in Australian theatre history first needed to occur before opportunities such as those offered by PACT were possible.

In Australia, theatre practice as we recognise it today was neatly handed to the country from the colonising European settlers. While it has adapted its own distinct style, it has remained a predominantly Western form until more recent times. One of the more distinctly Western-dominated eras of theatre in Australia was during the 1970s New Wave.²⁹ However, this era did not necessarily encompass or reflect Australia as it was experienced by many people. As Julian Meyrick argues, “New Wave theatre is an anglo-obsessed legacy dating back to Colonial times”.³⁰ For many who were not part of the White, Eurocentric, middle class mainstream, the New Wave represented (and continues to maintain) a stranglehold on the Australian theatre space. This is particularly the case for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population whose experience and place within Australia was not usually represented on stage as academic Maryrose Casey points out:

²⁹ The New Wave theatre movement was seen a “golden” time for the Australian theatre sector, seeding what was perceived as a uniquely Australian theatre style. This period is renowned as producing many significant Australian arts organisations, writers, directors, actors and scripts.

³⁰ Meyrick, J. (2005), p. 7

*There is no doubt that the recognition given to the New Wave created space and respect for Australian work. However, that space did not and does not allow for respect for work outside the New Wave, whether that work happened before, simultaneously or years after.*³¹

This wave of mainstream representation, though advancing Australian theatre in general, did not necessarily advance Aboriginal theatre performance nor any other non-European style of performance, leaving Sydney's most prominent theatre spaces overwhelmingly Eurocentric.

Though Eurocentric theatre forms are predominant on the mainstages, there is a culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre in Australia, however limited and constrained. This was comprehensively researched and recorded by Casey³² in her book, *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre* (2004). In this next section I will focus on two research pieces that both claim Australia's theatre is disproportionately White. I will review Casey's important contribution to recording the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre, as well as outline the findings of Casey and highlight her assessment that Aboriginal theatre practitioners operate within tightly constrained and controlled frames of operation. I will then delineate how Casey's research influenced this study, as well as how the outcomes of my research can add to this record. In parallel, I will investigate Lee Lewis' belief that argues that Australian theatre is a perpetuation of White culture and restricts new expressions of urban, Aboriginal experience through a review of her essay *Cross Racial Casting: Changing the Face of Australian Theatre* (2007).³³ In this essay Lewis suggests that cross-racial casting on mainstages is a possible solution for the diversification of White stages. I contest this conclusion and explain why.

³¹ Casey, M. (2004). *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre*. St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, p. xv.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Lewis, L.,(2007). "Cross Racial Casting: Changing the Face of Australian Theatre" in Golder, D. J. (Ed). *Platform Papers. Quarterly Essays on the Performing Arts*. Vol 13. Sydney: Currency House Inc.

2.3.1: White Frames for a Black Culture

Maryrose Casey's book, *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre* (2004), is the most significant and comprehensive study of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in, and contribution to, Australian theatre to date. The research spans 1960 to 1996, a significant period when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues emerged to the forefront of the Australian social and cultural radar. Casey sought to address the recorded gap between social and artistic narratives in Australia. This book now stands as tribute to the existence of a partially unrecognised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre culture, acknowledges the significance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who were involved, and looks at how these organisations, productions and artists contributed to an Australian theatre ecology.

The book highlights that all of these developments occurred within what Casey calls "frames of operation". These frames include political, economic, social and internal factors that serve political agendas; reinforce social restrictions and perceptions; shift and confirm the way individuals, and society as a collective, perceive work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia. Casey establishes that national agendas, policies and narratives "create frames" which are used to receive, interpret and restrict Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creative works and ultimately serve to reinforce inherited colonial ideas about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia. Casey aptly surmises that these frames have been constructed "by a social memory of practice that reflects perspectives and beliefs generated initially by imperial/colonial narratives to serve national imaginaries of history and identity. These frames have then been adapted to serve changing national policies and agendas".³⁴

This agenda and narrative is a reflection not just of the arts industry, but the racial climate within Australia throughout this period. The early part of this particular era deliberately worked to silence any significant contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to the arts culture of Australia. As Casey explains,

³⁴ Casey, M. (2004), p. xx

*Over the last three decades of the 20th century the access to funding, the opportunities for production and the reception of productions were largely controlled by non-indigenous frames or understandings of Aboriginality and cross-cultural relationships.*³⁵

These non-indigenous frames of understanding are reiterated by Bourke who says: “From 1788...most representations of Aboriginal people has been produced and controlled by non-Aboriginal people. This representation has been biased and culturally prescriptive”.³⁶

This began to change as the political climate heated up with artistic revolutionaries from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community refusing to serve Eurocentric White-Australia narratives. As Casey notes, “writers such as Robert Merritt, Kevin Gilbert, Gerry Bostock and Jack Davis individually and collectively altered the range of representations of Indigenous Australians within Australian theatres and writing”.³⁷

Aboriginal artists such as Merritt, Gilbert, Bostock and Davis soon realised that performance was potentially a form of empowerment and a political tool. This knowledge helped instigate a critical mass of politically-driven Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists who emerged during the 1970s. The theatre practitioners of this era stepped outside the tightly constructed, restrictive frames that had been imposed on them and paved the way for the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance in Australia. Groundbreaking theatrical texts and performances started to emerge. These include the body of work by Kevin Gilbert, the political and often controversial writings of poet, educator and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal and performers and creators such as Bostock, Merritt, Davis, Maza, and Charles.³⁸ These artists established the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander movement for new Aboriginal theatre.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Bourke, E. (1998), p. 4.

³⁷ Casey, M. (2004), p. xx.

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 268-281.

Their work gave rise to important flagship organisations such as the National Black Theatre, Nindethana Theatre, and eventually initiatives such as the National Black Playwrights Conference in 1987. Such artists, organisations and initiatives helped create the climate necessary for the realisation of trailblazing work such as *7 Stages of Grieving* (1996) a devised work by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman, and *Bran Nue Dae* (1990), a musical by Jimmy Chi and Kuckles.

Casey's body of research aims to shift perceptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as being inert and immovable, into an appreciation and recognition of a vibrant and important segment of the Australian cultural offering. It highlights the shameful absence of academic, political and social recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artistic input and presence within the Australian cultural milieu. Casey has since gone on to recently publish *Telling Stories: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performance* (2012).³⁹ In this publication, Casey reinforces her assertions that Euro-Australian culture has effectively assisted in colonising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practice and continues to restrict and ignore the authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creative knowledge in efforts to erase cultural practices. However, in this book Casey's lens is that of historical performance practices for entertainment, and therefore not as acutely relevant as *Creating Frames*. Casey's research in *Creating Frames* was very influential in the present research and her methods and approach were particularly useful. Casey faced various challenges which I also experienced. These included a lack of detailed and accurate documentation, scarce governmental statistical data, minimal public understanding of the culture and condition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience, and the strong oral traditions of that culture (this particular point was stated several times by all Aboriginal theatre-makers who were interviewed for this research).

Casey applied a range of strategies to overcome the above-mentioned obstacles. These tactics included the painstaking process of tracking down and archiving as many productions as she could identify; finding critical and political responses to

³⁹ Casey, M. (2012). *Telling Stories: Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander Performance*. North Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Scholarly.

artists and productions; and, perhaps most significantly, conducting interviews and conversations with anyone from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who was linked to this important theatre history. Casey identified the interviews as one of the most invaluable sources of information for her research.

The recording of these oral records provided a new, previously unrecorded history. For the first time, a comprehensive and cohesive record of collective social memory from the perspective of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre community came into existence. This took *Creating Frames* beyond a simple catalogue of facts – though of course the remarkable factual appendices at the back (including a chronological record of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writing, organisations and productions, as well as a bibliography of the contributing artists) are invaluable. The interviews assisted in identifying what happened and who was involved, as well as why and how they felt about their frames of operation. This significant document played a large role in encouraging me to continue adding to this tradition; however, this time by providing a new voice to the record – that of emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers.

As comprehensive and thorough as Casey's work is, it cannot fill all the gaping holes left by over 200 years of silence. Casey has created an opportunity for academics and others to continue to listen to and record this important history and legacy. Through my own research, I hope to create an addition to Casey's research and carry on her worthwhile record. I therefore aim to build on this narrative, contributing another chapter to the historical record. Casey spoke primarily to mid/late-career (established) playwrights, actors and theatre-makers. This is understandable as a record of their significant contribution was long over-due. However, her work did not include the perspective, work or place of emerging, Aboriginal theatre practitioners. Over ten years on, I now hope to add the next generation of emerging theatre-practitioners' voice to this ever-increasing record. A significant component of this research includes extensive interviews. Casey's record captured the era of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander own "New Wave" arts practitioners and organisations. I intend to continue to now capture the "Next Wave" of artists by focusing on those who are young, identify as Aboriginal within the urban Sydney environment and are working with theatre-making practices.

Sydney theatre director Lee Lewis echoes Casey's belief that theatre in Australia remains a White domain. She goes further, accusing practitioners within the industry of perpetuating this and offers a possible solution of cross-racial casting. This is a solution I believe to be limited and irrelevant to many it is intended to benefit. Lewis is the current Artistic Director of Sydney's Griffin Theatre Company, an organisation that aims to develop and produce new Australian plays. She believes it is the mainstages where real change and cross-cultural inclusion can be instigated. In her essay Lewis presents one interpretation on how a culture of White theatre is being perpetuated and a possible solution to reverse this trend.

Lewis notes the absence of representation on stages from anyone who sits outside the White mainstream. She argues there is a glaringly obvious flaw in the Australian mainstage theatre culture: it is "reprehensibly white".⁴⁰ To Lewis, this is a powerful oversight, particularly as it seems to be perpetuated by the Australian flagship cultural organisations who are recognised as receiving the largest slice of the funding pie; the highest level of media and critical coverage; the largest audiences, and who provide social, political and cultural ratification. According to Lewis, these colossi of Australian theatre organisations appear to perpetuate a national narrative of White cultural dominance.

This absence of minority cultures on stage in Australia stands in stark contrast to the period Lewis spent in New York where she had "grown accustomed to New York mixed-race casts".⁴¹ She was, she says, "astonished that the ethnic diversity that was so apparent on the streets was not replicated on Sydney's stages".⁴² Lewis found that art did not reflect a multicultural country but instead was functioning as a vehicle for a projected White national identity:

in light of the profile that successive prime ministers were happy to trumpet of Australia as 'a multicultural nation in Asia', I could not help but wonder why that national identity was not reflected by the Sydney Theatre Company (STC), Company B-Belvoir (Company B) or the Bell Shakespeare Company on the government-funded mainstages

⁴⁰ Lewis, L. (2007), p. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*

*of its largest city.*⁴³

Lewis cites Ghassan Hage's statement that "social changes in Australia since 1950 have done little to dislodge white centrality and that many strategies are in place normalising white dominance in core culture and governmental spaces".⁴⁴ Lewis agrees with Hage that this is a form of cultural capital, and that the "accumulation of whiteness"⁴⁵ as a form of cultural capital is supported by the mainstages. Further to this, Lewis draws on Pierre Bourdieu's argument that theatre is a reflection of existing class structure and narratives and extends upon this, proposing that it can be a "constructor of future class, of future race relations, and ultimately of the imagined future national identity".⁴⁶

In light of the lack of cultural and race representation on stage, this future identity appears to be a continuation of a glossy Westernised White – something Lewis believes is the primary reason for the continuation of a White-centric stage. It is a controlled cycle and it functions, intentionally or not, as an imaging of Australia's future. The mainstage organisations appear, Lewis claims, to be "racially constructed to support a future white-imagined community".⁴⁷ The mainstage organisations have predominantly been founded, run and patronised by people who sit within Australia's mainstream. Lewis concludes that due to these organisations' large slice of the limited arts funding available in Australia, that effectively they receive "Government support to perpetuate exclusion".⁴⁸ Whether this is intended or not, this is a conclusion Lewis feels she can draw based on the government's ongoing financial support to organisations who are not attempting to apply affirmative action in putting Black bodies on stage.

Whether intentional or not, not all cultural organisations function in this way. Lewis recognises smaller arts organisations, that are often more experimental and

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp.1-2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 56.

innovative, allow artists from groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to find a space and place for artistic development, particularly as these organisations are more willing to experiment outside of the prominent White-centric controlled artforms and cultural practices, and draw on non-traditional methods. On the downside, Lewis believes these smaller organisations to be marginalised, poorly attended, often inadequately funded, and therefore not overly effective in changing Australia's imagined future. In response to this situation, Lewis suggests a strategy of aggressive cross-racial casting is required amongst the classical canon in order to "subvert white-centric theatre".⁴⁹

Lewis asserts that the mainstages are where changes, such as cross-racial casting, need to occur to have the most impact. This implies that without the mainstages leading this movement, any changes that could benefit minority groups not overly represented on Australian stages will have very little impact on the Australian theatre landscape. This is clearly a patronising and colonial approach to theatre resulting ultimately in the assimilation of minority groups into the mainstream rather than providing these cultural groups an independent voice.

While many small-to-medium arts organisations do receive less funding than the major arts organisations, and operate along the "fringe" of creative mainstream endeavour, these organisations are incorrectly characterised by Lewis (and subsequently ignored) as having minimal impact on the theatre landscape. Casey also focused primarily on more mainstream theatre productions and organisations. The focus on the mainstream, therefore, is itself is another frame superimposed by Casey and Lewis; a frame that validated ideas that the mainstream and mainstage spaces were an authorised measure of success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. In essence this approach perpetuates the superiority of Eurocentric theatre culture in Australia. As a result the role many smaller organisations play in advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre practice are often overlooked, with the focus instead (as seen with the assertions of Casey and Lewis) going towards placing Aboriginal actors on mainstages within performances that conform to the dominant white culture, rather than promoting the development of independent Aboriginal and

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 4.

Torres Strait Islander theatre that reflects the performers' own cultural identity.

The Australia Council for the Arts has two tiers for funded arts organisations in Australia: 28 companies comprise the Major Performing Arts Board, while the Key Organisations unit encompasses a further 140 or more small to medium organisations.⁵⁰ To be considered a Major Performing Arts organisation, all of the following criteria must be met by the organisation. It must:

- be a dance, music, opera or theatre company or a hybrid thereof
- demonstrate the highest artistic standards in performances
- show an ongoing commitment to the development of the artform
- demonstrate an ongoing commitment to the development of artists within the artform
- show evidence of a sizeable and increasing audience base
- have a minimum average annual total income of \$1.54 million over the previous three-year period
- demonstrate an ongoing ability to be financially viable, including increasing levels of financial support from the broader community.⁵¹

This differs from Key Organisations where the shared criterion is that a Key Organisation usually plays a significant role within its particular artform, providing a range of services and artistic work.⁵² The rest of the criteria for a Key Organisation is not listed, but stated as being different for each artform.

The difference between the two tiers is possibly best demonstrated through their funding. In 2010/2011 financial year, of the \$163.8 million funding pool Major Arts Organisations received 58.9% of this totaling \$96.5 million, whilst Key Organisations received 16% of the available funding totaling approximately \$26.3 million.⁵³

⁵⁰ Australia Council for the Arts (2013) *Arts Organisations*. Accessed 22/04/13. Available from: http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about_us/our_structure/arts_organisations

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Australia Council for the Arts. (2011). *Australia Council for the Arts Annual Report 2010 - 2011*. Sydney: Australia Council for the Arts, pp. 20-24.

Attendance figures for the Major Performing Arts organisations stood at 3,057,757 attendees, whereas the Key Organisations saw 6,922,075 attendees.⁵⁴ More than double the number of people attended Key Organisation events than Major Performing Arts productions which received almost four times the public funding. Moreover, this is not a one-off discrepancy as every year from the date Lewis' essay was written, more people have attended Key Organisation events than that of the Major Performing Arts. These figures demonstrate a possibility that the small-to-medium arts organisations have more presence and relevance within their local communities and are more accessible for many local artistic and Aboriginal Urban Tribe community members. It is this conclusion that has led me to focus on the Aboriginal-specific programs established by PACT. PACT's program specifically created for the emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-making Urban Tribe is a strong example of the impact that Key Organisations and those who work with them can have within the local, regional and nation-wide arts ecology. PACT also helps to demonstrate that re-interpreting the Eurocentric canon of works with cross-racial casting may not be as effective, relevant or desired as creating opportunities that enable emerging artists to investigate their own contemporary lived experience.

PACT is a Key Organisation that has a policy of inclusion and accessibility, and attempts to create as many accessible and diverse programs as its funding and resources will permit. The programs offered often assist Aboriginal Urban Tribes within the local community who do not feel they have a place or artistic offering that would be accepted or of interest to a Major Arts Organisation. PACT will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

PACT's *StepUp* (2007-2008), *Incubate* (2009) and *OYEA commissioned new work* (2011) generated new, experimental theatre works created by Aboriginal theatre-makers. This is in contrast to Lewis' proposed solution is to cast Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other minority groups into existing traditional, Eurocentric theatrical works presented by institutions and organisations that were founded and are run by mainly White, traditionally trained artists and administrators, predominantly using techniques and traditions that stem from outside Aboriginal

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 27.

performers' cultural background and heritage. The present research demonstrates that Lewis' solution is not one in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre practitioners are necessarily interested in.

Lewis is herself a White-middle class, well-educated person proposing solutions for "Third World Looking People".⁵⁵ She seems to have made her assertions without talking to anyone who would identify as a "Third World Looking Person", including any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Having spoken to, and reviewed responses to Lewis' essay by non-European Australians, there is the belief that they cannot relate to many of the works that currently appear on the mainstages, let alone wish to play a role in creating them. The works that appear on the mainstages are often part of the Eurocentric canon or are contemporary Australian writing that again, is from the perspective of a White Australian. In response to Lewis' essay, Malaysian-Chinese Australian theatre-maker Teik-Kim Pok comments that he "decided that propping up Dead/Decrepit White Male literary traditions was not a long-term career path for me".⁵⁶ Admittedly, Lewis desires significant change within the sector of the theatre industry that she is familiar with. She wants to see a more diverse Australia on stage and believes that practitioners and the public have an obligation to ensure this happens. Nonetheless, I maintain that this approach, however helpful, is limited. Instead, as PACT also recognised, there is a pressing need for opportunities that allow theatre that reflects the lived experience and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to be created, promoted and supported.

As Casey suggests, theatre is a way of imagining a new national narrative, a new way of perceiving the country and its first inhabitants. As a new era of reconciliation becomes possible, many young Sydney-based, urban artists wish to explore their lived experience as a member of the Aboriginal Urban Tribe in Sydney, and to create within frames of their own making. Partly due to over 200 years of oppression, segregation and racism, creative opportunities are needed to develop a

⁵⁵ Hage, G. cited in *Ibid*, p.8.

⁵⁶ Pok, T.-K. (2007). "Readers' Forum. On *Platform Papers No. 13*: 'Cross-racial Casting: Changing the Face of Australian Theatre', Teik-Kim Pok in Praise of Hybridity". *Who Profits from the Arts? Taking the Measure of Culture*. By Adair, David., and Ferres, Kay. *Platform Papers. Quarterly Essays on the Performing Arts*, no. 14. Sydney: Currency Press Inc., p. 59.

skilled, critical mass of practitioners with the abilities and platform to create and present such work.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

As an “outsider” to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture it was of particular importance to approach this study in a way that would ensure that the participants were fairly represented, and to work within a methodology that would create space and the possibility for other ways of knowing and perceiving the world that may not be compatible with Western approaches. Using ideas based on Indigenous research methodologies and Grounded Theory, this approach created some excellent opportunities for new ideas to emerge however, it also meant that there were a range of constraints and difficulties to overcome. This chapter details the research aim, and paradigm applied in this study as well as the context, constraints, and the method applied throughout the research process.

3.1 Aims

This research is a qualitative study that aims to analyse opportunities provided by PACT centre for emerging artists (PACT) that existed for emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers in Sydney from 2007-2011, in turn assessing their effectiveness from the perspective of three significant stakeholder groups (the funding body, the arts organisation and the artists) and identifying any misalignment of perceptions in the development and delivery of these opportunities. PACT’s Aboriginal-specific programs are used as a case study in order to explore perceptions about the effectiveness of the opportunities offered to better understand what is needed in order for emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers to develop not only at an organisation like PACT, but within Sydney and Australia. To achieve this, qualitative data, in the form of interviews, are used to give voice to a range of perceptions about the creative opportunities provided. Also, in order to apply a validation aspect against the line of inquiry through triangulation, quantitative data will also be assessed to better understand the socio-economic and political frameworks that these opportunities are created within, and the rationale behind the development of national policy and creative policies in relation to emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers.

3.2 Paradigm

This research employs an interpretive paradigm. Underpinned by phenomenology and hermeneutics, this approach encourages the analysis of personal perceptions and lived experiences. It is also strongly influenced by the work of academic Bagele Chilisa. Chilisa's *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (2012) encourages researchers to obtain detailed insight directly into the local, individualised experience of the Indigenous subjects themselves, and to leave space in research to foster an inclusive environment, and an opportunity to voice a new perspective – namely non-European ways of perceiving the world. Chilisa claims that Indigenous research methods include four dimensions: (i) Targets local phenomenon instead of extant theory from the West, (ii) Creates locally relevant constructs, methods and theories derived from local experiences and indigenous knowledge, (iii) Can be integrative, combining Western and indigenous theories, (iv) Assumptions about what counts as reality, knowledge and values in research are informed by an indigenous research paradigm.⁵⁷ I factored these dimensions into my research approach believing they assist to “empower communities” and “make visible voices of those who continue to suffer oppression and discrimination”.⁵⁸ Chilisa claims that many postcolonial societies still ignore, suppress, and marginalise non-European knowledge systems and ways of knowing.⁵⁹ It is my intention in this research to be inclusive about “other ways of knowing”.

Using the lens of Indigenous research methodologies supplied by Chilisa, a framework of Grounded Theory was applied to the analysis. Just like Chilisa, the founders of Grounded Theory, Glaser and Strauss, set about to create a different relationship between theory and research. This effectively took the researcher from the library, out into the world itself.⁶⁰ This aspect of Grounded Theory was useful as ethnographic interviews were employed rather than testing an established hypothesis. In effect, this meant that the theory was to be “discovered” through the ethnographic interviews that were conducted. Grounded Theory has the additional benefit of

⁵⁷ Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE, p.13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. xxii.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. xvi.

⁶⁰ Dey, I. (2004). “Grounded Theory” in *Qualitative Research Practice*. Seale, G. G. C., Gubrium, J. F., Silverman, D. (eds.). London: Sage Publications, p. 82.

rejecting the idea that there is a single cause for any particular problem, taking analysis beyond the simplistic and embracing various cause and effect factors or “multivariate analysis”.⁶¹ Accordingly, the same opportunities were analysed from three different perspectives, while also avoiding a positivist approach. Due to the influence of Grounded Theory, this study rejects the belief or idea that there is an absolute truth as to what constitutes an effective opportunity or a correct reality. Instead, attempts are made to reframe existing truths and beliefs about the current effectiveness of opportunities and the historical, cultural and political rationale for their existence. This research is not intended to test a pre-existing hypothesis. Rather, it is intended to assist in better understanding the frameworks within which these theatre-makers are operating, and to reveal the different perspectives from the three major stakeholders in the generation, execution and effectiveness of Aboriginal-specific opportunities. The analysis of these perspectives assists in enhancing our understanding of what we might consider in order to generate effective opportunities for emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers.

3.3 Context and Constraints

I encountered a range of constraints throughout the research process. Foucault argues that whichever group is dominant will establish their own rules, power and knowledge structures.⁶² The danger for me was the risk of inadvertently becoming part of a historical White power structure that has often told the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture what to do and what is best for them since colonisation.

Research methods and frameworks of understanding phenomena within Australia are dominated by Western theories of thought of which I, as part of the dominant White group, intrinsically brought with me to the research, analysis and interpretation process. Obviously I cannot escape being White and middle class, and therefore part of the dominant group in Australia however, I attempted to cultivate an ongoing awareness of this as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are not part of this dominant power-structure and historically have been thrust to the peripheries of

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 89.

