Community Arts and Cultural Development: A Powerful Tool for Social Transformation

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Figure 1. This Is Our Life

Photographer: Mat De Koning

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Abstract

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Community arts and cultural development is a collaborative process between artists and community whereby direct participation in art making is as important as the creative outcomes. Worldwide, community arts theory and practice has been linked to civil and human rights advocates, most notably Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. In Australia, research into community arts highlights the social benefits of the practice and the role that government has had in its evolution. There is however very little research that focuses on understanding *how* the process of community arts and cultural development unfolds in communities, especially when working with disadvantaged groups. This thesis addresses this research gap by examining the practice of a leading community arts organisation in Western Australia, the Community Arts Network WA (CAN WA). Through the use of case studies, framed by critical ethnography and reflective practice, the thesis illuminates CAN WA's community arts practice and highlights its outcomes for individuals and communities.

The thesis research reveals *how* CAN WA's practice embedded values and principles that were fundamental to building relationships and gaining trust with Aboriginal communities. The research finds that community arts and cultural development practice is a powerful vehicle for marginalised voices to tell their own stories and in doing so the process has social transformative qualities for individuals and communities. At the individual level, practitioners, participants, and community members report increased cultural competencies and awareness, articulation of hope, healing, enhanced artistic skills and a renewed sense of possibilities. At a community level, there is evidence of strengthened cultural identity, having fun and improved social interactions amongst groups.

This thesis is an example of reflective research that contributes to a deeper understanding of community arts practice from a practitioner's standpoint. The thesis suggests that community arts and cultural development practice can be better understood as a tool for social transformation when recognised as a continuum from interpretative to transformative practice and when set against theories of empowerment and liberation.

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I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Carmen González Sepúlveda. As a young woman she desperately wanted to study but she was not able to do so. Later in life she has done many amazing things and has been an inspiration to many women – her positive energy and her enthusiasm for life is contagious!

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

Community arts, also known as community cultural development, is a collaborative and participatory arts and cultural practice where communities engage in art making activities that are meaningful to them (Mills 2006). In community arts, the creative processes and the direct involvement of community members in art making, culture and performance are as important as the artistic outcomes, and these are achieved through collaboration between the participants and the artist(s). The relationship with people is central to this cultural practice, where the community is as crucial as the arts (Gielen 2011). The artistic media used in community arts are diverse, and encompass a wide range of creative expressions including visual, verbal, written and performed (Mills and Brown 2004). It is widely claimed that community arts or community cultural development is an empowering process that enables communities to voice their own stories, learn new skills, express diversity and identity, establish relationships and communicate their concerns and aspirations for the future, and in doing so contribute to building community capacity and wellbeing (Sonn, Drew, and Kasat 2002; Mills and Brown 2004; Goldbard 2006; Mills 2006; Ruane 2007; Sonn and Green 2008; Palmer, Hayden, and Kasat 2011; Ife 2012).

Community arts has been recognised as a practice in Australia for 40 years and during this time it has enjoyed varying degrees of government support, and has endured numerous policy shifts which, at times, have threatened its very existence (Kirby 1991; Craik 2005; Correa 2007).

The present literature in Australia broadly examines two aspects of community arts practice. Firstly, there is some literature that highlights the significant role that government policy has had in developing and shaping its evolution (Binns 1991; Kirby 1991; Hawkins 1993; Ruane 2007; Young 2009). Secondly, there has been an incremental body of research since the mid-1990s that examines community arts or community cultural development and the social benefits it provides to communities in the areas of social capital creation, mental health, and health promotion, community engagement and wellbeing, as well as rural and regional revitalisation (Williams 1995; McQueen Thomson and Ziguras 2002; Mills and Brown 2004; Ruane 2007; Lewis and Doyle 2008; Anwar 2011).

Despite the increased body of work that recognises the social benefits of community arts practice, especially when working with disadvantaged communities (Thomas and Rappaport 1996; Sarkissian 2005), very little research focuses on understanding *what* community arts practice entails and how the process unfolds in communities. Whilst there is some literature that links community arts to social change agendas (Thomas and Rappaport 1996), there is limited research in Australia that provides an understanding of how the process of community arts creates opportunities for marginalised communities to have their silent *voices* heard (Thomas and Rappaport 1996; Boal 1998; Marshall-Clark 2002; Oropeza 2002; Price 2008).

The potentially crucial role of community arts has a deep, personal resonance. My awareness and interest in community arts practice was shaped whilst growing up in Chile under Augusto Pinochet's military regime during the 1970s and 1980s. Its repressive influence penetrated the most private realms of family life and fostered a culture of self-censorship, fuelled by fear. As a child, I remember my mother saying: "never talk about politics in public". So I didn't. This was not surprising, as in 1973 the regime murdered and jailed thousands of civilians during and after the bloody coup d'état that toppled the democratically elected Chilean President Salvador Allende (Augusto Pinochet 2011). The voices of dissent were silent for a very long time.