⁶² Chilisa, B. (2012), p. 7.

society; rarely consulted on what is required for their culture to thrive. It was a large admission when Prime Minister Whitlam⁶³ publically acknowledged this harsh reality. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activist and humanitarian Chicka Dixon recalls,

I clearly recollect the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr. Gough Whitlam, standing before 60 of us Aboriginal people and asking that we tell him what we wanted from his government rather than 'what we think is best for you'. No other Prime Minister had ever made that statement and nobody since, including Kevin Rudd.⁶⁴

More tangible constraints also presented themselves throughout the research and writing process. Due to personal circumstances, I found myself spending a significant amount of time overseas for the duration of my candidature. This meant that there were restrictions placed on my immersion in the Sydney contemporary arts scene, accessing artists for interviews and having immediate access to hard copy resources. Strategies to minimise the effects of these constraints were put in place. These included frequent trips to Sydney for interviews and resource access, and activating and nurturing an extensive network of ex-colleagues, academic peers, fellow artists and the participants themselves who kept me exceptionally well informed through the large variety of social media platforms now available such as Skype, WhatsApp, Viber, Instagram and, of course, emails. This allowed me to receive or source a substantial number of resources electronically.

These are not traditional methods for receiving information for a researcher – but they reflect the ways that my research participants actually exist in the world and communicate with one another. As such I felt it was fitting and created an appropriate alignment with my search for new research methods to create space and an inclusive, accessible environment for generating new knowledge. These methods of gaining information will, I believe, inevitably become part of the standard arsenal of research methods, and it was exciting to be successfully implementing them in my research.

⁶³ Edward Gough Whitlam (popularly known as Gough Whitlam) was the Australian Prime Minister from 1972 - 1975

⁶⁴ Korff, J. (2012) "Politicians Think Three Years Ahead". Accessed 27/01/12. Available from: <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/aboriginal-australia-information-deficit-syndrome-aids.html>

The group of theatre-makers who participated in the PACT opportunities was renowned by PACT staff as being hard to communicate with (I will look at this in more detail in Chapter Four). I quickly discovered the medium of Facebook to be an extremely effective method for communication that embraced more than just text and language. Though these personal insights were not factored into the research results without permission, they inevitably informed my understanding of the research subjects and their perceptions of the world. I connected in this way with four of the twelve theatre-makers who participated in the opportunities from 2007-2011. I experienced some difficulty in locating several past participants of the PACT Aboriginal-specific programs who were no longer contactable, or did not wish to participate. I respected these wishes and instead chose to conduct extensive, in-depth interviews with the participants who were available. I feel I have built strong and meaningful relationships with several of the participating artists and have discovered extremely effective ways to communicate that better suit the participants.

3.4 Method and Sources

A mixed-method approach using both qualitative and quantitative data was applied. The scope of the project tightly focused to a single arts organisation and single funding body due to the restrictive length of this study, but also in order to create space to conduct an in-depth analysis of the information provided by these stakeholders. PACT's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific program (2007-2011) was selected as a case study and in-depth interviews with participating artists and program facilitators of this program were conducted.

The development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific opportunities at PACT from 2007-2011 were recorded and the rationale for the development of the opportunities were analysed. This approach included the political, social and artistic conditions within which the programs were devised, evolved and executed, along with the opinions of various stakeholders. This was a process of archival research including: viewing of video documentation of previous performances; collecting still images and media articles; and collating and analysing funding applications and reports, annual reports, and Board of Directors reports. This

material is available from PACT's archives and from online sources such as the Australia Council for the Arts (OzCo) website.

In addition, quantitative data from OzCo and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) were collected and collated. This provided a big picture understanding of exactly what OzCo perceived as being required for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre practitioners to establish an effective and sustainable contemporary performance culture. This assisted me in understanding how PACT fit into the funding landscape on a larger scale.

In contrast to the collection of quantitative data, qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four of the artists who were involved in PACT's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program were conducted. These interviews ranged from 90 minutes to 150 minutes in length. Due to my involvement with PACT and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, I had an established connection and rapport with each of the artists who was interviewed, and therefore recruitment of the four participants was relatively simple. As beneficial as this relationship with PACT and the artists' was, it also presented a situation where I, as a previous manager of this organisation had obviously been in (what could be perceived as) a position of power and influence. Academic Kirsten Hastrup believes that the participant – observer fieldwork process inevitably contains a level of metaphorical “violence”. This violence is grounded in the hierarchical nature of the participant – observer and the manipulative techniques applied by the observer onto the participant. Hastrup states: “Revealing the cultural implications requires a degree of systematic violence; the ethnographer must keep up a certain pressure to elicit the information necessary for drawing some general conclusion (Griaule 1957:14). We hardly expect our informants right to fall silent...For all our rhetoric about dialogue, ethnographic practice implies intrusion and, possibly, pain”.⁶⁵

My previous position of “power” and ultimately as the person who was signing the cheques for these artists' opened up the possibility of me unintentionally

⁶⁵ Hastrup, K. (1992). “Writing Ethnography: State of the Art”, Edited by H. Callaway and J. Okely, *Anthropology and Autobiography*, Tavistock, London. p. 121

eliciting certain responses from the participants who were being interviewed, or perhaps even being the cause of them censoring their responses. This position was considered when interviewing the artists' and in the analysis of their responses. However, I believe that any potential censoring or altering of answers based on this position was mitigated by the length of time I had been out of the position, had established independent relationships with them over the years, and the fact that I had lived overseas for several years by the time of the interviews.

I also interviewed the Artistic Director and Associate Director of PACT who were at the artistic helm during the development and realisation of the specific PACT opportunities. This method was approved by the Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee and the interviews were conducted under informed consent.⁶⁶

The interview questions covered a range of subjects but focused on five primary areas of discussion:

A – *Arts Organisations*: Involvement with and perception of arts organisations within Sydney and beyond.

B – *The Artist*: Personal opinions on their individual arts practices, their perceived place within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts community and beyond; obstacles and influences in the establishment of their arts career.

C – *Arts Projects*: Projects they have been involved with and are developing. Opportunities they have received that have led to the creation of new work.

D – *Funding*: Perceptions and understanding of the funding process and opportunities they have been provided with.

E – *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*: General perceptions and understanding about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts practice and culture.

Though the format and questions were semi-structured, a level of flexibility and open discussion throughout were encouraged. Additional, improvised questions

⁶⁶ See Appendix 1.

were often spontaneously included. A substantial amount of time was invested reinforcing my rapport with the artists in order to build up an authentic relationship of trust. After a six-month period of discussions and correspondence, the interviews were arranged over Facebook and email, to be at a location of the interviewee's choice and convenience. Most often the locations were spaces where the artists felt confident and comfortable. This included their own home, their workplace, a football field, or a local café. This is looked at in more detail in Chapter Six.

The interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder, with ongoing note-taking throughout in order to capture my impressions of reactions, visual signals and environmental factors throughout the interview. These notes enhanced my understanding of their lived experience and perceptions. The interviews were then transcribed into the writing program Scrivener, which permitted the incorporation of "research memos".⁶⁷ These memos were used as data-extenders to include descriptions of my thoughts and reflections on the interview data, exploring possible meanings and subtexts.

Data were then analysed with Dedoose,⁶⁸ an online software application for analysing text and multimedia data that allows data to be readily coded in order to capture patterns within the interviews and notes, and to find emerging themes and ideas for further investigation against existing literature and theory. Nine primary (or parent) codes were created. The titles are based on statements made by the theatre-makers in their interviews (*italics*), with further description provided by the interviewer (me) (non-italicised):

1. *I Didn't Believe in Myself*: Confidence
2. *I Feel What's Going On in the World I See and Live*: Emotive and Intangible Connections
3. *It's Just Down to the Cultural Thing*: Cultural Differences and Misunderstandings
4. *I've Still Gotta Prove Myself and Earn My Stripes*: Opportunities

⁶⁷ Richards, L. (2009). *Handling Qualitative Data. A Practical Guide*. 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications, p. 79.

⁶⁸ www.dedoose.com

5. *No One Wants To Do A Depressing Aboriginal Play Anymore: Theatre-Making*
6. *PACT Has Been One of the Most Helpful Places: Positive Influences*
7. *They Expect You to Have Some Sort of Degree in Things: Gaps for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia*
8. *You Are Labeled an Aboriginal Artist: Expectations*
9. *You're Automatically Judged on Everything: Identity and Place*

These parent codes also germinated a multitude of sub-codes.⁶⁹ Once these codes had been established a phase of “Focused Coding” was conducted. Focused Coding, as described by Kathy Charmaz in *Constructing Grounded Theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis* (2006) entails “using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data”.⁷⁰ The parent codes and sub-codes were tested for frequency of use and significance for the interviewees. Based on these results, a full analysis of the interview excerpts from the categories that had the most frequency was undertaken. Charmaz believes that the strength of Grounded Theory lies in its encouragement to be actively involved in the data at all phases – to not simply read the data but to act upon it and through this action, concepts and themes emerge.⁷¹ The data excerpts selected through Focused Coding was actively analysed for patterns, which allowed meanings, and concepts to emerge. These emergent concepts were analysed and the results can be seen in Chapters Five and Six. The same analytical process was used for the interviews with both artists and the PACT artistic team.

In contrast, analysis of the funding body OzCo, required a quantitative approach drawing on literature in order to establish the history of the funding body, and the statistics surrounding funding levels, policy, and decisions in order to build a comprehensive picture of their perspective and role. This is now addressed in the Chapter Four.

⁶⁹ See Appendix 2 for full list.

⁷⁰ Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, p. 57.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, pp.58-9.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Funding Body: The Australia Council for the Arts

Australia is better known for its athletic and sporting feats than its vibrant arts culture – I can rarely go anywhere in the world without having cricketers names eagerly yelled at me. Yet Australia can also boast an arts culture worthy of international recognition. A primary reason for its existence is a public arts support and funding system dating back as far as 1818 – only 30 years after the arrival of the first fleet. This public support system for the arts has enabled the development of libraries, museums, galleries, and hundreds of arts organisations and arts opportunities throughout the country.

The Australia Council for the Arts (OzCo), the national funding body, is one of three stakeholders who are extremely important in the development, support and execution of Aboriginal-specific opportunities for emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers. This Chapter outlines the historical development and importance of the Australian public arts funding system in developing a vibrant arts culture. To establish this, Jennifer Craik's proposal of how to consider the history and development of arts funding in Australia is drawn upon. During this mapping of funding history, the traditional exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts is highlighted, and the manner in which it was eventually somewhat included into this framework of public funding through government policy and legislation is described, with a particular focus on what this funding has meant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and artistic production. Collectively this demonstrates that government policy relates closely to the level of opportunities – and therefore the level of cultural and artistic production – for this particular cultural group. Having established this, the focus turns to look specifically at the national funding body, OzCo, their history and their position in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts. Based on this position, I present OzCo's comments on PACT centre for emerging artists' (PACT) Aboriginal-specific opportunities in order to establish OzCo's perception of their effectiveness.

4.1 A Brief History of Arts Funding In Australia: From Two Cows to *Bully Beef Stew*

In her paper “A Horse with No Name: Arts and Cultural Policy in Australia”, Jennifer Craik presents a detailed model of one way to consider the history and development of public arts funding in Australia.⁷² Craik’s chronology traces Australian arts funding history through the following eras and concludes her account at around the same time as the PACT Aboriginal-specific programs began:

- Pre-1900: Settler Culture Emphasising Nostalgia and a New Beginning
- 1900-39: State Cultural Entrepreneurship
- 1940-54: The Era of National Cultural Organisations
- 1955-67: Organisational Patronage (through specialist bodies funded by government)
- 1967-74: Policies of Growth and Facilitation
- 1975-90: Access, Equity and Community Cultural Development
- 1991-95: Diversity, Excellence, Cultural Policy and Cultural Industries
- 1996-present [2006]: The Review Cycle and a Return to Neo-patronage.⁷³

I will also discuss beyond Craik’s era’s to 2011 as it is relevant to the development and continuation of the PACT Aboriginal-specific programs.

A summary of the development of arts funding in Australia (that I have collated from a vast array of sources and collected under Craik’s suggested eras), is now presented alongside the changes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific government policy and legislation (and how this affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait

⁷² Craik, J. (2006). “A Horse With No Name: Arts and Cultural Policy in Australia”. Refereed paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference. University of Newcastle 25-27 September. Newcastle, Australia.

⁷³ Craik, J. (2007). *Re-Visioning Arts and Cultural Policy: Current Impasses and Future Directions*. Wanna, J. (ed.). Acton A.C.T: Australian National University E Press, pp. 7-8.

Islander cultural production) that took place at the same time. This mapping demonstrates that though there was steady progress in the development of arts funding, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were initially excluded from the funding framework, and though eventually recognised and supported, it is not to the extent of mainstream arts. This section particularly highlights the dramatic shift in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and artistic production once government policies became more progressive and arts funding more accessible.

Pre-1900: Establishment of Settler Culture

The first recorded government patronage was received by Michael Massey Robinson – convict, public servant and eventual poet. He received the grand total of two cows for his efforts as Poet Laureate in 1818-19. This period of time marked the beginning of public money being invested in arts and culture with many art galleries and public libraries being funded. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy during this period was aimed at “civilising” the “natives” and despite the British Select Committee finding that treatment of “natives” within Australia was poor and recommending their protection, killing “natives” for land was common practice throughout the country. However, culturally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were seen in some circles as fascinating and exotic. Several corroborees and traditional performances were recorded in this era with an entrance fee for the public of one shilling. There is also a record of several circus-like performances by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performers.⁷⁴ Seen as a spectacle, there were no real opportunities provided by anyone to preserve, advance or promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture or performance.

1900-1939: State Cultural Entrepreneurialism

Australia suddenly led the way in new artforms, creating what is widely accepted to be the first ever full-length feature film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906) which followed the life and exploits of the infamous Australian outlaw. Literature emerged into the funding spotlight with Prime Minister Alfred Deakin establishing the

⁷⁴ AusStage. (2013). Accessed 12/02/12. Available from: <http://www.ausstage.edu.au>

Commonwealth Literary Fund (1908-1966). This funding provided “literary pensions for aged or infirm authors, for the families of 'literary men' who died in poverty, and for writers unable for financial reasons to continue their activities”.⁷⁵ The first performing arts grant ever recorded was in 1920. It was awarded to the Allan Wilkie Shakespearean Company. The company was provided with free transport on the Australian Railways to tour around Australia, as long as they ensured that their worked served an educational purpose. The Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board was founded and is arguably the blueprint of what was to eventually become the Australia Council for the Arts in 1964.

This was also the most restrictive era for cultural and artistic development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Policy was firmly in place to constrain and control almost every aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life. This included forbidding the use of language, traditional practices and for some people, accessing their traditional land. As the various Protection Boards were established, any opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural expression was eroded. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout the country were being forced to renounce their heritage or be ostracised from modern society, so were they also expected to perform at the will of the Government. For the 150th anniversary of settlement in 1938, Aboriginal performers were brought in from Western Sydney to perform a re-enactment of the landing of the first Governor of NSW, Arthur Phillip. Sydney-based Aboriginal peoples had refused to participate, and so a Western Sydney group was pressured to attend with the threat of loss of rations and privileges. Australia still strongly supported the policy of less governmental support, and more governmental control in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. There are no records of any significant artistic support or practice occurring during these oppressive years.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Craik, J. (2007), p.10.

⁷⁶ As per records developed by Casey, M. (2006) and the online database AusStage. Accessed 12/02/12. <http://www.ausstage.edu.au>

1940-54: The Era of National Cultural Organisations

World War II saw various significant developments in the way arts support was perceived and implemented in Australia.⁷⁷ This included the simultaneous decentralisation of arts away from high-brow pursuits of artistic excellence within major cities in order to enable public access and enhanced appreciation of the arts throughout the country alongside the founding of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT) and State Symphonies and Orchestras. Throsby also notes that it is this period that set up the government as a principal form of financial support for arts and culture in Australia, which is still the case today.⁷⁸ This period continued to see minimal artistic support and development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The only recorded performance during this period is *White Justice* (1946), a protest piece devised and performed by the New Theatre and members of the Aborigines League.

1955-67: Organisational Patronage

Organisational patronage began primarily with the establishment of the Elizabethan Opera Trust (later the Australian Opera who receive a large share of available federal funding today) in 1956, and the formation of Australia's premiere dramatic training institution, the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) (1958). The federal Arts Council was established from the state level councils (1964) and just outside this period, in 1968 the Australia Council (OzCo) began operation with a budget of \$1.5 million. OzCo could be seen as the culmination of the new way the government and society began to think about public funding – that is, as an integral part in the forming of the country's cultural identity and governmental responsibility. H.C. "Nugget" Coombs was reported by Throsby as believing: "Those who controlled the resources of a great society had an obligation to use those resources to advance the public good".⁷⁹ This era of "Organisational Patronage" reflected that shift in obligation.

⁷⁷ Throsby, D. (2001). "Public Funding of the Arts In Australia – 1900 to 2000". edited by Australian Bureau of Statistics. Accessed 02/04/11. Available from: <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/1301.0Feature%20Article302001?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=1301.0&issue=2001&num=&view=>

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Throsby, D. (2006), p. 7.

According to Australian theatre and publishing doyenne Katharine Brisbane, this shift was effective. Brisbane states that prior to the Arts Council, theatre was controlled by entrepreneurial and commercial agendas that promoted entertainment, not art. The emergence of OzCo saw transference of this control from commercial agencies to artists and not-for-profit arts organisations, heralding a new era of Australian culture.

It is from this period onwards that real political transformation becomes evident and subsequently, there is soon to be an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and artistic production, confirming Throsby's assertion that, "[p]romotion of cultural diversity can take place only in accordance with respect for fundamental human rights".⁸⁰ Unfortunately, cultural diversity was not flourishing as yet. However, the foundations had been established by the government for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with more cultural diversity promoted and more opportunities available.

1967-74: Policies of Growth and Facilitation

This was an era of cultural vigor for Australia, primarily stimulated after years of Liberal government by the Whitlam Labor government (1972-75). Most significantly, the national arts funding and advisory body, OzCo, originally known as The Australia Council, (created as a division of the Prime Minister's Department in 1968)⁸¹ was reconstituted in 1973 in order to consolidate disparate administrative arrangements within the government. The Australia Council for the Arts was now provided with statutory status in 1975 under the Australia Council Act. OzCo's role over the years has been questioned, restructured, injected with funds and periodically stripped of them, but it has been the most significant public funding support for the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts in Australia. I will go into this in greater detail in section 4.2.

The increased production of new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander plays and theatre performances during this era reflected the more progressive policies of the

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 26.

⁸¹ Australia Council for the Arts. (2011). *Australia Council for the Arts Annual Report 2010 - 2011*. Sydney: Australia Council for the Arts, p. 34.

Organisational Patronage era, and the increased government funding (OzCo's funding went from \$5 million in 1972 to \$15 million in 1973), and support for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community through the strong establishment of a federal funding and advisory body. This phase could be considered a golden era for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.⁸²

1975-90: Access, Equity and Community Cultural Development

This era began with the establishment of The Australian Film Commission, and OzCo's Community Arts Board in 1978, however economic rationalism became the order of the day under the Fraser Liberal government (1975-1983), with investigations conducted into the purpose and need for public arts funding. There was no room for intangible outcomes in any reports provided to the government and many within the arts industry believed that such investigations were applying a model that was inappropriate to measure the worth of arts and culture. A change in government instigated a huge swing away from economic rationalism and this constrained approach for measuring arts and support. Bob Hawke's Labor government (1983-1991), made, Craik asserts, the most significant cultural changes in Australia since Federation (1901).⁸³ Craik lists that the changes included, "inquiries into arts employment, youth arts, cultural statistics, orchestras, government funding, folk life, and indigenous arts and cultural industry".⁸⁴

During this period, political and popular beliefs about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population shifted in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders had complete Commonwealth voting rights and were now aware of it (1962);⁸⁵ a Commonwealth referendum finally enabled a change in the Constitution which meant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders could be included in the census (1967); the Aboriginal Protection Boards were abolished; Australia voted in its first Aboriginal representative to Parliament, and the census included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for the first time.

⁸² Craik, J. (2006), p.5.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Australian Electoral Commission website. "Indigenous Australians and the Vote". Accessed 01/08/13. Available from: <http://www.aec.gov.au/indigenous/indigenous-vote.htm>

There were also many significant changes in federal and state law that had a direct effect on how the country perceived Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, their rights, and place within Australian society. These include the Federal Discrimination Act (1975), and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act (1984).

This was the most artistically prolific period for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders working outside traditional Aboriginal cultural forms, since colonisation. Over 30 new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander plays were written by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This period also saw the first National Black Playwrights Conference, and the establishment of the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust. Most significantly for this study, it was also when the experience of the urban Aboriginal was represented for the first time to a non-Aboriginal community in Garry Bostock's *Here Comes the Nigger* (1976). This was also the first time that experimental theatre began to be explored by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. These works include a multimedia, devised work with Oodgeroo and Kabul, and a devised piece at Sydney-based Sidetrack Theatre, *Whispers in the Heart* (1989). The more advanced policies of the time provided space and opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts to begin to emerge.

1991-95: Diversity, Excellence, Cultural Policy and Cultural Industries

The arts legacy from the leadership of the Hawke government continued with his protégé, Paul Keating (1991-1996) who released the policy initiative *Creative Nation: Commonwealth Cultural Policy* (1994). This was the first federal cultural policy in Australia. The policy unveiled the economic benefits of a strong cultural industry and recognised arts and culture as deeply significant for the country's and the individual's identity. However, in contrast to this, the Coalition authorised an arts policy. "Fightback!" was a range of policies advocated by the Coalition of which one was restricting OzCo and bringing arts funding back under the control of the states. Importantly during this time, Australia's major flagship arts organisations came under the newly formed OzCo Major Organisations fund.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, this new term began as a promising new period. The Aboriginal Council for Reconciliation was established (1991), funded by the government and with professed cross-party support and recognition that there had not been a formal process of reconciliation implemented to date. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) was conducted and the landmark “Redfern Speech” was presented by Prime Minister Keating at Redfern (1992). Most importantly, the High Court of Australia handed down its decision in *Mabo and others v The State of Queensland* (1992), the legal ruling that dramatically altered the Australian colonial narrative. The ruling recognised Native Title in Australia for the first time and overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius*, or “land belonging to no one”.⁸⁶ This led to the *Native Title Act (1993) Cwlth*.

Unfortunately though this government assisted with great advances for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it also placed economic gain over some of these rights, with the Keating Government permitting the Northern Territory to extinguish Native Title at McArthur River for the purpose of mining (1993).

Despite political set-backs, the social and political advancements made in this era are reflected in the increased production of new and innovative performance work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Mandawuy Yunupingu, leader of the Aboriginal band Yothu Yindi, received the Australian of the Year award (1992), Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company formed in Perth (1992), Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts Company was established in Brisbane (1993), and a range of new Aboriginal plays were produced by Jack Davis, Eva Johnson, Richard Whalley, Sally Morgan, Jane Harrison, and Mudrooroo to name a few. This was also the era when the highly successful devised production *7 Stages of Grieving* was developed by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman (1994).

⁸⁶ Griffith, G. (1998) “The Native Title Debate. Background and Current Issues”. In *Briefing Paper 15/98* of NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service. Accessed 22/08/13. Available from: [http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/publications.nsf/0/da2f5f5ed50f5d38ca256ecf000948cd/\\$FILE/15-98.pdf](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/publications.nsf/0/da2f5f5ed50f5d38ca256ecf000948cd/$FILE/15-98.pdf)

1996-2006: Review Cycle and a Return to Neo-Patronage and Beyond

The 1996 shift to a Coalition Howard government (1996-2007) signaled an even stronger emphasis on economic rationalism than had previously been experienced by the arts. This is often viewed a period of significant cut-backs for the arts and though funding to OzCo increased, there was a return to ideas of “artistic excellence”. This meant that mainstream, elite cultural organisations received more support and recognition. Hand-in-hand with this support was a review process, as the business acumen and position of many arts organisations was perceived as being substandard, with many on the verge of financial ruin. The outcomes of this review were that for arts organisations to receive government support they needed to become sustainable, dynamic businesses. Based on these reviews, the government injected significant funds into the arts. Unfortunately, there were various problems with this strategy, namely that the Howard Government had no real vision for the arts and culture in Australia.

This period resulted in a decline in the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights due to the conservative Howard Government’s policies and beliefs. As Casey notes, “Howard announced that he would not tolerate 'political correctness', declaring that there would be major changes in existing programs in the interests of balance. Howard argued that 'balance' required diminishing Indigenous rights”.⁸⁷ The Howard Government disbanded the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, instigated the controversial Northern Territory Intervention (2007),⁸⁸ and refused to apologise on behalf of the government to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for past treatment despite the apology being recommended by the “Bringing Them Home” report.⁸⁹ Many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people within Australian communities see this period as a backward step

⁸⁷ Casey, M. (2004), p. 204.

⁸⁸ In 2007, the Howard government introduced the “Northern Territory Emergency Response”. Originally designed to address alleged child abuse within Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory of Australia, the “intervention” has been criticised and opposed by many Aboriginal communities who claim they were not appropriately consulted or involved in the response and believe it to be racist legislation.

⁸⁹ “Bringing them Home” (1997) is the popular, abbreviated title of the report *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

in terms of the previous advancements made for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights and reconciliation.

Despite the many challenges the Howard Government's incumbency presented, and in some ways due to the arms-length political control of funding bodies (which attempted to maintain as many opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists as policy would permit), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance had reached a positive turning point. Throughout the 1990s, different genres and modes of performance began to emerge and opportunities for new experimental processes were starting to be offered. When the Kevin Rudd Labor Government was sworn in, in 2007, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders received the long-awaited apology, Australia became a signatory on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Australian government allocated the largest amount of funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs ever before recorded in Australia. Simultaneous to this advancement, opportunities had begun to emerge for new, dynamic forms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creative expression. Experimental performance companies like Marrugeku were continuing to create edgy new works with a cross-cultural focus, Bangarra Dance Theatre continued to achieve international renown, mainstages were encouraged to perform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander plays, and programs such as *StepUp* (2007-2008) at PACT centre for emerging artists were now financially and socially possible. Throsby cited at the beginning of this section that cultural diversity will thrive when respect for human rights is promoted. The above chronology of increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artistic output reflects more equality and access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in arts funding and government policy direction.

The creative presence and output of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performers, playwrights, and theatre-makers has been on a continuous increase since the late 1960s, and as funding policy continues to provide opportunities and resources, the works continue to be developed. These figures imply that the trend is upwards and continuing as such. This upward trend is undoubtedly assisted by OzCo, as the leading arts funding body in the nation. OzCo's policy of support, promotion

and exposure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts, and OzCo's recognition of the significance of developing new, experimental and alternative works alongside the preservation of traditional practices has contributed to the upward trend. This is not to say that other funding bodies do not also play a role in achieving this. In this next section I will take a brief look at the three tiers of government funding that directly affect an arts organisation and artists in Sydney.

4.2 Government Arts Funding for Sydney-Siders

Each level of government has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts policy in place and opportunities available for Aboriginal theatre-makers in Sydney to access. However, some levels of government meet certain needs and are more accessible than others. An arts organisation in Sydney such as PACT, as well as Sydney-based artists, have access to apply for funding and/or support from three tiers of government. City of Sydney (local), Arts NSW (state), and Australia Council for the Arts (federal).

At the local government level, the City of Sydney, though able to provide more immediate face-to-face support for Aboriginal theatre-makers and artists, as well as fund many community organisations that benefit Aboriginal theatre-makers such as Redfern Community Centre (RCC), has extremely limited funds for arts activities and minimal infrastructure to administer them. When I communicated with the City of Sydney in order to collect data from them about their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts involvement, they stated that they had barely any data collected. There are also very few opportunities available for individual artists to apply for.

At state level, Arts NSW has a *NSW Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy 2010-14*. The strategy is focused on increasing the participation of Aboriginal people in the arts, promoting Aboriginal cultural practice, utilising the arts to assist in bridging the gap between the White and Black communities, and generating jobs. Unfortunately, Arts NSW predominantly focuses its funds on arts organisations and has limited individual funding. Though recognising that NSW has the largest

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in Australia, there are very few accessible opportunities for individual Aboriginal artists, or Sydney-based arts organisations. Funding opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders via Arts NSW for 2013 were listed as: i) *2013 Aboriginal Regional Arts Fund*. This promotes arts in regional NSW and is of minimal assistance to participants of this study due to its specific location requirements; ii) *Quick Response Grants: Aboriginal Arts and Creative Industries*. This provides last minute financial support but is not intended to fund long-term vision projects, and Strategic Support.⁹⁰

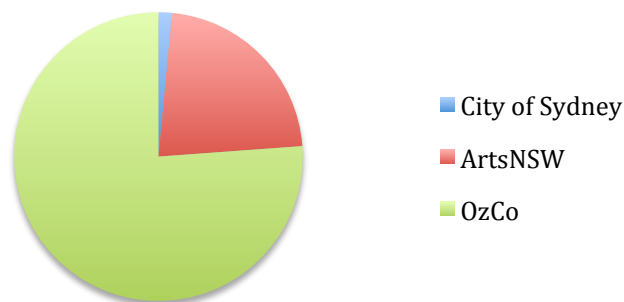
OzCo is the main player in this arena. Figure One and Two below give an idea of the large amount of overall funds available to be dispersed by OzCo in comparison to the other two levels of government funding available to PACT and Sydney-based artists.

Figure One

	Local Government City of Sydney	State Government Arts NSW	Federal Government OzCo
2007/8	\$2,819,000	\$48,023,454	\$146,900,000
2008/9	\$2,506,300	\$45,880,996	\$175,300,000
2009/10	\$3,202,885	\$49,300,000	\$164,500,000
2010/11	\$3,323,000	\$48,815,000	\$163,800,000
2011/12	\$3,291,621	\$48,200,000	\$164,500,000

Figure Two

2011/12 Financial Year



⁹⁰ Arts NSW website. "Aboriginal Arts and Culture in NSW". Accessed 9/07/13. Available from: <http://www.arts.nsw.gov.au/index.php/arts-in-nsw/aboriginal-arts-and-culture-in-nsw/>

As well as the largest amount of funds to allocate, OzCo also offers the largest range of opportunities. As well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders being able to apply through mainstream funding rounds, there is also a specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artform Board that provides a specific range of opportunities for which only those who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are eligible to apply. Opportunities exist for arts organisation, and independent artists alike.

In the 2010/11 financial year, the same year as *Bully Beef Stew* was being developed and performed, OzCo provided a range of opportunities which included: a three-year partnership with the British Council, ACCELERATE Indigenous Cultural Leadership Program for eight emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural leaders; an annual workshop program connecting 25 Indigenous arts organisations and their leaders across the country, committed \$20,000 Dreaming Award for artists aged 18-26 years to develop a major work with their chosen mentor, and invested \$50,000 in the national Indigenous Playwrights Conference. OzCo provided a total of 81 grants, (16 being within NSW). This totaled \$1,904,011.00 of funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific project⁹¹ out of a total of \$163,800,000.00. This is 1.16% of available funding. As comparatively large as this sum appears when measured against City of Sydney or Arts NSW, it is worth noting that this percentage is not in line with the last official recorded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of 2.3% of the total Australian population.⁹²

I have identified OzCo as a significant and leading support source for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. As PACT is primarily funded through OzCo, and due to the restrictive scope of this thesis, I will focus very explicitly on the role of OzCo in delivering and generating opportunities for Aboriginal theatre-makers. This is not to say that the City of Sydney and Arts NSW do not play a role in supporting PACT and its programs, nor the artists who participated in this study, but that compared to OzCo, their role has less direct impact.

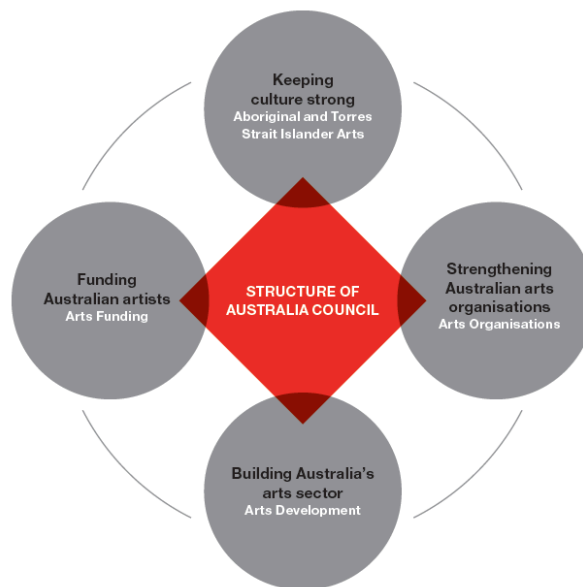
⁹¹ Australia Council for the Arts. (2012). *Australia Council for the Arts Annual Report 2011 - 2012*. Sydney: Australia Council for the Arts, pp.16-17 and 24.

⁹² Australia Bureau of Statistics. (2006). "Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006". Accessed 05/08/11. Available from: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/B7164C771F4A35D7CA2578DB00283CB1?opendocument>

4.3 PACT Aboriginal-Specific Opportunities From the Perspective of OzCo

After initially approaching OzCo in order to establish their perspective in relation to PACT’s programs and wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts support, I discovered that it is extremely difficult to get anything that constitutes meaningful, qualitative data from OzCo directly. They are limited in what information can be given out due to privacy restrictions and what information can go on the public record. However, OzCo did provide some information about their perception of PACT and their Aboriginal-specific opportunities (2007-2011). In email communication with David Everest, Program Manager for Arts Organisations at OzCo, and current client manager for PACT, he reaffirmed their commitment to investing in emerging Aboriginal theatre-makers, confirming it was part of their key strategy. As can be seen from Figure Three, one of the four foundation pillars of the structure of OzCo is “Keeping Culture Strong. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts”⁹³

Figure Three



From its inception in 1968, there has always been, in theory, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation amongst the OzCo Artform Boards.⁹⁴ All of

⁹³ Australia Council for the Arts (2011), p 10.

⁹⁴ As of 2012/13, The Australia Council for the Arts has seven Artform Boards and two committees. These include: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts board, Dance board, Literature board, Major

OzCo has Aboriginal representation as a Key Strategy yet how successfully this has been implemented is debatable. While technically it does not just rest with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artform Board (here it must be noted that it is interesting that OzCo have defined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as an “art form”) to deliver opportunities for this specific group, the predominant amount of responsibility for the development and promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander opportunities has fallen to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artform Board.

The underlying premise for the existence of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artform Board is the recognition of the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People to self-determination and for the support and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artforms.⁹⁵ This Artform Board began with \$0.8 Million in 1973-1974 to deliver programs. By 2010-11 this had increased to \$1.9 Million.

Part of achieving the OzCo-wide key strategy is the development and adherence to the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Policy*.⁹⁶ First adopted in 1997, *The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Policy*'s purpose was to function as a blueprint for the council and its stakeholders on how to develop programs and opportunities that would advance the artistic expression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The policy holds to four main policy principles: Respect; Authority; Rights and Responsibilities; and Diversity.

Guided by these principles is a range of policy priorities that include:

- National Oversight and Strategic Coordination
- Arts Development

performing arts board, Music board, Theatre board, Visual arts board; Community Partnerships committee and Interarts office

⁹⁵ Australia Council for the Arts. (2013). “National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Policy”. Accessed 31/05/13. Available from:

http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about/policies/national_aboriginal_and_torres_strait_islander_arts_policy.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

- Regional Cultural Development
- Infrastructure
- Industry Development
- Distribution, Promotion and Market Development
- Communication and Strategic Promotion
- Copyright, Intellectual Property and Moral Rights
- Broadcast Media, Multimedia and Information Technologies
- Cultural Heritage and Cultural Resource Management
- Cultural and Environmental Tourism⁹⁷

PACT and its emerging theatre-makers fall into the three policy areas of Development, Infrastructure, and Industry Developments, which are expressed in the following terms:

Arts Development

The Council considers Arts Development a policy priority to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, organisations and communities to realise their right to participate in a cultural life and to determine their participation within the wider arena of arts and commercial industries at a national and international level.

Assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to develop professionally is seen as the responsibility of all sections of the Australia Council including the ATSIAB and all funding divisions.

Infrastructure

The Council considers Infrastructure to be a policy priority supporting the development of a strategic group of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander arts organisations in conjunction with other funding bodies.

This will form the basis for improved access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities to arts projects and services on a regional, state or multi-state basis.

Industry Development

The Council considers Industry Development to be a policy priority in recognising Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders determining and managing their economic development through the arts to enhance opportunities and resources.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

*Council recognises and supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the cultural industries as legitimate employment and productive economic activity. Industry development is seen as a responsibility across all of Council.*⁹⁸

Based on these priority descriptions, PACT and its artists assist to professionally develop young and emerging Aboriginal theatre-makers. This fills the gap left by the absence of national, state and local Aboriginal theatre organisations that are accessible to these theatre-makers, in part through generation of employment to both established and emerging theatre-makers through a mentoring scheme and commissioned works, while also improving future employment opportunities for these theatre-makers.

OzCo agreed with this assessment. They stated that, from their perception, PACT is a significant organisation in the area of emerging artists, and claims “there are not many companies that are exclusively aimed at this part of the sector”. They also believe that PACT is contributing to the development of opportunities for urban, emerging Aboriginal theatre-makers and that their opportunities align with the aforementioned policy, claiming simply “if they weren’t, it [Aboriginal-specific opportunities] would not be funded”. They conceded that how closely the opportunities align to OzCo priorities and policy is difficult to assess. OzCo did confirm “the project [*Bully Beef Stew* (2011)] was properly acquitted and was an effective program”. Interestingly, OzCo go on to say “This does raise the old problem of how does a funding agency measure the effectiveness of arts programs? We rely largely on the applicants to self evaluate”. These self-evaluations are in the form of end-of-project reports, or acquittals, that are sent to OzCo. They usually include a financial report, artistic report and a qualitative report measuring the success of a project against established key performance indicators (KPI’s). These KPI’s may include ticket sales, audience attendance numbers, and a perception from the arts organisations of how they perceived the project met the funding criteria. When asked why *Bully Beef Stew* was funded by OzCo, they stated “because the panel⁹⁹ thought it met the selection criteria and policies of the theatre board at that time”. The success of

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ OzCo panels are made up of arts industry peers.

the opportunities being provided to these artists is measured directly against policy, financial reports, KPI's and basic written feedback from the artists or arts organisation. Though these are undoubtedly bland, bureaucratic answers, it does make clear that the opportunity would not have been supported if it did not meet OzCo's policy direction.

OzCo were extremely cautious about the information they provided me. When attempting to make enquiries, I was informed by David Everist (Program Manager, Arts Organisations and PACT's current Client Manager), that "as a funding agency we are limited in what feedback we can give on the public record".¹⁰⁰ Antonietta Morgillo (Program Manager, Theatre) stated, "As an agency of the federal government the Australia Council is bound by the Commonwealth Government confidentiality policies and cannot give out [certain information]".¹⁰¹ Obviously OzCo has an obligation to protect the privacy of the applicants as well as some aspects of the discussion by the decision-making panel members, however this lack of qualitative information greatly restricts the transparency and ability to better understand the motivations and outcomes as decided by OzCo.

As indicated by OzCo, PACT applied for funding through the Theatre Artform Board. PACT did not apply for any funding for their Aboriginal-specific programs via the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artform Board. The commissioned new work *Bully Beef Stew* was primarily funded through the OzCo Opportunities for Young and Emerging Artists (OYEA) initiative. When asked why she didn't apply via the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artform Board, Regina Heilmann, Artistic Director of PACT (2002-2010) responded "it just seemed too complicated". This gives the impression that perhaps non-Aboriginal arts organisations who are supplying opportunities for Aboriginal artists do not feel like they are connected to the Artform Board specifically set up to provide opportunities for these artists. Instead, PACT applied for support through more familiar avenues such as general project funding and including it in core funding budgets, believing it to be a better option. This also enables organisations, when reporting against their

¹⁰⁰ Everist, D. (2012), e-mail message to author, June 27, 2012.

¹⁰¹ Morgillo, A. (2012), e-mail message to author, May 30, 2012.

triennial funding, to tick a range of boxes that fulfill policy initiatives such as including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders within their program.

For all of the PACT opportunities, PACT as an organisation applied for the funding support, not the theatre-makers. When asked what methods are in place in order for OzCo and Aboriginal theatre-makers to communicate directly, OzCo listed the website, the funding guide, phone, email and stated as the most important method – face-to-face meetings. OzCo asserted that opportunities being offered by or supported by OzCo are discoverable through arts organisations that have a reputation for providing Aboriginal-specific opportunities and have a relationship with OzCo. They particularly suggested PACT, Belvoir, Ilbiggerri, and Yirra Yaakin. As only PACT and Belvoir are in Sydney, NSW and only PACT usually works with theatre-making processes, this gives the impression that PACT is the only arts organisation that Sydney, emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers can connect with in order to access OzCo funded opportunities and support. OzCo do not mention or suggest Sydney-based and Aboriginal-run Mooghalin Performing Arts. This is perhaps because they are not triennially funded by OzCo and, in some respects, in their organisational infancy.

As PACT is a significant contributor to the development of urban, emerging Aboriginal theatre-makers, in this next chapter I will look at PACT's history, the evolution of their Aboriginal-specific programs, and the perception held by the artistic team about the difficulties and benefits that the PACT programs provided.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Arts Organisation: PACT Centre For Emerging Artists

PACT centre for emerging artists (PACT) has been operating since 1964. Originally called Producers, Artists, Composers and Talent, PACT has made several transitions from a community run, amateur arts collective, to a government funded Youth Theatre, to its present-day status as a triennially funded Key Organisation under the Australia Council for the Arts (OzCo) Theatre Board, working with emerging artists.

PACT is perched beside the railway line in Erskineville. This inner-city village is minutes from the Sydney central business district and has evolved from a working-class town of tiny cottages housing local brick-makers, tanners and gardeners into a highly gentrified area with trendy bars, packed cafes and expensive real estate. Despite its proximity to central Sydney, it boasts a small, redeveloped, village-like atmosphere that closely reflects the spirit of PACT as an organisation. However, the venue itself and many of the artists who frequent it as an arts hub do seem to sit slightly outside the gentrified populace of Erskineville. Their alternative second-hand clothing, dreadlocked hair, preference for squatting in abandoned buildings and unconventional outlook on life, certainly makes them a colourful (though seemingly welcome) addition to the community. Many of the local businesses and community members support the efforts of PACT with in-kind donations and attending the community-based events that take place on the streets, the parks and local school.

The PACT space itself is an old converted factory provided by the local City of Sydney Council for heavily subsidised rent. Without this local council support the organisation would not have access to a venue. Various arts organisations in Sydney have lost their venues over the years by being priced out of the market or losing financial support. Performance Space is a great example of this. Having had control over a premise for many years, they were eventually in a position where they had to take up offices within Carriageworks¹⁰² and relinquish their venue. PACT's control

¹⁰² Carriageworks is a multi-venue space that produces, presents and hosts multidisciplinary works that explore contemporary themes. Its focus is the small to medium sector.

over a venue means it is able to maintain a level of independence, and can support groups that may not otherwise have access to a venue.

Sparse and grungy compared to other venues throughout Sydney, PACT is an ideal place for experimentation, new exploration and to feel part of a local community and wider arts hub. There is minimal, basic equipment; most of it donated from the local Newtown High School of the Performing Arts, some of it not working, some of it held together with years of repairs and gaff tape. The place really does embody the idea of “running off the smell of an oily rag”, and yet plays an important role in producing a new era of experimental and alternative artists.

Whilst a staff member at PACT I was required to be part of every aspect of the space and the projects within it: from serving at the bar, operating sound, rigging up equipment, helping paint a floor, marketing a show, to designing the program. Every nook and cranny of PACT is held together by the dedicated staff and participating artists. There is always a sense that people are heavily invested in PACT and what it stands for. However, this investment is primarily from fairly low-income groups of people. The participating artists and their audiences are quite often students, people at the beginning of their studies or careers, or people working in the more experimental area of arts for little or no recompense. Participation fees, ticket prices and venue hire costs all need to be pitched low to ensure accessibility, attendance and participation. Therefore, self-generated income is minimal due to the low pricing of tickets and participation fees, as well as the experimental and alternative nature of the work which has minimal mainstream appeal. The limited marketing and promotional resources also contributed to restricted exposure and income. Most independently generated income is through venue hire. Therefore, PACT is deeply dependent on public and private arts funding for its existence.

During the time period of this study (2007-2011), the public funding for PACT came from all three levels of government. The venue from City of Sydney (local), some project funding from Arts NSW (state) and core organisational funding from OzCo (national). Of course, on top of this there were various project funding applications that were successful as well as several philanthropic bodies supporting

projects throughout the year. Primary support was the venue, provided by the local council, complemented by OzCo which supported the creative and administrative costs of the organisation.

One of the most significant financial developments for PACT as an organisation was the formal recognition by OzCo of not only their local relevance in the contemporary performance scene, but their impact and relevance on a national level. In 2008, PACT was one of only 25 small to medium arts organisations in the country awarded OzCo Key Organisation status, and therefore received triennial funding through the Theatre Board. This successful application meant that PACT had been recognised as evolving beyond the Youth Theatre category and was acknowledged as being a significant player in nurturing, training and promoting emerging, contemporary performers. PACT's unique role in the Australian cultural ecology is that it became the only arts organisation within Australia that works exclusively with emerging artists. Regina Heilmann recognised how critical this was: "PACT is a stepping stone, a launch pad – a dynamic and supportive environment that enables young artists to sustain their practice and keep moving ahead, contributing to the vibrancy of contemporary Australian culture".¹⁰³

The time period of this study was an exciting era to be involved with PACT – assisting to lay the foundations of various programs that would go on to produce a new generation of experimental, contemporary performers in Sydney. This new era of working specifically with emerging artists coincided with policy developments for this particular sector of the arts. Initiatives such as the Australian Federal Government's \$6.6 million Opportunities for Young and Emerging Artists (OYEA) (2008-2011) fund (from which PACT received \$25,000 to develop the new work *Bully Beef Stew* in 2011), and the ongoing interest and agenda of governments to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creative expression, provided a great opportunity for urban, emerging, Aboriginal contemporary theatre-makers. PACT took advantage of this social and political climate to develop a range of programs for Aboriginal theatre-makers over five years.

¹⁰³ PACT centre for emerging artists (2009). *PACT Centre for emerging artists Annual Report 2008*. Sydney: PACT centre for emerging artists, p.6.

In the next section I will describe the history of the Aboriginal-specific programs at PACT and detail the programs offered from 2007-2011, explain their evolution and why it was necessary for them to evolve. I will also introduce the artistic team behind these opportunities and programs, and look at the staff motivation for establishing and continuing to offer Aboriginal-specific opportunities.

5.1 The Evolution of PACT's Aboriginal-Specific Programs

The PACT Aboriginal-specific programs evolved from residencies with slightly different structures through to a more tightly facilitated performance laboratory format, and culminated with a new devised/facilitated performance work that was created and performed by Aboriginal artists. All of the programs listed here were instigated under the artistic leadership of Regina Heilmann and Chris Murphy. Both have since left PACT and the Aboriginal-specific programs established by Regina and Chris are no longer being offered, although *Beef Bully Stew* (2011) is still listed on the PACT website as available for production and touring, and the current artistic team do have plans for future projects. I will return to this in more detail later in the Chapter.

Interviews conducted with Regina and Chris revealed their perceptions of how the series of opportunities from 2007-2011 came about and evolved. Their extensive artistic experience informed the initial development and execution of the Aboriginal-specific program. Regina is a director and theatre-maker in her own right. A performer with Sidetrack Performance Group from 1988-1997, she created and devised contemporary performance work as a core ensemble member in works such as *The Drunken Boat*, *Idol* and *The Measure*. Her prior training was driven by director Don Mamouney who aimed to develop a theatrical form that would reflect the contemporary world. Regina came into contact with PACT as a PACT ensemble tutor and was eventually asked to take the helm as Artistic Director (AD) in 2002. Regina says of her intentions for her time at PACT were that she wanted to:

create an environment of excellent practice; to develop a stepping stone program including: ensemble training and performance making, master-classes, mentorships, established/emerging artists networking, laboratories, performance making opportunities, curatorial opportunities; leading young and emerging artists to independent practice.

When Regina was offered the position of AD at PACT upon the departure of previous Artistic Director Caitlin Newton-Broad, she requested that Chris Murphy also be invited to become part of the creative staff. Chris, who became the Associate Director, had previously collaborated with Regina on and off for over 12 years. Having also worked with alternative organisations such as REM Theatre, physical theatre group Legs on The Wall and Theatre Kantanka, she was no stranger to developing interesting and experimental new works in unconventional spaces, traversing cross-cultural collaborations and cross-disciplinary interests. Chris says of her time at PACT:

Working at PACT was truly life changing. It was an extraordinary opportunity for me to learn how to take on the shared responsibility of a company and give it your all. I guess what we did was to bite off more than we could chew, and chew like crazy!

Regina and Chris inherited a rich history of experimental, innovative and inclusive arts practice from previous PACT Artistic Directors. Anna Messariti (1994-1997) claims her work at PACT was “distinctly informed by the politics of presenting and exploring diversity”.¹⁰⁴ Chris Ryan (1997-1999) challenged ideas about identity, the notion of “acting” and “encouraging participants to question form as well as content.”¹⁰⁵ Caitlin Newton-Broad (1999-2002) encouraged “the fundamental exchange that takes place in a collaborative process”.¹⁰⁶ It was Caitlin who instigated the first of PACT’s Aboriginal-focused opportunities with local Aboriginal youth.

From 2002, Regina and Chris changed PACT from a youth theatre into the only arts organisation in Australia working exclusively with emerging artists.

¹⁰⁴ Mack, T. (2000). “PACT – Continuity Through Change”. *Lowdown Youth Performing Arts in Australia*. Volume 22, Number 3:10-11, p.10.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p.11.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*.

Throughout Regina and Chris' tenure at PACT, an element that they consistently found hard to balance was their artistic vision with funding body obligations. Sometimes the two would not align. For example, PACT was obliged under their venue in kind support agreement with the City of Sydney to offer a program that was accessible to local children. However, this age group (under 18) was not the focus group of PACT's artistic vision for emerging artists, which was supported by OzCo. Another component of PACT's agreement with the City of Sydney was to provide the surrounding area – the nexus of Newtown, Redfern, Alexandria and Erskineville – with relevant programs for the betterment of the local community. This community has a strong Aboriginal presence. In response to the location, funding obligations and in recognition of the socio-economic gap felt by these communities, PACT under Caitlin Newton-Broad developed an Aboriginal-specific community-based program that took place at PACT in 2002 called *Stand Your Ground* (2001).¹⁰⁷ This was a community-based event in partnership with local organisations and used popular culture to engage the Aboriginal community and develop a performance. Despite not necessarily being completely aligned with PACT's artistic vision, it was an inspiring project. As Regina describes,

When Chris and I took on the role of directorship at PACT, Stand Your Ground had been up and running. I felt that there was a strong commitment to continue that because the first version of it was so exciting and wonderful. I mean the kids and the community that came to PACT to watch and see what was going on, were so excited, so empowered, and thrilled by that experience of being in a real theatre space, with all the lights and all the paraphernalia. It drew a huge audience that had never been to PACT before, and that was obviously something that we felt, given our proximity to Redfern and Waterloo, that it was a really important strand to maintain.

Having witnessed the positive outcomes of *Stand Your Ground*, Regina felt it was extremely important to continue on with this opportunity – this is despite being well out of their cultural and creative waters:

¹⁰⁷ *Stand Your Ground* was a community cultural development collaboration between communities and across cultures, particularly Aboriginal, which involved eight weeks of workshops for dance, video and hip-hop. The collaboration involved PACT Youth Theatre, Cleveland Street High School, JJ Cahill Memorial High School and the Waterloo Girls Centre.

So even though we didn't know very much about, umm, community art – if that's what you want to call it – or Indigenous art, or Indigenous culture, we decided that we would run with it because it seemed like it was a really important thing to do: to connect with the local community that didn't have the same advantages – a community that was often marginalised and didn't have the same privileges and advantages as white kids had, or the middle class had, or the rest of the community had. So yeah, we really wanted to find a place for those people to find their own voices.

Their first series of attempts to do this involved maintaining the existing and inherited model. The programs altered slightly through *Stand Your Ground 2* (2002) and *Stand Your Ground 3* (2003), *Gathering Words* (2006), and then *Dream on to Reality* (2004), which was the first attempt at incorporating more experimental performance practice into the opportunity through video installations. This period also included the engagement of Karen Therese as Community Cultural Development Artist (2005-2008) in order to consolidate and better implement these programs.

Through Karen, these programs continued to develop and eventually morphed into *Gathering Ground* (2006) in partnership with Redfern Community Centre. *Gathering Ground* (2006) was “a collaborative multi-art promenade performance created and presented by young people on-site at The Block in Redfern”.¹⁰⁸ *Gathering Ground* (2006) was a walking tour of The Block developed in conjunction with the local Aboriginal community and incorporated film, performance, visual art, and acrobatics.

Blending the initial ideas of *Stand your Ground* with Regina and Chris' new artistic vision for PACT as a place of interdisciplinary and experimental performance, *Gathering Ground* (2008) took on a more experimental and alternative edge. When discussing the *Stand Your Ground* (2001- 2003) and *Gathering Ground* (2006) outcomes, Regina highlights the desire and need for such programs, but that perhaps the next move forward for PACT was to challenge existing ideas and perceptions of what was artistically possible. She reported:

¹⁰⁸ PACT centre for emerging artists website. “Gathering Ground 2006”. Accessed 15/02/12. Available from: <http://www.pact.net.au/2011/09/gathering-ground-2006/>

The outcome of Gathering Ground [2006 and 2008] was wonderful and the audience was thrilled again. It proved that it was something that people really wanted to see, and it was something that the kids really wanted to do. We tried to move it out of a typical performance mode of doing hip-hop, R&B, modeling or dancing which was the thing that the kids wanted to do. We wanted to challenge their notions of what live performance would be by creating a bit of drama in there as well ...which I can't say was particularly successful.

Although the outcomes were well received by the community, Regina recalls that by the second *Gathering Ground* (2008), the relationship between PACT and Redfern Community Centre (RCC) was strained. There were various issues such as cultural misunderstandings and internal politics at play. This is mentioned in section 5.3.2. Here I will simply highlight that one very positive outcome that did occur from PACT's initial contribution in *Gathering Ground* (2006) was that Karen Therese's involvement enabled her to develop a rapport with several local Aboriginal emerging artists and identify their desire to artistically "find a place" and "find their own voice". Therese suggested a mentorship program for these emerging artists. This became *StepUp* (2007). *StepUp* was modeled after an existing PACT program called *Vacant Room* that was not Aboriginal-specific. *StepUp* (2007) was initially a mirror-reflection of *Vacant Room* and aimed to provide a much-needed opportunity for these emerging Aboriginal artists to pursue their practice. As described by Regina,

Kaz made a lot of connections with younger artists and so she actually came up with the idea to have a mentorship program for them. So the older artists who are at Redfern can mentor the younger ones, and they can come into PACT as well and be mentored by professional Indigenous artists. It was actually through all her talking, being on-site and being in the community that Karen came up with this idea.

Chris confirms that this program also aligned much more closely with the artistic vision and direction that Regina and Chris wanted to take PACT in comparison to past Aboriginal-specific programs such as *Gathering Ground* (2006 and 2008), that were developed partly as an obligation to funding bodies such as City of Sydney. She explains PACT's major objective:

It's to provide support for emerging artists. In which case, StepUp [2007-2008] and Incubate [2009] programs were absolutely aligned to the company's core objectives. Those projects sat in a really good

place for PACT and what it was doing. They sat right in the heart of its core activities.

However, aligning the Aboriginal-specific opportunities to PACT's core activities and artistic vision did not automatically equate to a perfect program. Issues arose during *StepUp* (2007 and 2008) such as lack of artist commitment, high drop-out rate, and lack of commitment to working in the PACT space. According to Chris:

The ideas and the reality didn't always meet. The expectations, or how it [the opportunity] was set up in theory changed. Set up as a mentorship, you come and spend time in the space. Sometimes it didn't happen, it didn't work. It needed to be more group focused.

The realisation that aspects of *StepUp* (2007 and 2008) were not as effective as they could be sparked the remodeling of *StepUp* into *Incubate* (2009). This was a more facilitated opportunity with established Aboriginal director Wayne Blair. Based on the participants' more positive attendance rates, commitment, and stronger performance outcomes of *Incubate*, this opportunity was perceived as more successful than *StepUp* (2007 and 2008). On the back of this opportunity, PACT successfully applied to OzCo for OYEA funds to create a new full-scale performance work with the theatre-makers from *Incubate*. The outcome was a new performance piece, *Bully Beef Stew* (2011). This work is an exploration of what it means to live and identify as Aboriginal today. As Sonny Dallas Law explained in an interview to the online magazine *Brag*, "Not all of us go through the traditional cultural practices like in other places of Australia. So we dived into how we practise our traditions and maintain our cultures living in the city in 2011".¹⁰⁹ He went on to explain:

I chose to write and perform about this subject because I feel it's time for young Aboriginal men to have some role models and listen to good stories. In the media and out in the community we still get stereotyped. I wanted to send a message, not just to young Aboriginal men, but to everybody, that this is who we are; we are just like every other male out there. I think this is going to be a great show, especially for young Aboriginal men, to see the positive side of being an Aboriginal man.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Binns, S. (2013). "Bully Beef Stew. PACT's Fearless First Commission". *The Brag* June 29. Accessed 16/04/12. Available from: <http://www.thebrag.com/2011/06/27/theatre-feature-bully-beef-stew/>.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Sonny here demonstrates that he feels there is a need to defy negative stereotypes that still exist of Aboriginal men. He hopes to present and promote more positive images of Aboriginal males, tell new stories about the experience of being an Aboriginal male, and show that Aboriginal males within contemporary society are urban, interesting and can be positive additions to society. PACT, with the support of OzCo, provided an opportunity to make this possible.

Bully Beef Stew proved a great success, with reviewers praising the positive presence of Aboriginal artists on stage as powerful, timely and necessary. Angela Bennetts from Alternative Media Group of Australia says, “Bully Beef Stew is a good example of the powers of transformation. The performance started off as a bud of an idea during a PACT program a few years back...and developed into a professional show”.¹¹¹

Sydney arts blogger Augusta Supple writes:

*It's fun. It's energetic – it makes me smile and want to be a part of whatever they are doing. Magnetic. Watchable. It is breathtaking...They are impressive – and the show will stop your heart and start it again.*¹¹²

Lee Han from Artshub states,

*As a work that showcases the emerging talents of three young theatre-makers, Bully Beef Stew is a commendable production of itself...but as a challenge to the hegemonizing values of the whiter-than-white culture that saturates Sydney stages, it is brave, timely and necessary theatre.*¹¹³

This “brave, timely and necessary” presence was something that Lee Lewis felt could be achieved through cross-racial casting. Instead PACT has achieved it

¹¹¹ Bennetts, A. (2011). “Bully Beef Stew”. From *Alternative Media Group of Australia*. Accessed 07/08/13. Available from: <http://www.altmedia.net.au/bully-beef-stew/37859>

¹¹² Supple, A. (2011). “Bully Beef Stew. PACT”. From *Augusta Supple*. Accessed 07/08/13. Available from: <http://augustasupple.com/2011/07/bully-beef-stew-pact/#more-2502>

¹¹³ Han, L. (2011). “Bully Beef Stew”. From *Artshub*. Accessed 07/08/13. Available from: <http://au.artshub.com/au/news-article/reviews/performing-arts/bully-beef-stew-184767>

through a pathway opportunity that culminated in a successful, new work created through theatre-making processes. It should be noted however, that PACT never created its own Indigenous Arts Strategy or a Reconciliation Plan, whilst several larger organisations within Sydney such as the Sydney Opera House and the Sydney Festival have embraced this concept. Instead, PACT's program development was more responsive and grass roots in its evolution. This was partially due to restricted human resources that would make documents such as this difficult to create, however it is perhaps also reflective of a lack of professional understanding and capacity in cross-cultural collaborations.

From hip-hop with teenagers at The Block to a new work created through devising and theatre-making processes, the Aboriginal-specific program was important for PACT, for the artists and for the theatre ecology of Australia. And yet how and why was the program, despite being fraught with difficulties, executed from the perspective of the PACT artistic team?

5.2 The PACT Aboriginal-Specific Opportunities from the Perspective of PACT

To gain a better understanding of the Aboriginal-specific opportunities from the perspective of the artistic team, one-on-one recorded and notated interviews were conducted with both Regina and Chris. There were many collaborators and contributors from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who helped provide cultural support and ideas for PACT – particularly for their early programs – however, due to the restrictive scope of this study, I focused primarily on the formal role of the PACT artistic team as they played a primary and significant role in the creation, development and execution of the programs this thesis focuses on, that is, *StepUp*, *Incubate* and *Bully Beef Stew*. Wayne Blair and Andrea James were engaged to work on these projects as paid Aboriginal and Torres Strait employees; ideally, it would have been preferable to have included them in the interview process, however due to time and word count restrictions this was not possible. I expand on this in section 5.2.3.

The interviews were each approximately two hours long and took place in different places and at different times. Initial coding of these interviews revealed three primary categories of significance for Regina and Chris.

1. *It's Just Down to the Cultural Thing: Cultural Differences and Misunderstandings*
2. Perceived Importance of PACT
3. Difficult Interactions

Through a thorough analysis and a focused coding process, several significant patterns, conflicting thoughts and reflections emerged from the interviewees.

Four significant themes emerged:

1. Recognising Difficulties and Developing Methods to Overcome Them
2. The Importance of Flexibility and Willingness to Evolve Programs
3. The Importance of Real Relationships and Connection to Community
4. The Importance of a Sustainable and Long-Term Vision

Before these four themes are analysed in-depth, it is interesting to note that the language used throughout both interviews had some positive, but was of a predominantly negative tone. However, this was intersected with a strong belief that though the process of creating and implementing all of the programs (2007-2011) was difficult, the outcomes were positive, invigorating and something the artistic team were proud of. This use of negative and positive language to describe their experience about the process and outcomes did not appear to be forced or contrived. Rather it emerged as they found language to convey their perception of the programs. Moments when negative language emerged was during discussions about creating such opportunities (in contrast to the mainstream, open programs) and having them come to fruition. The interviews revealed that the process of engaging with, committing to, and ensuring an outcome from the Aboriginal participants was difficult and placed significant strain upon the organisation and its resources. Yet, despite these difficulties, the organisation and its staff, including myself, persisted

with the ongoing belief that the opportunity was significant and worthwhile, and PACT's relationship with the participants was valuable and important. The interviews exposed the various inventive and lateral ways the company and its staff evolved themselves and the opportunities in order to make them successful, and leave a positive impression upon the participants. However, before the positive outcomes came a period of difficulty that PACT needed to work through.

5.2.1 Recognising Difficulties and Developing Methods to Overcome Them

It felt like that was a really important thing that we needed to continue [Aboriginal-specific programs], so we struggled along with that cause it had a lot of inherent problems with it. No guarantee or trust that participants would commit or continue to be involved. It was a very hands on...very much about making sure it was all going to happen because it was a bit of a fight really, because, [sigh]. It's hard work to make a piece of performance and requires a lot of commitment.

Regina Heilmann

As mentioned, and in common with many under-resourced, overstretched small to medium arts organisations, PACT was running off the proverbial smell of an oily rag. Most of the fuel was provided by the committed staff themselves – namely the artistic team Regina and Chris. This practice of ensuring programs occurred, even on tiny budgets and with limited resources, was so commonplace at PACT with every program carrying a certain degree of difficulty, that it was therefore surprising to hear within both interviews, the extent of difficulties, strain and fear that were part of developing and executing the Aboriginal-specific programs.

Negative language such as “struggled”, “fight”, and “hard” was peppered continuously throughout both interviews. Things “broke down”, it “didn't have an easy beginning”, there were “dreadful emails and discussions”, we “struggled”, and “had to manage them”, it was “fraught”. These weren't attacks on the participants. It almost seemed hard for both Chris and Regina to say many of these words. They would often pause mid-sentence, seemingly hesitant to reveal the difficulties faced. Regina haltingly describes the sensation of providing the opportunities: “You can

only do so much...[pause]...so given the right opportunities, you know...take them up...and I mean, some people don't...[stops to reflect]...I mean it was quite tricky with the first *StepUp* [2007]”.

Regina perhaps best summarised how “tricky” aspects of creating and sustaining all of the opportunities when she stated: “So it was quite fraught really, as a process...”. The word fraught is repeated when she says, “But I think because of... there was a lot of fraught situations and difficulties in communication and politics and ummm...it wasn't as smooth as that”. Chris also refers to the experience as fraught saying the initial Aboriginal-specific opportunities had: “very fraught dynamics ...very hard...”.

Something fraught is a situation or course of action filled with something undesirable, or something that causes anxiety and/or stress.¹¹⁴ Statements such as those above, and their delivery in the interview implied there indeed was a significant amount of anxiety and stress from PACT staff. This language was used primarily in reference to the process, and particularly when speaking about the first phase of the range of opportunities offered over the years, namely – *StepUp* (2007 and 2008). As Chris explains, “Look, this particular *StepUp* [2007] didn't have the outcomes that the intention was. It took a while for...this one, it just needed enormous amounts of support. So the mentors were there but the mentees, you know, it's like, they didn't come or they dropped out”.

Despite this disappointing outcome, the program was not considered by the artistic team to be undesirable. In fact it was very much a desired component of the PACT annual program from the point of view of staff, the relevant funding bodies and the artists. Regina personally felt that: “I wanted to continue the program that had begun at PACT. I know that it was a really important. It was perceived to be a very important aspect of what PACT was doing, and I wanted to honour that”.

One emergent concept from the analysis of the negative language being used was that despite the strong belief in the moral and ethical benefits behind the

¹¹⁴ Macmillan. (2010). *Macquarie Dictionary Online*. URL: <http://macquariedictionary.com.au/>

opportunities, there was an underlying sense of fear that the programs would not be successful, that there wasn't the commitment to the program that PACT was used to with its open programs, and that all of the strain and difficulties would not bear fruit. Chris questions, "What do you do if no one turns up? What do you do if no one has anything at the end of the process? How does the company manage that and if you've sort of got to put on a show...what do you do?".

Regina identified difficulties stemming from different expectations, largely due to lack of communication from the mentees, as the primary cause of the strain. Emails were not responded to, mobile phones were disconnected, turned off or calls never returned. Paperwork was not submitted on time, or at all; timetables that were agreed upon were not adhered to, leaving the valuable PACT space empty and often mentors' time wasted. The staff at PACT spent a significant amount of time and energy chasing down things that were required by the organisation from the participants of these programs with the constant uncertainty as to whether or not they were progressing, committed to the program, "dropping out" or even aware of what was required from them.

When I asked Regina what she found to be the single most difficult aspect of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, she responded "Contacting them. Ensuring that the schedule, meetings or setting up the space happened – making sure that artists were actually committed to meeting those schedules and deadlines and turning up".

I too faced this difficulty in communicating with the Aboriginal participants of this study. The same pattern Regina, Chris and I had experienced at PACT began to re-play itself out when I attempted to lock down interview times, places and details with some of the theatre-makers who were involved in the programs. My emails and phone calls would go seemingly ignored. Out of desperation, I resorted to social media avenues to kindle better communication. This proved extremely effective. Response rates increased and dates were set for interviews. Even more interesting was the fascinating relationship and connection that emerged through Facebook communication. I could see and comment on what the participants were doing in

their daily lives, I knew how their child was progressing, what new job they had just engaged in, whether their team had won at football that week and that they'd got a new haircut. They in turn could find out about me and my life. They received some insight into my friendship circles, my interests, and saw images from my life. This instigated some great online and in-person conversations. There was a virtual relationship established that translated easily into, and indeed enabled, a face-to-face one.

One great example of this was when I was meant to interview Björn Stewart. This interview had been two years in the planning from first discussion to finally both committing to being in the same place at the same time. Fate stepped in with another idea however, and on the day I was to interview Björn I severely injured my ankle. A situation that could have resulted in misunderstandings and misperceptions about postponing the interview (and the possibility of Björn losing interest and the interview never being re-scheduled), instead became a shared-sympathy situation. A friend posted an image of my rather disgustingly swollen and bruised ankle the size of a tennis ball on Facebook which Björn was able to see, and by the time I contacted him to discuss changing the interview date and time, he couldn't have been more accommodating or sympathetic to my injury. Likewise, after arranging an interview with Kate Beckett, she kindly, over Facebook, invited me to join her in her home. This personal touch, which ironically came from what are sometimes perceived as impersonal mediums such as Facebook, assisted in the realisation that difficulties encountered by Regina and Chris were perhaps not a lack of commitment and willingness from the theatre-makers, but instead a lack of interest in communicating through traditional channels. What was initially an obstacle for me – no communication and no commitment – resulted with an extremely positive outcome. I found that I had the capability of building meaningful and informed relationships with the participants. This emerging dialogue and relationships are a reflection of Dwight Conquergood's assessment that emerging theories in this context are a joint enterprise. The information generated from this ethnographic process is co-created. Conquergood cites Peter Jackson's belief in radical empiricism and states, "The radical empiricist's response to the vulnerabilities and vicissitudes of fieldwork is honesty, humility, self-reflexivity, and an acknowledgement of the interdependence

and reciprocal role-playing between knower and known”.¹¹⁵ The realisation of this interdependence was crucial in developing strong lines of communication and in-depth, personal perspectives from participants of the study, and collecting comprehensive information. It was a shared experience that was not simply me studying “them” but generating thoughts and ideas together.

To return to the difficulties faced by PACT, further to the communication difficulties was the perception of the lack of commitment by the participants, particularly during *StepUp* (2007 and 2008), which initially generated a sense of frustration, fear and lack of trust from PACT. There was ongoing uncertainty that the program would be engaged with nor result in successful outcomes. This generated an underlying sense of fear and distrust from the perspective of the organisation. The Aboriginal participants did not behave, communicate nor engage in the same way as the participants of *Vacant Room*, the open-program of which *StepUp* was the mirror-reflection. There was a belief that there was a lack of investment in the opportunity, a lack of willingness to commit the way the company required them to, and participants perhaps did not have the skills and discipline as yet to work independently the way the participants of *Vacant Room* did. Regina said;

One thing with Vacant Room – emerging artists come into the space on their own and have 20 hours with a mentor of their choice. It’s quite hard to be in a space on your own and make a work. That’s really difficult for anyone really. I think that was a bit of a stumbling block with the first StepUp.

With stumbling blocks, frustrations, lack of trust and commitment, one must ask, as Chris Murphy asked earlier, “What do you do?”. Indeed, as an arts organisation, what do you do when funding bodies have expectations and promised outcomes for their funding, when artists and audiences are depending on your guidance and facilitation, when staff are fearful and concerned that all their tireless efforts are ineffective, and not engaging the theatre-makers they have targeted to assist? And with all of these difficulties, where is the incentive for any small to

¹¹⁵ Conquergood, D. (1991). “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics”. *Communications Monograph* 58: 179-194, p.182.

medium sized arts organisation to engage in what is possibly a “fraught” process? The stakes are high for a small to medium arts organisation such as PACT. Funding rounds are extremely competitive and unsuccessfully executed programs do not assist in enhancing PACT’s reputation with funding bodies to successfully deliver an arts program. This would potentially jeopardise future funding applications.

So why does PACT continue to work with this particular group? One possible answer is found in the alternate use of extremely positive language applied in certain contexts throughout the interviews. This positive language was increasingly used when discussing the processes and outcomes of the second *StepUp* (2008) and increased as discussion of the opportunities progressed through into *Incubate* (2009) and finally *Bully Beef Stew* (2011). Though there was still the identification of difficulties and negative language being applied in reference to the process, it was always accompanied by a positive reference to the outcome once these difficulties were resolved.

Chris describes the second *StepUp* (2008) program,

You know, for the time that they had and the complexities around timetables, and all being in the same room at the same time, I do remember those showings with a lot of, you know, I thought they were really positive outcomes.

Regina describes the feeling of getting through the process and viewing a ‘final production’ and its subsequent outcomes of confidence and independent work practice:

It’s just fantastic when artists came into the space and worked and threw their ideas around and created a work, which they then performed with pride, with a level of skill. It’s exciting for any of the artists that I worked with just to go – ok we’ve got an idea, we want to try it out, we’re going to do this and that and then we have a final production which we’re going to show people. That’s quite an achievement. I’m always blown away when young people make things and they know how to make them, and to know that people have gained the skills and confidence to go into the space and to actually make the work, and apply themselves.

The most positive and emotive comments were made by Chris when she reflected on the experience of hearing the Aboriginal collaborators of *Bully Beef Stew* (2011) talk at an event she had arranged, post-PACT involvement:

And what I thought was really fantastic was last year when the boys did the show at PACT, Sonny, Björn and Colin. It was something that actually struck me. They came and spoke at the museum [where Chris now works] during July. It was very personal and very heartfelt. [Chris here seems to be very moved by the recollection of this interview] I was like – Oh God! They were talking about themes in the show and in a very personal way. They were saying it was about my father and...you sort of feel quite teary. It was very genuine. They are just fantastic. I guess for them that was still at PACT that show, but I suppose in a way it was an opportunity that continued on from that period of time when they'd done you know the ensemble and these programs. It was them, a culmination in a way of their ideas, and they made a show.

It was a very clear pattern within both interviews that as the theatre-makers who were participating in the opportunities proved they were building and developing skills, willing and capable to produce outcomes and were constructing a strong relationship with PACT, PACT in turn became more and more positive about the opportunities and the relationship they had with the artists. Subsequently the outcomes improved, as did the programs.

The programs, however, didn't simply improve themselves. There was active engagement by PACT to reconsider the opportunities they were offering and develop and evolve them so that the difficulties they faced in the earlier programs were addressed and they felt they were no longer tentatively feeling their way, but producing opportunities that were relevant and effective for the participants.

Regina and Chris acknowledged that difficulties diminished and more positive outcomes increased if they engaged with the theatre-makers to provide what they needed. These needs included a willingness to be flexible and evolve the programs to suit the needs of the Aboriginal theatre-makers, not solely the arts organisation; build meaningful and sincere relationships with the participants and form a connection with the community that supports them; and generate a long-term vision and sustainable

opportunity for the participants, demonstrating commitment as an organisation to Aboriginal theatre-makers.

This leads me to the first perceived requirement: that the programs needed a flexible and evolving approach in order to mould and shift according to what best suited the Aboriginal theatre-makers' needs.

5.2.2 The Importance of a Flexible and Evolving Program

I think it just needed another approach really. It needed really full on...it needed absolutely for these young people to be supported differently.

Chris Murphy

As identified in the previous section, there were aspects of the Aboriginal-specific programs that were fraught, difficult and generated feelings of frustration and fear amongst the PACT staff. In particular, the first *StepUp* (2007) program was not perceived as having achieved the objectives the organisation set out to achieve. Chris explains that despite several of the participants having dropped out or disappeared, the organisation still managed to put something together to achieve an outcome for the program. They asked Aboriginal performance practitioners from their networks to come in and do showings or performances of their work à la variety night style. Chris explains,

And the mentorship [StepUp 2007] sort of fell over because people dropped out and there sort of really was only one standing if you like. So in order to present anything, it actually became a huge night with a massive audience. But there were these short pieces...

KRG: So it became a curated night as opposed to a creative development process?

CM: Yeah. So it sort of morphed. And it kind of needed to morph. It didn't sit in one place or the other. It got reconfigured. It wasn't what it set out to be.

Having recognised that the first Aboriginal-specific program with urban, emerging theatre-makers had not been as effective as they hoped, PACT's response

was one of flexibility and willingness to respond to what the artists needed to make the following year a success. Chris explains: “You know there’s that sort of something nearly falling over. It’s not working. From my perspective the practical response was to reconfigure what the program was so I guess I feel like that’s what happened with the earlier *StepUp*”.

So what did PACT identify as needing reconfiguration and how did they respond with flexibility in order for the program to evolve? Three primary areas (indicated below as A, B and C) of evolution and flexibility became apparent: Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander facilitators and directors in the management and creative direction of the programs; recognising that a mirror-reflection of the mainstream program is not effective and Aboriginal participants needed a different model or, were coming from a different starting point; PACT as an organisation couldn’t administer the program from arms-length but needed to be “hands on” in its development and execution, in conjunction with the Aboriginal artists involved.

A. Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander facilitators and directors in the management and creative direction of the programs

Initially PACT had engaged Karen Therese as the Community Cultural Development Artist in order to develop links within the community and develop relevant projects based on those connections. She instigated and facilitated the first *StepUp* (2007). Unfortunately this appointment didn’t have the positive outcomes that the organisation was hoping for. The significant issues began during the *Gathering Ground* (2008) project. This particular issue is too convoluted with many internal politics at play to adequately address in this study. This program in itself has been the subject of other studies such as the article by Paul Dwyer and Liza-Mare Syron “Protocols of Engagement: ‘Community Cultural Development’ Encounters an Urban Aboriginal Experience”.¹¹⁶ Rebecca Conroy was also commissioned by PACT to do a research report on this particular event, however it is not publically available at this

¹¹⁶ Dwyer, P. & Syron, L.-M. (2009). “Protocols of Engagement, ‘Community Cultural Development’ Encounters an Urban Aboriginal Experience”. In *About Performance*. No.9. 2009: 169-191. University of Sydney Press.

point in time.¹¹⁷ To summarise in brief, there was a breakdown in the relationship between the local Aboriginal community and Therese, resulting in Therese being unable to continue on in her position at PACT, and a perception by PACT and RCC that some damage had been done to the relationship between PACT and The Block. It should be noted that Therese is not of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. Due to the departure of Therese following *StepUp* (2007), *StepUp* (2008) fell directly back into the hands of PACT's core staff (Regina and Chris) to manage, oversee and facilitate. This resulted in a process of crisis management due to no Community Cultural Development Artist facilitating the project and the strained relationship that was left between PACT and the local Aboriginal community. Due to this, the PACT artistic team was now responsible for the project coming to fruition. This took a considerable amount of time and resources including the need to closely monitor and manage the program. Regina describes that "...we had to manage them – in terms of managing who was in the space, when; just ensuring people take up the offer, that they turn up when they're meant to turn up, that they were responsible for their relationship with their mentor".

The company had responded with a more involved, and controlling approach, yet it still didn't yield the outcomes they were hoping for. Therefore another change was instigated the following year which moved the program into a new model – *Incubate* (2009). For *Incubate*, as mentioned, PACT invited well-known Aboriginal theatre practitioner and director Wayne Blair to be the facilitator and director of the program. The outcomes of this program were notably more successful. Chris notes the difference that strong leadership involvement from Aboriginal artists and facilitators had on the program:

Having [people like] Wayne Blair and Wesley Enoch that can support from the back end, communicating with the artists and bringing them in and inviting them to come in. With them in there, being paid and steering it, that to me is a much better process. So the company can create the project but the artists are at the helm, leading a process that is in a way the best thing for the artist.

¹¹⁷ Conroy, R. (2008). *Gathering Ground 2008. Research Report*. PACT centre for emerging artists. Sydney.

The emerging artists involved in *Incubate* expressed that working with an Aboriginal artist like Wayne Blair was exactly what they wanted. James Saunders was enthusiastic about Wayne's influence: "I wanted to work with Indigenous artists and an Indigenous director and see what influences they would bring to my work, and see the direction they would take it". Björn states succinctly, "*StepUp* [2008] was fine. *Incubate* and working with Wayne, that was great".

It was felt by PACT staff that finally, a more successful model had been developed and that the leadership and involvement of Aboriginal artists to create structure, leadership and cultural insight was required for this to occur.

B. Recognising that a mirror-reflection of the mainstream program is not effective and Aboriginal participants needed a different opportunity or, were coming from a different starting point.

StepUp (2007 and 2008) was initially an almost mirror-reflection of the open, mainstream program that PACT had developed called *Vacant Room*. *Vacant Room* experienced its own set of challenges however, not to the same extent that was experienced with *StepUp*. Though the same program model had been offered to Aboriginal theatre-makers, the opportunity was playing out very differently. The artistic team came to the realisation that the participants of the Aboriginal-specific opportunities and programs had different requirements, needed different levels of support and were coming from a different starting point than many non-Aboriginal theatre-makers. The solution to this was to offer more structured schedules, more one-on-one time, and more time to understand the creative process. Regina explains this realisation:

We restructured it for Incubate (2009). It was much more structured time and a much more ordered environment than Vacant Room was. We realised that the [Aboriginal] artists that are not too familiar with the process of the place or the space or that type of practice. They needed more one-on-one time. Once we realised that, it made a huge difference.

This led to some significant changes throughout the program from *StepUp*, into *Incubate*. Regina and Chris recognised that the program needed to feel easy and accessible for participants. This is quite different to the *Vacant Room* model that required participants to submit an application and go through a selection process. With *Incubate*, a simplified application process was developed, and artists were personally invited to be involved; any administrative aspect to the program was minimised, and simply getting participants into the space was paramount. Regina states that getting people through the door and feeling comfortable became a chief concern – initial engagement was key. Once this was achieved, there was something to build upon.

Once PACT had altered *StepUp* from a mirror-reflection of *Vacant Room* into *Incubate*, the outcomes from *Incubate* were very different to *StepUp*. There was no dropout rate, there was a higher attendance rate throughout the creative development process and rehearsals, and there was a strong performance work as an outcome to demonstrate the successful process.

C. PACT as an organisation couldn't administer the program from arms-length but needed to be "hands on" in its development and execution, in conjunction with the Aboriginal artists involved.

Though Regina and Chris identified that the leadership of the program needed to be done by Aboriginal artists, that certainly did not mean that PACT's involvement in the program itself, nor their connection to the artists, was diminished. PACT could not simply provide space and administration for this opportunity. The involvement of Chris and Regina was paramount to the success of the program as they were able to monitor the issues and difficulties, create strong relationships with the theatre-makers and mentors/facilitators, and assess the positive outcomes it eventually had. Chris explains that the program was more successful in later years due to "more support staff wise. More hands on – more company support".

This company support included maintaining close working relationships with the artists in order to identify their needs; hearing from them what was working and what was not; and providing emotional and artistic support as required. PACT needed

to build and maintain a level of trust between the artists and the organisations and to ensure the organisation was not a cold, impersonal space but rather a community that was accessible and safe for Aboriginal theatre-makers who were exploring new ideas, and processes (this level of company support and its benefits is described in more detail in Chapter Six). The idea of community was incredibly important to all the participants of this study. In this next section I will outline the importance of authentic and meaningful connections in order to make the opportunities more effective.

5.2.3 The Importance of Relationships and Connection to Community

So I was imagining, ideally, like a bridge between the two sites [PACT and RCC] and constant movement between the two in terms of skills sharing and resource sharing; communication and community.

Regina Heilmann

The interviews with PACT staff and the theatre-makers both revealed that personal connections and authentic relationships were an essential component for an effective opportunity. This honest and open connection eventually established trust between the arts organisation and the theatre-makers, which helped the parties to identify what opportunity was needed, and to create improvements to it as required. It was also important for the artists to feel as though they were in a safe, transparent and comfortable environment. If this relationship and connection did not exist, the opportunity became less desirable for the participants.

The very existence of the Aboriginal-specific program at PACT came through a process of connecting with the local Aboriginal community, and developing community relationships. This process began with the *Stand Your Ground* (2006) program at The Block that PACT produced. Regina explains:

So we decided we'd try a different approach and Karen [Therese] started to research community, Redfern community. She started to make contacts and meet people, and met Tracey Duncan who was the Aboriginal Community Arts Worker at Redfern Community Centre.

They seemed to hit it off, and they started to brainstorm and from that came that idea that we take a project – we take it out of the theatre and we take the work to the site – to Redfern, to the neighbourhood. We use that site and the experience of the neighbourhood and their own turf, the peoples own turf, to try and engage participants and connect in a different way.

The first important connection with the community at Redfern and associated community organisations had been made. This connection enabled PACT to develop a more intimate understanding of the community's needs, desires and obstacles. It also created a relationship between PACT and The Block that had not existed before – something that Regina had always intended between the two groups, as mentioned above.

Perhaps most significantly, this effort at making a genuine connection and relationship evolved into a dialogue between the Aboriginal community, and PACT. A “dialogue”, a conversation between two or more people, demonstrated that the relationship was intended for both parties to have equal footing, both be equally invested, involved and respected. This perception of the connection was an important one in order to break down cultural misunderstandings. Regina states that “it created a dialogue and I think broke down some fears...as much as a theatre project can do that”.

It should be here recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, arts organisations and community workers are significant (and often not acknowledged) contributors to supporting and assisting non-Aboriginal organisations such as PACT behind the scenes. This was particularly the case during the earlier PACT programs such as *Stand Your Ground* and *Gathering Ground*. This lack of recognition was one of the tensions that was only partially resolved during *Gathering Ground*. This tension was explored by Paul Dwyer and Liza-Mare Syron in their paper “Protocols of Engagement: ‘Community Cultural Development’ Encounters an Urban Aboriginal Experience”. The paper looks at the intricate and often complex situations that can arise in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural exchange and relationships. When referencing *Gathering Ground* (2008), Dwyer and Syron state

that despite tensions and fundamental problems in the collaboration and communication process with PACT:

the strength of commitment to the project of the Aboriginal artists involved, their skills in building and maintaining relationships, their understanding of the significance of community protocols (including an awareness of when and where repair work is needed with respect to procedures that they themselves do not always get right first time) – all of this, together with the will of elders such as Uncle Max and Auntie Rhonda, the support of the Aboriginal Housing Company, the continuing enthusiasm of the community performers – meant that, in the end, this gathering could still take place...To re-cap, the gathering took place; it was allowed to take place by those with the knowledge, desire and authority for this to happen.¹¹⁸

The paper highlights the importance of Aboriginal artists, arts workers and community being heavily involved in collaborations such as these, and recognises the significant contributions made by Aboriginal artists, organisations, elders and community members that make the realisation of the project possible.

During the later programs *StepUp*, *Incubate* and *Bully Beef Stew*, the ideas and support offered by the established Aboriginal artists involved, Wayne Blair and Andrea James, was invaluable to the process, and recognised as a necessary component for the overall success of the programs. These artists were provided recognition by PACT by: being paid and publically recognised for their Director/Facilitator role, being consulted on the development of the project, and provided a level of creative input and control over its direction. This is demonstrative of how PACT reconstructed their programs (as discussed in section 5.2.2, part A) in order to build better programs and capacity for themselves, the artists, and Aboriginal community involved in their programs.

This new capacity and understanding needed to start somewhere however, and the support and dialogue that developed with the Redfern community and Karen opened up a new relationship, which eventually enabled Karen to identify a need within the Aboriginal community. There were young, emerging Aboriginal people

¹¹⁸ Dwyer, P. & Syron, L.-M. (2009), p.166

who were interested in developing their theatre-making practice, creating connections with established Aboriginal artists, and being associated with PACT. However, the relationship could not simply end with PACT providing a program. As mentioned in the previous section, PACT needed to continue to invest in the relationships with participating artists, establish strong levels of trust and demonstrate a genuine interest in them as artists and as people.

Theatre-maker Kate Beckett, one of the participants in both *StepUp*'s and the ImPACT Ensemble program (an annual, auditioned ensemble program that provides professional and creative development training for emerging performance [theatre] makers (18-30 years)) explains that should this relationship not exist, no matter how wonderful the opportunity being offered by the arts organisation, it becomes less desirable without the personal rapport and connection with the people involved. Kate, when asked if she would choose to apply for an opportunity based on the quality of the program or based on the people responded, "The connection with the people I think. I mean the quality of the program is important but I think you can get more out of a person". Kate expressed that she would be willing to forgo an opportunity if the relationship was not right.

Kate was one of the more involved participants at PACT. She took advantage of many opportunities including *StepUp* (2007 and 2008) as well as the ImPACT Ensemble. During my two years at PACT, I remember Kate and several other Aboriginal theatre-makers coming to visit regularly, unannounced and hanging about. She would use the space when it was free, resources when available and often simply come in for casual chats and advice from the creative team. It was PACT's aim that it be less of a "venue" and more of a "hub" in which there was an open door policy, people could come unannounced, and consult with the team whenever they were available. Kate believes that since Regina and Chris have departed from PACT, the ethos of PACT has changed. Kate mentioned that she now feels she needs to make an appointment to see someone and that she doesn't share the same relationship with the new team as she did with the old.

Of course it is important to note that for an under-resourced, over-stretched organisation such as PACT, there are benefits to changing this way of working in order to become more efficient and serve people in a different way. However, for Kate this sadly meant that she no longer felt as connected to the organisation and was looking for opportunities in other areas. This was not said with anger or bitterness but a simple fact that her relationship with other arts organisations such as Urban Theatre Project and Bankstown Arts Centre was now stronger and she felt more comfortable there.

Though Kate has moved on from her strong connection with PACT, the connection itself was possible through having time to form. As the PACT Aboriginal-specific programs extended over five years, there was time to invest in these relationships. This is part of why a sustainable and long-term vision is important as will be seen in this next section.

5.2.4 The Importance of a Sustainable and Long-Term Vision

I think PACT has been one of the most helpful places in terms of me getting a career and developing a career.

Kate Beckett

As Regina stated in the previous section, she had envisioned a collaborative relationship with the local Aboriginal community that was a dialogue, mutually beneficial, and so ingrained and long-term that it created a distinct path between the two groups. It is this long-term vision for this relationship that saw the opportunities on offer shift from an obligatory, locally-funded Community Cultural Development project to a nationally funded, new Aboriginal performance piece.

When Regina and Chris began at PACT, the CCD projects were extremely successful and popular within the community but it was identified that there was no critical mass of young, emerging Aboriginal theatre-makers or contemporary performers. Those that demonstrated interest lacked skills, confidence, experience

and opportunity. PACT wanted to change this. By investing in a long-term range of opportunities, PACT's Aboriginal-specific opportunities developed, in collaboration with the local community organisations, a small critical mass of skilled Aboriginal arts practitioners – their own creative Urban Tribe. Starting with connections with local schools and organisations in 2006, PACT by 2009 (through the artistic team Regina and Chris reaching out to the community and other arts organisations), had connections and collaborations planned with successful, established Aboriginal artists, and nationally recognised organisations such as National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association Dance College (NAISDA) and Major Performing Arts company, Company B. This long-term investment also meant that the opportunities could function as a kind of, in Regina's words, "feeder program". This meant that as the artists' skill level, confidence and development of their practice evolved, so could the program. Therefore by the time one of the theatre-makers had been involved with PACT for several years, he or she had the experience and the confidence to make their own works and investigate more opportunities independent of PACT.

The successful funding of *Bully Beef Stew* (2011) by OzCo's OYEA commissioned initiative is a great benchmark to measure the success of this long-term investment. PACT had proven to funding bodies that it was invested in the Aboriginal arts community, had established a culture of providing relevant and successful opportunities to emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers, and that this opportunity had national relevance. Sadly, organisations such as PACT cannot rely on funding to produce long-term programs and opportunities. The unpredictability and unreliability of funding often undermines any organisation's best intention to provide a sustainable program in the long-term. As Regina explains, "Well I think it's very hard to rely on funding. It's competitive and unstable. There's a real tension between what is and is not deemed to be worthy projects in art".

Importantly, PACT had previously proven itself to the Aboriginal theatre-makers that PACT was an organisation that would forge ahead with its programs with or without extra project funding, often delving into core funding in order to make an opportunity occur. This was the case for both *StepUp* (2007 and 2008) and *Incubate*

(2009). It was important to the organisation that they provide for the artists what they promised they would. After having built strong connections and relationships of trust, demonstrating their sustainability and ongoing investment in these artists was a vital key in the overall success of the program.

Sadly, after the last funding application submitted by Regina was completed, PACT appeared to have not continued this legacy for several years, demonstrating how fragile opportunities such as these can be. Without an artistic team determined to continue offering programs and opportunities, and with no applications to a funding body to support such opportunities and programs, they can simply disappear. Change is inevitable under new artistic direction and as the artistic vision changes, so organisational priorities also shift. This did indeed seem to be the case with the introduction of the new artistic team at PACT from 2010-2011. Fortunately, upon further investigation, I have discovered this is not ultimately the case. When I asked the new artistic team why the Aboriginal-specific program appeared to have ceased, Julie Vulcan, acting Artistic Director, provided the following response:

The program has not ceased. What has ceased is maybe the format of the program and the original program title ie. StepUp and later Incubate.

PACT has facilitated two showings of discrete video works from the show in 2011 and 2012 with curator Djon Mundine. PACT supported applications to Blaklines in 2013. In consultation and debriefing sessions with the Bully Beef Stew artists it was agreed that the support by PACT of emerging Indigenous artists was incredibly important within the community and that this should be encouraged to continue. PACT applied for and was successful for a new ATSI lab in 2012 to be held in 2013. The vision for PACT is to continue this cycle of development lab followed by presentation season in cycles (ie. Lab one year and presentation the following year/s). These programs might give the impression of having ceased or lying dormant from the outside, however, like all programs they are predicated on the availability and interest of artists/facilitators/directors and time constraints of all parties. This sometimes means negotiations take longer.¹¹⁹

So despite what appeared to be a hiatus in 2012, a new era of has just begun at PACT in 2013. PACT recently launched their new program, an intensive creative

¹¹⁹ Vulcan, J. (2013) (Acting Artistic Director, PACT), e-mail message to author, April 30, 2013.

laboratory for emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. This laboratory will be led by Björn Stewart. It would appear that the legacy and long-term vision begun by Caitlin Newton-Broad in 2001 with *Stand Your Ground* and evolved by Regina and Chris will continue on into a new era, led by new Aboriginal artists who were provided opportunities by PACT. The sustainability and long-term ripple effect of these programs are an important legacy for Regina:

I think it was an important offering. I mean, I wouldn't say everyone went "hey that's fantastic! StepUp is amazing!" I mean, not in that sense, but in a slow, sort of grassroots trickling through. It has to be a positive thing. Even though it might have only been a handful of people who experienced this at that point in time, whatever they got out of it they're passing onto their colleagues, or children, whoever. I feel like the offering was important. It's reached out in ways that I will never know.

Regina is correct – the opportunity has had resonance on many levels. All of the theatre-makers I interviewed are still working within areas of the arts as well as some of them working closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in a variety of capacities. Kate has gone on to continue making independent work and is now a teacher herself at RCC and Belvoir St Theatre as part of their Youth Outreach program *Youth Express*, Björn recently received funding to create a short film, James was writing about a transvestite in Kings Cross and his experience, and Sonny, at the time of the interview, was working as the Cultural Arts Development Officer at RCC. Though their number is small, this is indeed a critical mass of new generation theatre-makers who are changing the cultural landscape in Australia, each in their own way.

With some very successful outcomes that build a small critical mass of skilled Aboriginal theatre-makers and practitioners, perhaps Chris is right to state that what Australia needs is “more places like PACT. Why is there only one? There should be lots”. As can be seen in Chapter Six, the artists’ who were involved in these programs tend to agree. In this next Chapter I will present the same PACT Aboriginal-specific opportunities from the perspective of the theatre-makers themselves.

CHAPTER SIX

The Artists: Emerging, Urban, Aboriginal Theatre-Makers

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Maryrose Casey invested a significant amount of time developing a record of Aboriginal theatre history by interviewing established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. Unfortunately the perspective and opinions of emerging, Aboriginal performers are yet to be recorded. This chapter aims primarily to reveal the opinions, ideas and perspectives about the PACT centre for emerging artists (PACT) Aboriginal-specific programs. Through this framework, it also delves into their perception of their place within the artistic landscape in Australia, their opinions about opportunities available to them in general, and difficulties they believe they face. Most importantly, this Chapter is an opportunity for the next generation of emerging theatre-makers to be heard, on the record, and to play a role in moulding opportunities into a more effective and sustainable model. Four of the theatre-makers who participated in PACT's programs were available for interview.

Kate Beckett, Sonny Dallas Law, James Saunders and Björn Stewart are urban, emerging Aboriginal theatre-makers who were closely associated with PACT and its Aboriginal-specific programs from 2007-2011. They are four of the eleven artists who were involved in the PACT Aboriginal-specific programs from 2007-2011. Several other artists who were involved in these programs and contactable were invited to participate in this study. Due to no response received from these artists, I decided to focus on in-depth interviews with the theatre-makers who had responded with enthusiasm.

My time spent with these theatre-makers at PACT, in the interviews and continuing communication since then, has always proved inspiring, interesting and thought-provoking. They are four incredibly different personalities and yet shared many ideas about how they perceived themselves, their practice and the opportunities they were being given. Below is some information on each interviewee, however, I feel that my observations at the beginning of each interview give some insight into

their diverse lives and personalities. These observations will be included after each general introduction.

Kate Beckett

Kate is an emerging artist who began her practice as a film artist but realised, through the influence of PACT, that she wanted to develop her own performance practice and experiment with devising and theatre-making. Kate is deeply influenced by her family's interest in and love of the arts (her brother was a well-known local hip-hop artist, and her father is a musician who loved to busk). Kate reveals, "If I did any type of performance it would be singing. My family is so musical so I've done a lot of singing and busking with my father. When I was younger we used to go to Tamworth Music Festival and all these other places and Dad always busked and so has my uncle. You've probably seen him around Newtown. Black Elvis they call him". After high school, Kate went on to TAFE through Eora College to study Certificate II and III in Film and Television Production. Kate participated in *StepUp* (2007 and 2008), *Incubate* (2009) and was part of the ImPACT Ensemble open program in 2008.

The Interview:

I met Kate in the Leichhardt Housing Commission estate on a beautiful sunny day. Kate couldn't have appeared to be happier to meet. I sensed that she was looking forward to being given a voice, articulating her thoughts and having them heard. When we arranged the interview, Kate asked me if I would mind if she brought along her one and a half year old daughter, Pepper. I felt that, though an inevitable distraction, Pepper was an integral part of Kate's life as a mother and Kate's interaction with her art was now wholly integrated with Pepper's existence. We conducted the first section of the interview at a beautiful small, urban park around the corner from her apartment, whilst Pepper ran around playing. Kate managed to give me a lot of her attention whilst also keeping an eye on, and interacting with, Pepper. Eventually Pepper wanted to go home so we stopped the interview and moved to Kate's two-bedroom housing commission apartment, with the background sounds provided by Pepper playing with her toys in the lounge room right next to us.

There was barely any furniture but there was a small mountain of toys. Pepper had discovered a large bunny rabbit from amongst her toy barricade which, when you pressed its ear played *Für Elise*. It was a slightly surreal soundtrack to the interview.

Kate asked that we sit at the table (as the one couch was broken) and pushed away piles of research work she had been doing on her latest creative development to clear a space for us. As I sat, I glanced at the wall slightly diagonal from me and saw that there was a detailed funding calendar carefully copied out with meticulous notes on what opportunities she would apply for, and when it was due.

Sonny Dallas Law

Sonny is a writer, director, arts administrator and producer interested in experimental cross-artform practice. Also a graduate from Eora College, Sonny completed the Certificate IV in Theatre Performance and Practices, Certificate IV in Musical Theatre and Certificate IV in Film and Television. During the time of the interview, Sonny was the Cultural Development Officer at Redfern Community Centre (RCC). Sonny took part in *Incubate* (2009) and *Bully Beef Stew* (2011).

The Interview:

We met at RCC at 10am. I really like the tone of the place. The Block does seem like a diverse and interesting community with an energy sitting just underneath the surface. I had arrived early and was triple-checking all my equipment in the car. I noticed that the iconic painting of the Aboriginal flag on the side of a large building was immediately visible, like a symbol of ownership, or a nod of recognition as you came into The Block area. I braved the torrential downpour and approached the front doors of the RCC. There was a closed sign on the entrance. I ignored it and stepped inside. There was a significant leak immediately at the entrance, but no one seemed overly concerned. Sonny waved to me with a smile from his office. Sonny was wearing a vibrant red shirt, jeans and a tweed beret. He seemed to me to have managed to achieve a perfect blend of inner-city stylish, cool Block hood and urban

fashion sensitivity, with a slight touch of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flag colours (red, black and yellow).

James Saunders

James considers himself more of a writer than a performer. James moves smoothly between many different worlds including his rugby team, writing programs, theatre-making at PACT and his work with various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations such as GenerationOne.¹²⁰ James started a Musical Theatre Diploma with Eora College. James participated in *StepUp* (2008), *Incubate* (2009) and the ImPACT Ensemble in 2009. James was invited to be part of *Bully Beef Stew* (2011) but withdrew.

The Interview:

I met James outside his new workplace in the main street of Redfern. He now works for GenerationOne. We had agreed to go to a nearby football field so James could have lunch whilst we conducted the interview. This seemed fitting as James' interests are not only in the arts, he's also heavily involved in the local rugby club. This is an interesting duality – particularly when James' burly, White, working class football mates come to PACT and watch one of his performances as a gay, Aboriginal artist, and cheer uproariously.

The afternoon was sunny and we walked together down to the field where there was a small cafe selling sandwiches. On our way there we caught up like familiar acquaintances with James asking polite and friendly questions about what had been happening at PACT, and with Regina and Chris. I also heard a little about James' new position, the travel it involved and the toll it was taking on his relationship. He was finding this difficult but felt the work he was doing was extremely important. He gives the appearance of being a very dignified man. We bought some sandwiches and drinks and hit the almost deserted spectator stand. There was a field lawnmower touching up

¹²⁰ GenerationOne is an organisation that aims to end disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians within one generation through employment. This includes education, training, and mentoring.

the football field for an upcoming weekend game, and some local community members sitting on the stands or wandering through them. I was worried that the presence of other people nearby might inhibit James and what he would reveal, but this did not appear to be the case as we progressed. He spoke with friendly confidence through the interview and was extremely candid. It felt like James really relaxed in this familiar territory of the football field, talking about the arts.

Björn Stewart

Björn also crosses between artistic practices moving from the role of writer, to performer, to director, to film artist to deviser. He has experience across both theatre-making processes and script-based work, and has worked with more experimental organisation as well as the mainstages. A University of Wollongong graduate, Björn holds a BA (Creative Arts). Björn was involved in *StepUp* (2007), *Incubate* (2009), *Bully Beef Stew* (2011) and, like James, also took part in the ImPACT Ensemble in 2009.

The Interview:

It took over two years for Björn and I to meet up once again after our time at PACT. Though connected on Facebook, the last time we verbally spoke was at PACT during the ImPACT Ensemble show *Public Bunnies* (2009) in which Björn was a collaborator. At the time, I spoke to him and James about my line of research and interest in interviewing them – Björn was extremely keen. Unfortunately, time and location often kept us apart. Finally, Björn was available to meet. We had an interview all lined up however, that morning, I fractured my ankle and needed to re-schedule. However, Björn happily re-scheduled and I met him at the back of the Buzz Bar Café on King St, Newtown. He had been filming that day for an MTV Reality TV program. It was a fashion program in which they give participants a fashion make-over. He wasn't being paid, but was able to keep the clothes they gave him. He seemed amused by the job as he was telling me about it. He claimed he knew the whole thing was absolutely absurd and not what he wanted to be doing but he got some free clothes. I asked what else he was doing to make ends meet and he

explained he was performing as characters at children's parties. He said he didn't mind the job as it was quite fun however, he didn't think he would be able to continue as he'd just received an opportunity to develop a short film. Unfortunately the dates clashed so he would probably have to leave his one paying job to create the film – for which he would receive no money. He was however, extremely excited to have received the opportunity of developing the film and knew that's what he wanted to do. The back of the Buzz Bar was freezing – there was barely any lighting, no heaters, and very little atmosphere. There was no one else out there so I felt it was a good space for Björn to say anything he needed to say.

Each of the four interviews were approximately 2-2.5 hours long and took place in different places and at different times. Initial coding of the interviews revealed three primary categories of significance for the theatre-makers:

1. Access to Opportunities
2. Perception of a Successful Opportunity
3. *You're Automatically Judged on Everything*: Identity and Place

The analysis and focused coding process applied was the same as used for the assessment of Regina and Chris' interview with very different results. Through the application of this process, the four following patterns and themes emerged:

1. PACT as a Positive Influence
2. Playing the "Racial Card"
3. "We Work Differently"
4. The Urban Tribe

The participants all revealed that the concerns and perceptions they hold of their experience with PACT differed from those that PACT had. Their interviews also revealed some strong ideas about why certain aspects of opportunities were more positive for them, and provided insight into how opportunities being offered to Aboriginal theatre-makers could be more successful.

6.1: The PACT Aboriginal-Specific Opportunities from the Perspective of the Emerging, Urban, Aboriginal Theatre-Makers

I will now look in detail at each of these four significant categories.

6.1.1: The Importance of PACT/ PACT as a Positive Influence

His palm is open. He laughs breathily into the microphone and says in a slightly louder voice, which becomes more and more demanding in tone. "He puts out his hand. You put out your hand".

Incubate (2009) performance by Björn Stewart

PACT is a non-Aboriginal run organisation and at the time, did not have a single employee who identified as being Aboriginal. Yet PACT was perceived as a positive influence by each of the Aboriginal theatre-makers interviewed. The language used by the theatre-makers to explain their PACT experience was overwhelmingly positive and they each credit much of their subsequent careers in the arts to the opportunities received there. Björn stated,

I love PACT and I think they've always done a great job with emerging artists and new works. They've probably given me the kick-start into getting the ball rolling in my career. It's a place anybody can go to if they've got ideas and works and stuff to put it on. PACT was just, like, allowing me to get my stuff up on stage; getting a lot of the things that were on my mind off my chest, and being able to work with it. Bully Beef Stew [2011] was probably the happiest time. Going straight into the rehearsal of Bully Beef Stew, or just making the work and stuff like that was great! Absolutely loved it.

PACT gave Björn the opportunity to explore and give voice to his thoughts and creative ideas. He felt PACT was accessible, and a place for experimentation and "safe" failure. As a collaborator on *Bully Beef Stew* (2011), he was (as were all the collaborators) paid through funding for his role. He felt empowered by being employed as a theatre-maker and the economic stability he received from this.

James came from a slightly different perspective, feeling that the guidance and structure of an established arts organisation to guide and mentor was of significant assistance to him. He explains,

I 'spose having somebody that's working in an established organisation to look over work, and give guidance and mentoring is really important. Just my experiences with PACT and dealing with the way things are done there, it really helped me develop myself as an artist; coming out as an emerging artist.

Sonny was inspired by the opportunity to be mentored and work with established Aboriginal directors and theatre-makers, stating that working with Wayne Blair and Wesley Enoch was very influential for him.

SDL: Yeah I would love to be artistic director of Belvoir or STC [Sydney Theatre Company]. It's a goal of mine.

KRG: And you feel this is obtainable?

SDL: Yes. If [Wayne] Blair can do it and Wesley [Enoch] can do it, well I can do it too.

For Kate, PACT was a turning point in her career direction. Kate actually decided to become a theatre-maker after *StepUp* (2007). She says:

KB: I think PACT has been one of the most helpful places in terms of me getting a career and developing a career.

KRG: Do you think if places like PACT didn't exist, you would have ended up becoming a performer and an artist?

KB: I don't think I would have been a performer. I would have been a film maker...more of a writer...and somewhere like PACT being so warm and generous with time and not pushing, ummm... I guess having an understanding and encouraging you, ummm, yeah, that helped me.

This close connection, one of warmth, generosity, encouragement and understanding was vital to Kate. When I asked why she didn't have this relationship with an Aboriginal-run organisation, she responded, "I don't think there are many Indigenous organisations to be honest". To a certain extent, in Sydney, she is correct. There is no national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre organisation in Australia. Aboriginal-run Sydney-based Moogahlin Performing Arts was only in its organisational infancy at the time of writing. This absence is despite theatre-makers such as Björn feeling that the existence of an Aboriginal-run theatre organisation was "crucial". PACT was filling a gap for these theatre-makers.

All the artists had slightly different reasons for feeling that PACT and its opportunities were a positive influence and experience. These reasons included: a platform for voicing their ideas and thoughts; having connection and guidance from an established arts organisation; making connections and networks with established artists; feeling as though they were in a safe environment that provided warmth, generosity, support and understanding. Underlying all this was the perception that there needed to be a level of cultural understanding and willingness on the part of PACT to make a real connection with the participants, to better understand their situation and not draw pan-Aboriginal, stereotyping conclusions. One of the artists noted, in contrast, that he had an incredibly bad experience with an established, non-Aboriginal arts organisation. He was offered an opportunity by this organisation however, was unable to take it up due to commitments to family members who had expectations of receiving financial support. It was a cultural given for this theatre-maker that he would sacrifice a great arts opportunity in order to support his family. Unfortunately, the arts organisation did not understand this. They implied that they had invested heavily in this theatre-maker and that their withdrawal from the opportunity was “a really typical Aboriginal thing for you to do”. The theatre-maker felt guilty, insulted and felt as though the arts organisation thought that he “owed them something”. The theatre-maker no longer has a relationship with this arts organisation, nor participates in any of their opportunities.

As outlined in Chapter Five, despite an initial high drop-out level and many frustrating problems working with the emerging theatre-makers in the Aboriginal-specific programs, PACT persisted in maintaining positive communication and relationships with these artists. They were always welcomed into the space and invited to be involved in the opportunities on offer, unconditionally. This established a relationship of trust and has left all participants with a lasting, positive impression of their time at PACT and what the opportunities provided for them.

Another appealing role PACT played for the theatre-makers was that of a “middle-man” between the funding bodies and the theatre-makers’ creative pursuits. Each theatre-maker expressed numerous times that they felt the existing funding application process and the funding bodies were inaccessible to them. I will look at

this in more detail later in the Chapter. For now, I will simply note that their perception was that applying for funding was usually intimidating, difficult and not something they had the confidence or skills to engage with. They particularly felt that the major funding bodies were not overly interested in them, nor accessible to them, and that they hadn't achieved enough to get the attention of the major funding bodies and be taken seriously by them. One artist commented,

they kind of seem to take the same group [each funding round]. I feel as though the Australia Council gives money to the same people. Of course I apply for the Australia Council things but I know I'm not going to get it 'cause I'm not professional or I'm not known enough yet. I mean I always apply for it so they see my name, but I've always been knocked back by them.

Of course, it is possible that this is an indication that the application being submitted by this particular theatre-maker is not at a level required by the funding body. However, if this is the case, how does a young theatre-maker from a disadvantaged group within the community reach this level without opportunities and support to build their skills and capabilities?

This is a gap PACT attempted to bridge. PACT, as an accessible space, did not require the artists to engage with complex paperwork or application procedures, and kept their opportunities for this group of theatre-makers free-of-charge. This meant the theatre-makers were not required to apply for funding in order to create the work, or even to participate in the program. Instead PACT staff worked with the funding bodies, drawing on their own more significant experience and resources (in comparison to the emerging theatre-makers) in order to obtain funding from both government and philanthropic bodies. This method of course in itself generates a new line of problems and questions such as should PACT be paternalistically taking over this role for them? Perhaps a better method would be to provide the skills in order for the artists to develop their own applications. However, due to the restricted scope of this study, this question cannot be appropriately addressed. PACT moved forward with what they perceived to be the most effective way to support the artists at the time.

Perhaps the most important positive resonance that PACT had for the theatre-makers was providing an opportunity that was Aboriginal-specific without cultural-specific outcomes. The program was set up so that only those who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander could participate, but it did not require Aboriginal-specific content as an outcome. The theatre-makers believed that a lot of programs and opportunities being offered expected traditional references, cultural stereotypes and familiar topics such as the Stolen Generation and traditional relationship and connection to country. Kate explains,

When you say you're an Indigenous artist, the only thing I don't like about it is that you become kind of boxed, and then people sometimes have these expectations of you to be walking around talking language [her tone implies it is absurd] or they expect that maybe I come from the Northern Territory. You can become boxed. We're hearing about a loss of identity and all that type of stuff but I think people need to start embracing their new identity in the mix of culture.

All of the theatre-makers expressed this desire for new voices and new stories to be told, ones that more accurately reflected their urban, non-traditional lived experience or, as Kate termed it, their “new identity in the mix of culture”. Björn believed that he would be more motivated to be involved in opportunities if he wasn't expected to produce stereotypical Aboriginal content: “I would apply for it [funding] if it's like, this is for Indigenous people but it doesn't have to be about Indigenous content. It can be about anything”.

Sonny believes that there has been a positive transformation in recent times, and that the representations of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience are changing, therefore more stories are needed to reflect a contemporary existence. Sonny says,

I think there's been a shift. Ten years ago there was really great theatre but a lot of it was very political. It was very...I just can't think of the word...depressing, sad, victimised me. But I think now performers and writers want to do more positive things to share with the wider community.

Just like Kate, Sonny is sick of representations of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by both White and Black communities on Australian stages. They each expressed a desire to create whatever they wanted, outside of this prescribed racial and cultural framework. Björn claims just simply having more “Black faces” on stage would change non-Aboriginal perceptions about the contemporary Aboriginal experience, and that he shouldn’t have to create Aboriginal-driven content just to receive opportunities. He asserts that he feels “a little bit cheated” by these imposed cultural restrictions and that he doesn’t know “why I should actually have to keep going back to it”. Björn here agrees with the ideas of Lee Lewis: having more Black presence on stage, any stage, is important. Yet, Björn has chosen to achieve this differently from how Lewis suggests by creating his own work and demonstrating a preference for theatre-making processes instead of traditional plays.

As noted above, the PACT opportunities did not require the theatre-makers to generate Aboriginal-specific content. The participants could create absolutely anything that they wished. All of the opportunities provided time and space to explore any idea that was of interest or import to them, in any medium, discipline or style that they chose. It is interesting to note that without the requirement of exploring Aboriginal-specific issues, each of the artists interviewed nevertheless ended up returning to Aboriginal-specific concepts and ideas in some way. It was as if by removing the requirement, it enabled each young theatre-maker to consider what was most important for them to explore, and each chose to return to their heritage, and the personal lived experience they wished to better understand. For example, Kate created *Coloured Digger* (2008) which was an exploration of the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Soldiers during WWI, in which her great-uncle was a soldier; *Bully Beef Stew* (2011) was an intimate examination of contemporary Aboriginal “manhood”, what it means to be an Aboriginal man in today’s society and how to reach beyond inherited perceptions and stereotypes. Björn admits “it seems to always relate somehow to being Indigenous as well. It’s kind of ironic. I don’t know why I seem to keep going back there, relating back to my heritage”. Without the constraints of having to include Aboriginal content, the interviewees were much more interested in creating it and felt more invested in the subject matter.

Throughout all of the interviews the perception of PACT overall, was very positive, and there was sense that the opportunities and the organisation had left a real resonance with each participant. The theatre-makers perceived that PACT was accessible, connected, provided easily available opportunities, removed the burden of lengthy and complicated funding applications, and the requirement to produce Aboriginal-specific art content. As a result, from their perspective, PACT opportunities provided a positive experience. It created a hub for them to connect with, and networks for them to learn from; it provided skills to use to forge each of their careers.

6.1.2: Playing The “Racial Card”

“You see, I don't want to use it. I don't want to use my card. I don't want to play the card. I don't want to play the racial card”. He pauses, long enough to feel uncomfortable. He states, “I am owned. I am owned. I am owned by this land. I am owned by the government”.

Incubate (2009) performance by Björn Stewart

As mentioned above, opportunities for emerging, Aboriginal theatre-makers without the expectation of delivering Aboriginal-specific content were important to all of the theatre-makers interviewed. But why was this the case? Each of the artists expressed a belief that many of the opportunities they were offered or which were available from funding bodies and arts organisations were less about them as artists in their own right, and more about their Aboriginality. Returning to Björn's performance: “I don't want to use it, I don't want to use my card. I don't want to play the racial card” in this section I will look at the perception that these artists are often offered opportunities based on their racial background, and not on their skills level. This was a point of tension for many of the artists who were torn between feeling like they were a token component of an artistic program and wanting the opportunity to create work.

Kate states that she believes “a lot of things I am getting is because I am an Indigenous person. I'd say the majority of things out there is because they need Indigenous content”. James echoes this sentiment simply stating that he feels he is offered opportunities because he is Aboriginal rather than because he is an artist and

feels it is special treatment that undermines his value as an artist, “I've never really, in my life, wanted to have special treatment for being Aboriginal. I've always wanted to be treated, chosen for things based upon my merit”. Björn asks,

am I a good performer or am I just getting a lot of work because of my race? Last year I got a show at Belvoir and it's like, did I get that because of my heritage or did I get that because of my talent? What if I was just going for an audition that didn't require somebody that's Indigenous, would I still be able to get those things as well, or would I just keep landing Indigenous roles?

The effects of receiving opportunities in this manner seemed to create a negative perception about the opportunities for each of the theatre-makers, and especially Kate, James and Björn. It made them feel “boxed”, cheated and undermined their confidence. As Björn admits, it presents a dilemma, “...am I a good performer or am I just getting work because of my race...it really messes with your head sometimes...”.

When asked which they preferred to be identified as – an artist who happens to be Aboriginal or an Aboriginal artist – each of the artists stated that they identified as an artist first, and Aboriginal second. Of course their Aboriginality was an integral part of them, as Kate succinctly exclaimed, “identity is always going to come across. I mean say someone is Lebanese, or whatever, I mean they're Lebanese. Of course it's going to come across, because that's what they grew up with, and that's what you are!”. Yet she goes on to say that her Aboriginality is one part of her, and that the artistic aspect of her also requires recognition and respect. She states, “I'm mainly an artist, cause that's just what I am. But you know, I am Indigenous as well”. James agrees, stating he prefers to be referred to firstly as an artist, “Why? Because I am James Saunders, I am Aboriginal, but I am still an individual and that means a lot to me. I'm an artist and that's who I am”. When questioned further about why this is an issue, James replied,

My Aboriginality is a part of me but I am still me. And if people were talking and said “Oh yeah, James the Aboriginal artist is in that performance” rather than saying “James is a great actor in this performance” there's a sort of expectation that you should be representative of [a culture], rather than who you are: an independent artist.

All of the theatre-makers felt that they were perceived by society and the Australian arts culture primarily as Aboriginal. This identification brought political frameworks, stereotypes and ingrained perceptions with it – not to mention cultural responsibility. Kate explains, “on stage you’re automatically judged on everything, your appearance and everything like that. I remember it was either Leah [Purcell] or Deborah [Mailman] who said to me ‘No matter what you do, if you’re a black person and you’re standing on stage, in Australia, people are going to read that in a political sense, compared to if a White person stands on stage and does exactly the same thing’”.

This social and artistic expectation made each of the artists feel as though when given an opportunity because they were Aboriginal, it was automatically accompanied by the expectation to produce Aboriginal-specific content; that they were forced into representing their culture, its history and presenting some kind of pan-Aboriginal experience; instead of being able to explore their own creative interests and present work that was relevant to them. The result was that they believed it undermined their artistic freedom and made them ‘feel owned’. Björn explores this idea in *Incubate* (2009). When I asked Björn to explain the meaning behind his work that I quoted in the Introduction, he explained:

it's like I'm not my own person, even though I like to think that I am. I am still owned by somebody or something. And being just an artist, even then you're still owned by somebody or something, an institution or an idea which fuels you and influences you and your ideas. Like [my] heritage for example. I will always have to go back to it; I'm owned by it, even though I want to separate the two, I'm still interconnected to both. It's the same with the government as well. It feels like we've been...my people have been owned by them, and not independent of them, we don't have sovereignty. We're a part of this country but also they've kind of been in control of our decision-making.

This lack of control over artistic content and opportunities, as well as how they are perceived by the artistic community was definitely a point of much passionate feeling throughout the interviews, and was expressed as a feeling of ‘being used’. This idea of being artistic tools for funding body and arts organisation agendas alike

created some uneasiness and, as Björn described, a “dilemma”. Björn asks “...do I take it [the opportunity] or shouldn’t I?”.

The consensus among these artists appeared to be yes, you should take it. Despite the “dilemma” of not wanting to “play the racial card” it seemed to be a valid rationale to the artists that if they were being used by stakeholders to tick Key Performance Indicator boxes, then it was reasonable for the artists to take advantage of these opportunities for their own benefit. Kate describes an opportunity she had received based on her Aboriginality:

I felt used, but I was using them too. I mean, it was a win-win situation really at the end of the day wasn't it? I needed money and wanted a chance to show my work and they needed Indigenous content. For example, I knew that with the Next Wave Festival it was going to help me if I put in there that I was Indigenous. I knew they were looking for Indigenous content because I knew in 2007 when my cousin went in and they said “we really need Indigenous content”. So I knew to chuck that in there. I did that, and I got it. I even said “did I get this because I wrote I was Indigenous?” and...they admitted to it.

Björn holds the same attitude of changing being “used” into a positive: “If you look at anybody else that’s non-Indigenous and everyone is struggling to get work and stuff like that and it’s like, well, it’s there! Of course I’m going to take it”. It seemed the key was to be aware of it and understand the framework you were operating within. The theatre-makers had taken something that they felt was an insulting offer only provided because they were Aboriginal, and chose to make it an advantage that they could utilise to get their work developed and seen.

This “understanding” could aptly apply to the PACT opportunities which, as explained, were initially developed to fulfill council and other funding body requirements that they service the local community. However, perhaps part of the key to the positive perception of the opportunities provided by PACT was that PACT demonstrated a genuine interest and investment in the Aboriginal theatre-makers, and both parties realised the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship. By also providing the artists with the freedom to explore their own artistic interests, the theatre-makers felt as though their creative interests were treated with respect and

provided validity, and the arts organisation established a successful opportunity working with Aboriginal emerging theatre-makers. Sometimes, there seems to be a benefit in playing the “racial card”.

Recognition of the need to be able to create based on their individual lives, and not a pan-Aboriginal experience, as well as understanding a mutually beneficial relationship was possible in opportunities, was not the only thing the theatre-makers felt needed acknowledgement. In this next section, I will address the belief that as Aboriginal theatre-makers, they work differently to non-Aboriginal theatre makers.

6.1.3: “We Work Differently”

Singing softly we hear the tune “I Am Australian. I am Australian”. He stops singing. “Sorry. Sorry. I said I’m sorry”.

Incubate (2009) performance by Björn Stewart

Sonny expressed strongly that there needs to be recognition of the fact the “we work differently” to mainstream or non-Aboriginal theatre-makers. He states, “we do work in a different way. It’s something I can’t explain. I don’t know, I mean I’m an educated person but I feel there are some who aren’t as educated too, especially in the country. So they find it difficult to fill out those forms and it deters them”. Sonny here seems to be connecting this concept of working differently with being less educated, but I believe he is also expressing the idea of many Aboriginal peoples having a different way of engaging with and perceiving the world that is sometimes not aligned with mainstream Australian ways of knowing and working.

All four participants referred to this concept of “working differently” in the interviews. This idea was never thoroughly articulated, but was strongly felt. In Chapter Five it was articulated by the artistic team in that they eventually recognised this difference and that they needed to work differently in developing and executing the Aboriginal opportunities than they otherwise would have done for a mainstream opportunity. I believe this belief in working differently partly comes from a fundamental “gap” in Australian society between Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islanders and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. This gap extends to almost every significant aspect in life: housing, health, employment, education, infant mortality, and early childhood development.

The statistics are disturbing. A study conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare revealed that less than two-thirds of working-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were in the labour force in comparison with four out of five non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were almost 2.5 times as likely to fall within the lowest income bracket, and almost 50% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were living with families who were unemployed. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders made up one-quarter of prisoners throughout Australia as at June, 2010, and between 2000-2010 the imprisonment rate rose by 52%. Hospitalisation for mental health issues was almost twice that of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, with one-third of young people experiencing high levels of psychological distress. Life expectancy is 11.5 years less for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and 9.7 years less for women. School retention rates are lower for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with retention to year 12 at 47% compared to 79% for the rest of the country.¹²¹

It is clear that there are profound and fundamental differences and disadvantages for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders compared to the average mainstream Australian. Hence the concept of the “gap”, and the desire for many to see it reduced (Closing the Gap).

In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) set a range of targets for Closing the Gap in their national integrated Closing the Gap strategy. These include:

- To close the life-expectancy gap within a generation
- To halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade

¹²¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011). “The Health and Welfare of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People”. Accessed 12/3/2012. Available from: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous-observatory-health-and-welfare/>

- To ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities within five years
- To halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade
- To halve the gap in Indigenous Year 12 achievement by 2020
- To halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.¹²²

The Council of Australian Government's *Closing the Gap: National Urban and Regional Service Delivery Strategy for Indigenous Australians* also confirms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage exists not only in remote areas of Australia but extends to those living within urban environments. It identifies gaps in education, employment, income and housing:

Recent analysis of the levels of socioeconomic disparity between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in a given location, based on 2001 and 2006 Census data, confirms that Indigenous disadvantage is not just because Indigenous Australians are more likely to live in remote towns or outstations. Even within the same suburb or large regional town, Indigenous Australians for a range of reasons, fare relatively poorly in terms of employment, education, income and housing.¹²³

This gap did affect the theatre-makers in this study either directly, or indirectly at some point in their lives. It was mentioned previously that James had some financial obligations to support his family, Sonny engaged with many Aboriginals at RCC that were hugely affected by disadvantage, and Kate had first-hand experience of such a “gap” when applying for an opportunity with OzCo. She unfortunately found out that due to not having obtained a certain level of education, she was ineligible to apply, “The one thing that did disappoint me, I wanted to apply for ArtStart¹²⁴ but

¹²² Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. (2008). “Closing the Gap: Targets and Building Blocks”. Accessed 11/7/13. Available from: <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/programs-services/closing-the-gap/closing-the-gap-targets-and-building-blocks>

¹²³ Council of Australian Government. (2013). “Closing the Gap: National Urban and Regional Service Deliver Strategy for Indigenous Australians”. Accessed 10/06/13. Available from: <https://www.coag.gov.au/node/67>.

¹²⁴ ArtStart is an initiative from OzCo that provides up to \$10,000 to support and/or develop an emerging arts career and practice.

what I found a little disappointing, and made it a little bit hard, is that they expect you to have some sort of degree and that's the reason I couldn't apply for it". ArtStart requires a Certificate IV or above in a creative arts course to be eligible. Kate had completed a Certificate II and III in Film and Television Production. This gap in education could be viewed as an indirect form of discrimination in light of the fact that in general, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education levels are statistically lower than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. At the very least it needs to be considered that it is blocking, even if unintentionally, some Aboriginal artists from accessing some opportunities.

Perhaps in light of these gaps it is no surprise that during the interviews with the theatre-makers it was indicated that confidence levels of the theatre-makers were not high when approaching funding bodies, doing applications and engaging with new opportunities. Sonny expressed that dealing with funding bodies, arts organisations and applications was intimidating, "I was scared of the whole thing – filling out applications, and [it was] time consuming as well. I'd been too scared when I was younger. If I had \$5,000 who was going to manage that? That's why I didn't even bother". Björn also expressed he was "scared" of such processes, "it kind of scared me. There's a certain way of writing them out and I'm not quite sure how it works".

How is this different from any other group of emerging artists? I have already identified there is a fundamental gap for the majority of Aboriginal peoples therefore they come from an automatic place of disadvantage. But it felt as though there was more to it than that, and that it is not just the negatively infused idea of a "gap" that creates a different way of working. These theatre-makers, though perhaps disadvantaged in terms socio-economic factors, were determined and ambitious. It was more a problem with them being forced to engage with processes and systems that sat outside the way they perceived and operated within the world. In *Making Multicultural Australia. Closing the Gap from Policy to Practice* (1995), Chris Bowen cites Tim Rowse as saying, "The majority of our cultural resources in the arts are allocated to traditional European style practice, and few opportunities for other

practitioners to develop exist”.¹²⁵ Rowse argues that a cultural dualism had arisen in which a “worthy” subsidised public culture is placed above other forms of culture. Like Casey and Lewis, he sees it as a self-reinforcing system in which resources and rewards are concentrated in the hands of families who have become skilled in their use”.¹²⁶ This does echo Kate’s earlier statement that the same people get the funding and opportunities every time.

Rowse goes on to cite Castle and Kalantzis from *Access to Excellence: a review of issues affecting artists of non-English speaking backgrounds* who claim, “Cultural values are embodied in a particular concept of 'excellence' which elevates and legitimises established culture and excludes and devalues other cultural activities”. Bowen says that “They [Castle and Kalantzis] argue this approach defines excellence from a western high cultural viewpoint which effectively discriminates against folk based culture, community art, ethnic art, and co-operatively produced cultural practices”.¹²⁷

The theatre-makers interviewed are creating outside this legitimised “western high cultural” practice. They do not relate to this enforced concept of “excellence” as is encouraged by the mainstages and Lee Lewis in her concept of cross-racial casting. Therefore, it cannot be surprising that the theatre-makers expressed intimidation and fear of opportunities, or having to apply for opportunities that are based on this model. This lack of ability to relate to Eurocentric, Westernised processes and cultural practices is not something necessarily experienced by mainstream Australians who quite often grow up surrounded and immersed by this culture. Recognition of this belief that things are different for Aboriginal, urban, emerging theatre-makers would assist in creating what would be perceived as a more accessible opportunity and increase engagement in those opportunities. Therefore, I have identified ways in which the Aboriginal theatre-makers felt they “worked differently”. The three areas that appeared to be the most significant to the theatre-makers were:

¹²⁵ Bowen, C. (1995). “Closing the Gap from Policy to Practice”. *Queensland Community Arts Network News* 1 (1). Bowen, Chris. (1995). 1st Edition: 4-6, p.3.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p.2.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p.3.

1. Applications were difficult as they didn't know how to write them, they were long and convoluted, and there appeared to be no way for them to learn how to write them
2. They felt intimidated about applying as they believed their written communication skills were not as advanced as oral skills
3. The opportunities on offer by funding bodies and arts organisations were difficult to discover

In order to better understand these perceived difficulties for the artists, I will discuss each in turn.

The theatre-makers felt that applications were difficult as they didn't know how to write them and there appeared to be no way for them to learn. Each of the theatre-makers interviewed had gone on after school to study at either TAFE or university level in an aspect of the arts. Despite this, they each felt that the written application process expected by funding bodies and arts organisations were intimidating, difficult, expected knowledge of "insider" jargon and involved long, tedious paper-work processes they were unwilling to engage with. Sonny felt that the difficulty many Aboriginal artists experienced filling out application forms deterred them from applying. He felt that without some training in this area this situation will not change and Aboriginal artists will continue to be deterred. Sonny admits that when he was starting out, "it was really hard to apply for mainstream residencies. You didn't want to deal with the paperwork...writing grants and submissions". Björn recalled a moment at university where part of his coursework was to submit an application for an opportunity. He said they were given minimal guidance on how to do this and he received a poor mark for his efforts. He stated that they received very little information on how to improve. He believes that this experience deterred him for many years from applying for opportunities that had complicated application processes.

When each of the artists were asked how they learnt to apply for opportunities, they all stated that it was through their Aboriginal peers. Sonny was learning on the job at RCC by reading other people's applications and through the unofficial mentorship

of Lily Shearer and Liza-Mare Syron. Kate had a similar experience learning from Lily Shearer at RCC. She says, “I just went around asking people how to do stuff. I’ve never gone to uni. I just went to TAFE and did film stuff. The way I’ve been learning is I just went around annoying people”. Kate believed that she needed to wear “a thousand different hats” in order to succeed in the arts in Australia. She acknowledges “in Australia you can’t just be an artist. You have to learn how to do all the funding and that type of stuff and wear a thousand different hats. Even just short courses or, you know, in the business side of things. I think that’s what fails with a lot of artists, a lot of people just want to be an artist but you can’t just be an artist if you want to be successful”.

When I asked Björn why *Bully Beef Stew* (2011) hadn’t continued on to tour or to another season, he responded that funding was an issue,

The obstacle is how we get it. But that’s like, with me writing stuff out to apply, I kind of feel a bit hesitant towards...umm...I think the obstacle would be...it’s nothing with the relationship with any of us, I think it’s just the knowledge of how to go about it and putting ourselves out there...

The perception was that for there to be significant improvement in engagement by, emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers in Sydney, there would need to be some relevant training provided so that the artists had the confidence and skills to apply for opportunities in the first place. The second issue that emerged was that the theatre-makers felt intimidated to apply for opportunities as they felt their written communication skills were not as advanced as oral skills.

My experience at each interview with these emerging theatre-makers was excellent. They were never at a loss for words and their passion, ideas, expressions of their creativity, and positive hopes for the future came through clearly to me. Yet in each of the interviews, there was a strong aversion to administrative processes conveyed. If an opportunity involved a lengthy written application process and required budgeting, written communication and basic business strategy skills, the interviewees admitted they would automatically dismiss the opportunity. Sonny identified problems from his perspective with the current popular application process:

“I think the forms could be a lot smaller than they usually are that the wording...there’s that particular way of wording things. I don’t know why it has to be like that”.

This difficulty is not something isolated to this particular group of people, nor their specific practice. A recent report by Laura Ginters from the Inaugural NSW Aboriginal Dance Forum suggests that these issues are cross-artform and cross-generational. One participating artist said “I want someone to write my grants for me!” and it was expressed that there was a desire by NSW Aboriginal dance artists for “Alternative means of presenting projects [to funding bodies] (eg. By video)”.¹²⁸

Sonny also expressed a desire to be able to present his creative ideas differently than the written application-based process. He believed if he could apply by verbally communicating his ideas and plans, he would be much more confident and successful. Sonny goes on to say, “I’d much prefer one-on-one or face-to-face than a written application. I don’t know why it can’t be from the heart of the artist. If you put [me in front of] a panel of people it would be much easier for me to explain why I want money”. Sonny has in turn applied this approach to Aboriginal participants of opportunities at RCC stating that the local residents “only have to talk to me” and he completes applications on their behalf.

Björn also feels he would like to work differently when applying for opportunities. When talking about applications he claims “there’s a certain way of writing them [applications] out and I’m not quite sure how it works. I know what I’m saying and thinking in my head but [it’s] putting it out onto paper in a formal way I have trouble with. It’s another language that I’m not familiar with”.

The theatre-makers generally perceived they lacked the skills and confidence to apply for many opportunities, and without the preferred option of applying for opportunities orally, the theatre-makers all agreed they would opt for opportunities that had less complicated application processes. These included residencies. Kate

¹²⁸ Ginters, L. (2011). *Darung Muru. Dance pathways. Inaugural NSW Aboriginal Dance Forum. Report and Recommendations*. Ausdance: NSW, p. 8.

believed “applying for a residency is a lot easier these days ‘cause you’re not really applying for much, usually one or two pages of stuff”. Kate also mentioned that opportunities provided by philanthropic or private bodies were much more accessible. She confides,

That’s how I’ve been getting money actually, applying for awards like the Ian Bowie Commercial Award¹²⁹ and things. I got in the finals for that. There’s less criteria and they’re happy to let you go and do what you want to do. They look after the money and they’re just happy for you to go do what you want to do, make what you want to make and then they’ll come and see it and go ‘yeah that was cool’, and you don’t have to do any of that auspicing or the budgeting. They take care of that.

Obviously simply being handed money and opportunities without any expectations or management is one end of the spectrum. Yet the artists involved clearly state that they would be much more inclined to apply for opportunities if they were able to incorporate an element of oral presentation to a panel and not just formal written communication. To establish a critical mass of skilled Aboriginal theatre-makers in Sydney, it would seem that, at least initially, oral presentation could be factored into the application processes. If not this, then workshops and programs that assist in building application writing skills and business acumen are required. One or a combination of these approaches may achieve more interest and involvement by Aboriginal theatre-makers in opportunities.

Despite a belief expressed initially in the interviews by all the theatre-makers that there were sufficient opportunities available, only Kate (who had a comprehensive list of possible opportunities pasted to her wall) seemed about to readily identify these opportunities. It was consistently revealed in the interviews at “Section D – Funding,” that they perceived that the opportunities were not clear, not easily discovered and that the way they learnt about relevant opportunities was through word-of-mouth via peers and community members. Each of the theatre-makers talked about needing to “find” the opportunities. Sonny says, “Oh yeah, there’s a lot of opportunity out there, but knowing about it I guess. Trying to access it,

¹²⁹ The Ian Bowie Memorial award is a philanthropic body that provides financial support to theatre artists and technicians between the ages of 16-25. The grants are intended for investment in training and mentorships with established theatre practitioners.

trying to find it”. When Björn was asked about what he knew about opportunities available for him he asserted, “I mean there’s stuff that’s with NSW Arts [Arts NSW], Screen Australia and you know, Metroscreen is great, and you know, the Australian Government. Those are the ones I seem to know about at the moment. But I’m sure there’s others out there as well, but it’s finding them...I mean there could be stuff out there, but I haven’t been told about it. It’s where to look...and most of what I’ve got is from word of mouth”.

James agreed with this, believing that you had to find the opportunities and that they weren’t easily discoverable and therefore accessible. He believed that if there was a central database of some description, that sat outside of OzCo, it would be incredibly popular and more aligned with how members of the Aboriginal arts community would prefer to work. He stated, “I think if there was a central database where it was advertised in a user friendly way – just so people know what’s available and when it’s available and deadlines...that’d be better.” He brings this idea up again later in the interview, “Just a centralised database that’s user friendly and not an Australia Council website, and as well having a program set up to help Indigenous artists to not rely on someone for their projects”. In James’ mind, this database would be a source of education and information that would create more independence and less reliance for Aboriginal theatre-makers.

It is perhaps worth considering these ideas in light of my earlier assertion that Aboriginal artists “work differently” and do not engage well with traditional Westernised processes. Whether this is due to one of numerous gaps experienced in their life, or simply because they engage with and see the world differently, the point is that current processes are not working and alternative approaches need to be considered in order to, at least initially, engage these artists. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Chilisa asserts throughout her book that Indigenous ways of knowing and creating need to be given space outside the dominant power structures that have been in place since colonisation. Bowen writes that the concept of multiculturalism in Australia during the Whitlam government years (1972-1975) was the first time that a government had recognised the need for institutions rather than non-European groups

to change.¹³⁰ It is perhaps time to consider that this group does perceive themselves as working differently and therefore perhaps the institutions themselves need to consider changing processes rather than expecting everyone within a diverse Australia to work in the same way to the same effect. However, just changing the way we think about how Aboriginal theatre-makers work will not yield strong outcomes. An affirmative action approach, due to the indisputable level of difference in opportunity and skill level owing to profound disadvantage over many years, could provide Aboriginal theatre-makers the much-needed opportunity to generate skills and a critical mass of performers to change the current artistic landscape with this “different” outlook and voice.

But of course, “working differently” does not necessarily have to be viewed as a completely negative thing requiring intense intervention. By embracing a group within Sydney who perceive the world through a different artistic lens, it creates an exciting possibility for new ideas, new voices and new representations of Australian society. It also opens up the possibility of new ways for all stakeholders to work that could prove innovative.

One example of this is the way that social media was proving to be an effective method of communication between myself and the Aboriginal theatre-makers. What if the leading funding body for Aboriginal arts created a Facebook group that was Aboriginal-specific, and became a central hub for informing members about upcoming opportunities and deadlines, provided hints and basic skills on how to apply and was an immediate and responsive way for the artists to have direct communication with OzCo for questions, concerns et cetera. Though the theatre-makers involved in this study indicated they and fellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people worked differently due to gaps in their education, confidence, and in terms of how they would apply for opportunities, there may be some simple ways of addressing at least some of these problems. But first, perhaps the initial step in recognising these differences is to acknowledge the experience of the urban Aboriginal in today’s society.

¹³⁰ Bowen, C. (1995), p.1.

6.1.4: The Aboriginal Urban Tribe

With his left hand placed in his pocket, he gives no indication of his Aboriginal heritage – he in fact seems intent on visually confirming he is a city boy.

Incubate (2009) performance by Björn Stewart

The final significant theme that emerged from the codes was a belief by each theatre-maker that they were primarily connected to an urban Aboriginal experience as opposed to identifying with a more traditional, rural Aboriginal culture. As explained in Chapter Two, participants relate to what I have identified in this study as The Urban Tribe. It is this experience of the urban Aboriginal that each of the theatre-makers wished to explore creatively. Katie says, “people need to start embracing the new Aboriginal urban culture which we don’t celebrate enough. It’s always about being country, it’s always about Darwin, it’s always about the Kimberley, or those Dreamtime stories”. Instead, the artists want to explore their urban experience with new stories, new experiences and not what could be perceived as pan-Aboriginal stories. Kate believes the reason so many of these pan-Aboriginal stories are continuously explored and performed is that it is simply catering to what Aboriginal people perceive White people wish, or are willing, to hear from the Aboriginal community: sanctioned Aboriginal performance. She says, “I think Indigenous people just say what they think White people want to hear”. Kate believes those stories have already had a chance to be told: “I think there’s a lot of stories about land and the connection to land and I think that’s great and an important part of us. But I think those stories have been told. I think we’ve heard a lot of the same stories and new stories need to be told”.

Several of the theatre-makers were investigating a more urban experience in their creative practice. Kate explains her current project: “It’s an autobiographical/biographical about Elizabeth Taylor and, obviously, our differences; and I guess I’m exploring womanhood and beauty through Western culture; our similarities though we are ages apart. Exploring [ideas about] womanhood and beauty though different cultures, the Western culture and Indigenous culture”. This desire to explore more relevant issues for the theatre-makers who have grown up in an urban

environment is exemplified in an experience had by James whilst on a residency to create a new work. The feedback he received from other Aboriginal artists confirmed his feelings about the type of work he wanted to explore that had more relevance to his urban environment and personal experience:

A lot of feedback I got was that I didn't necessarily have to write an Indigenous play. So I went sort of down the path of writing a sexuality play as I really find that interesting and important. I started writing a play "Gina". I sort of based this story on my friend who is changed-gender and she is from Samoa. She is a prostitute on Williams Street. I'm sort of looking at gender stereotypes and how it shapes a person's career and personal life.

For his part, Björn was excited about his upcoming opportunity with Metroscreen and explained his concept in the following way:

I wrote this script and it's about three actors who are blindly optimistic in thinking they are going to break it in the industry, but they are so caught up in their own issues and their self-destructive lifestyles that they don't get anywhere. The main character who is Indigenous, but looks White, is going for an Indigenous television series and he's hesitant about it 'cause he looks White and he doesn't think he will get it.

Each of these artists have elected to creatively investigate ideas that are relevant to them, and their world, while also producing very individualistic explorations. They are definitely not about a shared Aboriginal experience but rather an examination into experiences one may have as a member of this Aboriginal Urban Tribe. Characteristics of all of the works being explored had a humorous element, and were looking forward with positivity and better communicating contemporary, urban, Aboriginal issues.

This humorous, more positive approach to their works was evident in some of the work they were producing in the PACT programs. When James spoke about the work he presented in *Incubate* (2009) he said "...the reason why I wanted to write the story about my mum was to show the funnier side of Aboriginal Australia inspire people to look for the positive in many [Aboriginal] situations".

All of the artists demonstrated an identification with the urban experience, or urban tribe. They were forward-looking and attempting to maintain a positive outlook on their work, its possible impact and the future for urban Aboriginals. These new stories explore more relevant issues for the theatre-makers that, though personal and individualistic, were intended to better inform, entertain and interest a wider audience to demonstrate that there indeed is more to these urban tribe theatre-makers than just Black “skin and blood”.

The interviews with the theatre-makers were an incredibly important part of this research process. They provided a voice to a previously non-recorded sector of the Australian theatre ecology and revealed some strong ideas and perceptions about what these participants perceived as being required for them to thrive and become vital contributors to the local arts ecology. Organisations such as PACT and the types of opportunities they provided were perceived as being positive and important as they were accessible, did not involve complicated application processes and did not require them to produce Aboriginal-specific content. PACT offered support, understanding, guidance and acted as an intermediary between themselves and the funding bodies. Though PACT initially began the Aboriginal-specific program to meet certain funding requirements, the program evolved and the relationships with the participants developed beyond these requirements, so that the theatre-makers felt that they were receiving the opportunity because they were Aboriginal, but also because they were interesting urban, emerging theatre-makers who had something to create and to say. As the theatre-makers were provided this platform in a format they could work within, they were willing to play the “racial card” as something beneficial for them, and not simply a tokenistic gesture by the funding body nor the arts organisation. Opportunities that factored in these above elements empowered the artists to explore new, urban, Aboriginal stories.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusions

Between 2008-2010, as Manager of PACT centre for emerging artists (PACT), I was involved in a series of Aboriginal-specific opportunities for emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers. Opportunities for this particular group began in 2007 and concluded in 2011. Through my involvement in these opportunities I became aware of the main stakeholders driving this specific sector of the industry, namely the funding bodies, the arts organisations and the artists themselves. I was in a position where I had to negotiate between three spectrums of expectation, cultural understanding and perceptions of what was needed to develop new, urban, Aboriginal theatre-making for the Australian cultural landscape. I felt these negotiations had been successful until emerging Aboriginal theatre-maker Björn Stewart, through his performance in *Incubate* (2009), questioned the motivations, agendas and expectations behind such opportunities. My self-satisfied sense of achievement and advancement in this area rapidly dissipated. Instead, it left a line of questioning that I have followed in this study: What was perceived as being needed for an urban, emerging, Aboriginal theatre-maker to emerge by the three main stakeholders, and did these perceptions align?

My findings demonstrate that there are some significant misalignments in perceptions about what is needed by the three main stakeholders of the Aboriginal-specific opportunities. This misalignment is partly a legacy of colonial Australia, where the perceived needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture – and subsequent policy and initiatives – have never quite achieved what they set out to. As outlined in Chapter Two and Six, despite decades of policy and initiatives being implemented in order to “close the gap”, nearly two hundred years of oppression and segregation have been difficult to overcome. There is still a significant gap for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in Australia in areas such as housing, education, health, and – as this study suggests – artistic representation in new forms of theatre. This means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders continue to be pushed to the peripheries of cultural and social representation in some sectors of the arts culture, and do not have the right infrastructure in place in order to effectively

change this. This study demonstrates that this is the case for emerging, urban, Aboriginals who make up the majority of the Aboriginal population and yet have a limited presence on the Australian stages, and therefore inadequate representation in new forms of theatre-making and contemporary culture.

7.1 The Three Perspectives

From its official commencement in 1968 the funding body, the Australia Council for the Arts (OzCo), has always maintained a strong belief in the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and its role in “keeping culture strong”. This is reflected in its policy and its significantly larger financial contributions to this sector than any other level of government funding. OzCo is guided in this area by policies and initiatives that are instigated by the government of the time. For the period we are looking at in this study, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Policy functions as a guiding framework. OzCo’s role in the case study chosen for this research was to provide funds to PACT, both directly through project funding and indirectly through triennial funding, in order for PACT to implement a series of opportunities that reflected particular policy priorities. In this case the policy priority areas that directly affected the arts organisation and the artists are: Arts Development, Infrastructure and Industry Development. This means that OzCo believes that it is important that Aboriginal theatre-makers are provided with professional development, support, opportunities, employment and infrastructure in order to facilitate this; and felt that PACT was in a position to effectively fulfill these policy priority areas. However, when discussing these programs with OzCo, they had very little qualitative records of the opportunities and were measuring their effectiveness and success through quantifiable means as reported by the arts organisation and measured against OzCo policies. There seemed to be very little beyond this to monitor or measure the impact of such opportunities. The opportunities provided by PACT were deemed successful and effective as measured against the mostly qualitative benchmarks. However, PACT’s agenda became something quite different to those initially imposed by policy.

PACT presented Aboriginal-specific opportunities initially out of policy obligation to funding bodies, but ultimately because of the passionate belief held by the artistic team that these programs were needed and important. PACT held that these opportunities were difficult to successfully establish and that they needed to evolve and change the opportunities in order for them to more effectively meet the needs of the participating artists. They were not driven by policy objectives but rather responding on-the-ground to the needs and requirements of the artists who were participating in the program. The perception was that the opportunities needed to be sustainable and ongoing, not just a knee-jerk reaction to policy of the day. Stability and ongoing opportunities enabled the organisation to change the program to better suit participant needs, improve outcomes, and develop strong rapport with the emerging Aboriginal artists, established Aboriginal artists, and the Sydney Aboriginal community.

This strong rapport was reflected by the positive opinions of PACT held by the interviewed theatre-makers. All interviewed participants felt that PACT was an important and positive influence in assisting them develop skills and careers in the arts. PACT was perceived as an accessible, generous and warm environment that made participants feel it was a safe artistic hub for experimentation, with no expectations of culturally specific content. PACT also navigated lengthy and complicated funding processes on behalf of the participants, and provided the foundation for the next step in their arts careers.

The theatre-makers revealed a keen awareness of their role in the policy and initiatives of government funding bodies and arts organisations alike. They disclosed this made them feel undermined and cheated. They felt this approach cast a shadow over their ability and validity as an artist. However, if this was the only way for them to move forward, as long as they were aware of it, they were willing to be party to privileged opportunities based on race, often seeing it as their only option. The artists' willingness to engage in these opportunities, with awareness, limited their sense of powerlessness. They instead felt that they were stakeholders in the relationships and opportunities too. This is one of several ways it was identified that Aboriginal theatre-makers "worked differently" to non-Aboriginal artists. Part of this

perceived difference extends from the significant socio-economic gap experienced by Aboriginal people in general. These gaps contributed to the Aboriginal theatre-makers feeling intimidated and ill-informed as to how to discover and successfully write an application for an opportunity. They felt that their oral skills were superior to their written skills however, no opportunities provided this avenue for them. This reflected Australia's colonial history with the continuation of the dominant paradigm constantly requiring minority cultures to shift the way they work to a more Eurocentric process, instead of different ways of working and knowing being incorporated into the institutions to better accommodate these underrepresented groups.

Another way the artists "worked differently" was their perception of their own identity and place within Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture as sitting both inside and outside that culture. This sensation particularly came about due to being removed from a traditional Aboriginal lifestyle and growing up within an urban space. As part of a new Aboriginal Urban Tribe, the theatre-makers all expressed an interest in telling new stories that were individual experiences and not necessarily based on their Aboriginal identity, nor Aboriginal grievances of the past. They are a new generation of theatre-makers looking forward with new voices and new ideas.

7.2 A Misalignment

All of the stakeholders and literature presented in this study demonstrate that, overall, there is a desire to see more Aboriginal representation on stages and in performance spaces. All stakeholder groups recognise the benefits of this. Artists see cultural and personal benefits; arts organisations see moral benefits as well as great reward in facilitating this sector; funding bodies are able to fulfill policy objectives and stimulate the industry, as well as fulfilling a moral agenda of ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation, and "Keeping Culture Strong". All levels of public funding, the City of Sydney, ArtsNSW and OzCo are aiming to provide valid and dynamic opportunities, fighting for more money to be given, developing and implementing policies and strategies in order to change the status quo. All stakeholders align in agreement that there should be enough opportunities, and

improved access to programs and services with effective outcomes which have resonance and impact for the artistic community, Aboriginal community and cultural landscape. The discrepancy appears to be in how these opportunities and programs are developed and delivered.

There has previously been no recorded discussion with emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers to determine, from their perspective, what exactly they require for an opportunity to be appealing, and effective. This study has begun that record. The significant findings of this discussion are the elements perceived to be required to create an effective opportunity. These include: if the provider of the opportunity does not identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, someone who identifies as such should be involved in the development and execution of the opportunity; the provider of the opportunity needs to develop an authentic, meaningful and long-term relationship with the theatre-makers. This relationship needs to provide an environment of safety, warmth and generosity. It cannot be an arms-length relationship and it needs to be accessible to the theatre-makers; a mirror-reflection of mainstream opportunities is not as effective as developing Aboriginal-specific programs. The artists believe they work differently and have different requirements; If there is long-term investment in the opportunities, there are better outcomes due to stronger relationships, development of skills and confidence, and trust between the opportunity provider and the artists; if the theatre-makers do not need to engage in complicated administration and application processes, they are more likely to engage with an opportunity; the opportunity must offer creative freedom for the artists to be able to make whatever they like, and not restrict them to Aboriginal-specific content. The theatre-makers have a desire to explore their personal, individual urban-Aboriginal experience and don't necessarily relate to more traditional aspects of Aboriginal culture; the theatre-makers are willing to take advantage of opportunities that reflect affirmative action as long as it is an honest, open and beneficial transaction, though they would prefer that this not be the way or reason for an opportunity to be provided. I am not suggesting that these outcomes would prove effective in every instance involving Aboriginal theatre-makers. This was a specific group of artists working within a time and place that was conducive to

effective creative outcomes when these above-mentioned elements were developed. However, it does offer an interesting place to start.

Many emerging artists have a range of requirements they would prefer in order to better succeed. However, due to the lack of critical mass of emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers in Sydney, the historical oppression and the immediate disadvantage experienced by this particular group of people even today, perhaps some changes in how funding bodies and arts organisations operate could be considered. This in turn could create a new generation of skilled theatre-makers who have resonance and impact on the cultural landscape. It is my assertion that there are important areas of misalignment in what the three stakeholders of this study perceive as being needed to achieve this. These areas of misalignment include: Methods of communication, the need for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contemporary theatre organisation, conflicting top-down and bottom-up approaches, and the ongoing insistence that Aboriginal artists engage with the same processes as non-Aboriginal artists.

7.2.1 Methods of Communication

OzCo believes they have provided an appropriate amount of communication and information options for Aboriginal theatre-makers, for example via email, access to the website and via arts organisations they have an existing relationship with. From the arts organisations they listed, the only appropriate one would be PACT. PACT expressed that communication was the primary obstacle for them in dealing with the theatre-makers. Methods such as email, phone and websites were ineffective. I personally also found this, however discovered that non-traditional forms of communication such as social media was extremely effective in communication and building relationships. The theatre-makers also expressed that they felt information about opportunities was not clear or easily discoverable, despite OzCo's belief that access to their website and staff was sufficient. Whether or not this is the case, the artists' felt they could not effectively contact OzCo and PACT felt they could not effectively contact the artists.

PACT established that you could not be at arms-length from this group of artists but needed to have personal relationships and this enhanced communication. This is not something OzCo provides. Those artists who had reached out to OzCo felt as though they were ignored, not taken seriously due to not being established artists, and no one from the organisation had taken an interest in their work. The general conclusion by the artists' was that a single database for Aboriginal-specific opportunities that would encompass all opportunities being provided would provide an excellent method of communication with opportunity providers. My suggestion in Chapter Five was that combining this idea and social media with a platform such as Facebook managed by OzCo could prove to be an excellent solution.

7.2.2 An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Contemporary Theatre Organisation

As mentioned above, PACT is the only appropriate arts organisation suggested by OzCo that offers opportunities to this group. PACT's experience of being an intermediary between OzCo and the theatre-makers was one of frustration, fear and "fraught" with issues. If it were not for the personal interest and passion invested by the artistic team, there would be very little incentive for a small to medium arts organisation to provide these opportunities. The program stretched the resources financially, physically and emotionally of the organisation and its staff. Despite OzCo's claim that they have a significant interest in "keeping culture strong" and having policy in place to promote and support Aboriginal arts, there is no national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre-specific organisation in Australia and apart from Mooghalin Performing Arts, which is in its infancy and has no long-term funding in place, there is no sustainably supported Aboriginal theatre organisation in Sydney, particularly one that supports more experimental practices. The assertions of OzCo that they are invested in this sector are undermined by there being no Aboriginal organisation that can pave the way providing long-term vision, a range of culturally sensitive opportunities, can engage with the artists as they require, provide opportunities that are relevant and that can focus on creating a skilled, critical mass of urban, emerging theatre-makers. The theatre-makers were confused by this absence of an Aboriginal arts organisation and expressed that they were more comfortable and

confident creating within an Aboriginal framework than a non-Aboriginal arts organisation.

7.2.3 Conflicting Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

As demonstrated in Chapter Two, the development of more enlightened and humane policies regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders had a significant correlation with the increased opportunities and new Aboriginal theatre work being developed. This top-down approach using policy is an effective way to kick start opportunities and sector development – however, only if it can be effectively implemented and is a reflection of what the sector and its participants require. OzCo could only measure the effectiveness of the Aboriginal-specific opportunities offered by PACT against policy requirements and Key Performance Indicators. There are predominantly only quantifiable figures available to them and no real qualitative information is sought. The theatre-makers all expressed a sense of alienation from OzCo, that they could not approach them, could not talk to them, were intimidated by funding applications and processes and did not feel they had a connection to the funding body. In contrast, they felt very connected to PACT and its staff. PACT used a bottom-up approach in how it developed its programs, identifying them as a need from within the community and then altering them in order to better meet the requirements of the artists. Regina expressed her belief that this bottom-up approach had resonance beyond what is immediately measurable. The theatre-makers all expressed that PACT's accessibility and approach was more desirable and without this, they would not engage in the opportunity.

7.2.4 Aboriginal Theatre-Makers Should Engage with the Same Processes as Non-Aboriginal Theatre-Makers.

The responses from OzCo regarding the Aboriginal-specific programs at PACT were similar to the responses I would have received for any opportunity being offered by PACT or another arts organisation. There is no recognition that this particular group may require a different approach or process. PACT recognised this difference and changed processes for this particular group of artists. Though the theatre-makers all

expressed that they do not want to be labeled Aboriginal but wish to be recognised as an artist, they also demonstrated that they were at a disadvantage by being confused by administrative and application processes that were an essential component of engaging with most opportunities. The only way to change this is to factor in different ways of working, as believed by the theatre-makers themselves, and permitting visual or oral presentations, or providing a range of workshops and training in order to develop skills in this area. To identify the gaps in how Aboriginal people access and engage in opportunities, stakeholders like OzCo need to actually engage with the group they are desirous to support and discover a commodious work process. Without this, emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers will continue to be unable to sustain their careers, and receive support that is available but out of hands reach for them.

7.3 Further Research

These findings are only scratching the surface of an important aspect of the arts industry in Australia. It is my hope that they are a starting point for further investigation that can reveal additional concrete results and instigate significant change. This would include further research in the following areas: Social media as a new, more effective communication method when engaging with Aboriginal artists; more accessible funding application processes that factor in non-Eurocentric ways of knowing and perceiving the world; why Australia (and Sydney) does not have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre organisation supported by the principal funding body; conducting a large-scale qualitative investigation into perceptions about practice and opportunities of emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers in Australia.

7.4 Conclusion

Research such as this study and the above suggestions may help to close the artistic gap in this one, small sector of the arts industry. If Maryrose Casey is right in believing that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been operating within frames “generated initially by imperial/colonial narratives to serve national

imaginaries of history and identity. These frames have then been adapted to serve changing national policies and agendas”¹³¹ and Lee Lewis is correct in asserting Bourdieu’s belief that “theatre is a reflection of existing class structure and narratives” and extends upon this, proposing that it can be a “constructor of future class, of future race relations, and ultimately of the imagined future national identity”¹³² then appropriate research and investment in theatre-makers, such as those who participated in this study, and generating effective opportunities for them could assist in breaking many imposed frames and changing the way Australia perceives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, their history, and modern place in Australian communities.

My hope is that this study demonstrates the importance of providing the right opportunities to emerging, urban, Aboriginal theatre-makers. The right opportunities have the potential to inspire a range of vibrant and engaging artistic outcomes which can provide a voice to a sector of the Sydney community that was historically silenced, and denied capacity and opportunity. Such opportunities could instead enable these artists in a new artistic exploration and expression of Australia in this era of hopeful reconciliation.

¹³¹ Casey, M. (2004), pp.xx.

¹³² Lewis, L. (2007), p.22.

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APPENDIX 1

Ethics Protocol

Participant Information Statement:



Department of Performance Studies
School of Letters, Art and Media
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

ABN 15 211 513 464

Dr. Laura Ginters – Senior Lecturer
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Masters Research Project: ATSI Performance Practice and Government Funding

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

(1) What is the study about?

The study is about urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander emerging artists, the contemporary performance work they are creating and how they are creating it. The study will look at the process and outcomes of making this new work. It will also look at what role government funding is playing in the creation of this work and what that might mean.

(2) Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being conducted by Ms. Kathleen Thomas and will form the basis for the degree of Master of Arts (Research) at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Dr. Laura Ginters.

(3) What does the study involve?

As an artist or arts-worker, you consent to being observed by Ms Thomas during your time working on the development of a new contemporary performance work. Ms Thomas will take notes to assist in her observations. She may also make video recordings and photographs if you consent to this. In addition, you may choose to participate in an interview about your experiences and thoughts as an artist or an arts-worker in this context. You may choose not to be identified in this study, if you so wish.

(4) How much time will the study take?

If you choose to participate, this research will take place during your usual working periods and will not require any additional dedicated time. Ms. Thomas will liaise with yourself and your associated arts organisation to arrange a schedule for observing your work during your scheduled rehearsal period. If you should also choose to participate in an interview, this will last no longer than two hours and will be organised at a time and place convenient for you.

(5) Can I withdraw from the study?

Being in this study is completely voluntary - you are not under any obligation to consent and - if you do not consent this will not affect your relationship with The University of Sydney or the arts organisation/artists with which you are involved. You may stop an interview at any time if you do not wish to continue. Ms. Thomas' notes will be destroyed and the information provided will not be included in the study.

(6) Will anyone else know the results?

The results of the study will form the basis for a thesis. After its completion in June 2013, a copy will be kept in the University of Sydney's Fisher Library and one at the Department of Performance

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Studies' Archive Room, where it will be available for researchers and other interested parties to read.

(7) Will the study benefit me?

The research will have no direct benefit for participants.

(8) Can I tell other people about the study?

Yes, you can tell anyone about the study.

(9) What if I require further information?

When you have read this information, Ms. Thomas will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Ms. Thomas on ktho9010@uni.sydney.edu.au or 0422 755 951 or Dr. Laura Ginters, Senior Lecturer, Department of Performance Studies, on 02 9351 6849

(10) What if I have a complaint or concerns?

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact The Manager, Human Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on +61 2 8627 8176 (Telephone); +61 2 8627 8177 (Facsimile) or ro.humanethics@sydney.edu.au (Email).

This information sheet is for you to keep

Participant Consent Form:



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Masters Research Project: ATSI Performance Practice and Government Funding

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I,[PRINT NAME], give consent to my participation in the research project

TITLE: ATSI Performance Practice and Government Funding

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved, have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

3. I understand that I am not under any obligation to participate in the study and can withhold consent without affecting my relationship with the researcher(s), the University of Sydney or the arts organisation/artists with which I am involved now or in the future.

4. I consent to the following:

- | | | |
|---|-----|----|
| i) Interview | YES | NO |
| ii) Rehearsal and work process observation | YES | NO |
| iii) Access to data and/or archival documentation | YES | NO |

5. I understand that I can stop any individual interviews with Ms Thomas at any time if I do not wish to continue and can instruct that any recording be erased and the information provided not be included in the study.

6. I consent to:

- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| i) Being identified in the study | YES | NO |
| i) Audio-taping | YES | NO |
| ii) Video-taping | YES | NO |
| iii) Photography | YES | NO |
| iii) Receiving a copy of the thesis/report | YES | NO |

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If you answered YES to the "Receiving a copy of the thesis/report (iii)", please provide your details i.e. mailing address, email address.

Receiving Thesis/Report

Address: _____

Email: _____

Signed:

Name:

Date:

APPENDIX 2

Codes

INITIAL CODES – Parent and Sub-Codes

1. *I Didn't Believe in Myself: Confidence*

- a) Feelings of Empowerment
- b) Lacking in Confidence
- c) Self-Perceptions About Confidence

2. *I Feel What's Going On in the World I See and Live: Emotive and Intangible Connections*

- a) Connection to Community
- b) Connection to PACT
- c) Healing and Reconciliation
- d) Importance of Relationships and Connections
- e) Importance of Understanding and Encouragement
- f) Ways of Engaging with the World

3. *It's Just Down to the Cultural Thing: Cultural Differences and Misunderstandings*

- a) Dislike of Eurocentric Processes
- b) Influence of Oral Culture
- c) Methods of Communication
- d) Sense of Disconnection from Heritage
- e) Sense of Disconnection from Traditional Cultural Practices
- f) Sense of Disconnection from European Culture

4. *I've Still Gotta Prove Myself and Earn My Stripes: Opportunities*

- a) Ability to Create with No Money
- b) Access to Opportunities
- c) Being Given a Creative Voice

- d) Being Perceived as Political
- e) Believe Enough Opportunities are Available
- f) Dependency on Funding
- g) Desire for A Different Way to Discover Opportunities
- h) Difficult Interactions
- i) Discoverability of Opportunities
- j) Discovering Opportunities
- k) Dislike of Complicated Processes
- l) Feelings of Being Used
- m) Feelings of Pressure
- n) Importance of Access to a Venue/Space
- o) Importance of Government Funding
- p) Importance of Philanthropic Funding
- q) Importance of Residencies
- r) Learning How to Apply for Funding
- s) Perceived Disadvantages When Applying for Opportunities
- t) Perceived Improvements Required Regarding Funding
- u) Perception of a Successful Opportunity
- v) Perception of a Sustainable Opportunity
- w) Perceptions About Level of Compromise
- x) Proving How Much You Want Funding
- y) Relationship with Funding Bodies
- z) Sense of Gratefulness
- aa) The Generation of Opportunities

5. *No One Wants To Do A Depressing Aboriginal Play Anymore: Theatre-Making*

- a) Characteristics of Indigenous Practice
- b) Perceived Importance of PACT
- c) Perceived Importance of the Arts

6. *PACT Has Been One of the Most Helpful Places: Positive Influences*

- a) Influence of PACT Artistic Team
- b) Importance of an Established Arts Organisation
- c) Importance of Cultural Guidance and Encouragement
- d) Importance of Family
- e) Importance of Mentors
- f) Significant of PACT Opportunities

7. *They Expect You to Have Some Sort of Degree in Things: Gaps for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders*

- a) Lack of Formal Education
- b) Lack of Knowledge and Skills
- c) Perceived Areas of Need Relating to Education
- d) Understanding Eurocentric Processes

8. *You Are Labelled an Aboriginal Artist: Expectations*

9. *You're Automatically Judged on Everything: Identity and Place*

- a) Belonging and Desire to "Fit In"
- b) Dislike of Victim Image
- c) Feelings of Being Judged
- d) Perceptions about Identity