For years, people were too afraid to speak out, and it wasn't until the early 1980s when I was in my early teens, that Chileans started more visible campaigns denouncing human rights abuses. The arts became a key vehicle to express dissent, to communicate, and to help people make sense of their reality. It is impossible to remember that time of my life without the music, poetry and images of Victor Jara, Violeta Parra, Silvio Rodriguez, Inti-Illimani, Pablo Neruda, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. These artists became powerful icons, and their work developed into emblems of the struggle of the people and their desire for freedom.

> **El Arado** (last verse)
> Nunca es tarde, me dice ella,
> la paloma volará, volará, volará,
> como el yugo de apretado
> tengo el puño esperanzado

porque todo

cambiará.

(By Victor Jara)[1]

The Plough

It's never too late, she says

the dove will fly, fly, fly,

like the yoke is tight

my fist hopes

that things will change. [2]

I became involved in politics at the age of seventeen. In retrospect, I understand now that what propelled me into activism was the combination of a growing political consciousness and a strong emotional connection to others who, like me, wanted justice. I discovered the revolutionary educator Paolo Freire and the theatre activist Augusto Boal whose writings helped me comprehend concepts such as class, colonisation, power and privilege. I integrated these intellectual understandings, mediated by the expression of the artists who had influenced me. I also discovered that my narrative for liberation was common to many others including students, peasants, miners, the working class, indigenous people, and the poor. This shared sense of purpose was immensely powerful (Rappaport 2000). It sustained and reinforced my values and beliefs (Rappaport 1995, 1).

I came to Perth, Australia, as a political refugee in 1987. The journey from Santiago to Perth was very fast; however the process of migration and integration to the Australian society was complex, difficult and lengthy. It was not until I became more involved in community arts and cultural development activities that I began to understand myself in my *adopted* country.

I gathered together a group of other Chilean women and we formed a theatre group where we explored and shared our collective struggles in settling into this new place. The need to understand and express aspects of my cultural identity became an important process that helped me make sense of being a Chilean in exile. In the course of gaining awareness of my displacement issues, I was able to recognise the impact that culture had in shaping who I

[1] Lyrics from: http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/v/victor_jara/#share.
[2] My translation.

was. Hence I understood that in order to develop a sense of belonging in Australia I needed to find a *voice*.

Armed with those insights and a desire to share my experiences, I found my voice through the arts. Following on from my involvement with the Chilean Women's Theatre Group, I actively participated in a number of other community arts projects including visual and performing arts, as well as filmmaking. I also became an advocate of this practice by getting involved in advisory bodies at the local, state and federal government level.

In 1999 I attained a position with the Community Arts Network of Western Australia. CAN WA has, since its inception in 1985, become one of the leading agencies engaging in community arts practice within the state. Throughout its history, CAN WA has defined its aims and objectives as an organisation that works with marginalised and disadvantaged communities. My new role required facilitating community cultural development processes with communities across Western Australia. The experience of working directly with communities affirmed my existing belief in the power of community arts. I knew, from my personal experience, about the connection between community arts activities and social change, and I became passionate about trying to understand the processes involved in meaningful and accessible community arts practice.

The awakening of my political consciousness left an enduring mark that has coloured the way in which I understand and view the world. It is not surprising that I found it comforting when I discovered that the libertarian ideas of Boal and Freire had influenced the practice of community arts and cultural development in many parts of the world including Australia (Adams and Goldbard 2002; Eagan 2011; Boyd 2011).

In 2004, I was appointed Managing Director of CAN WA. This role has afforded me the opportunity to deepen and consolidate the commitment CAN WA has towards Aboriginal people by initiating the development and delivery of long-term community-based arts projects with Noongar people in the Wheatbelt region[3]. The aim of these projects has been to create diverse opportunities for the Noongar people of this region to express their culture through the arts.

[3] The Noongar people have thousands of years of historical and cultural connection to the south-west of Western Australia, which is considered to be *their* country (SWALSC with John Host 2009*, xi*).

Since European colonisation Australia has seen a range of social policies aimed at dealing with Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal people have been greatly impacted by these policies that have ranged from protectionism to assimilation and more recently self-determination (Sonn 2010). One of the most draconian of these policies resulted in what has become known as the Stolen Generations (Haebich 2000; Read 2006, 444). This policy saw the removal of Aboriginal children from their families for generations. A landmark report published by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 1997, *Bringing them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families*, contains heart-wrenching stories revealing the devastating impact this policy, had and continues to have, on Aboriginal communities across Australia (Haebich 2000).

There have been numerous other studies into Aboriginal disadvantage. The Gordon Inquiry examines in depth the systems and the undercurrents involved in responding to family violence and child abuse in Aboriginal communities (Gordon, Hallahan, and Henry 2002); the *Safer Communities, Safer Children* (2007) report considers a model for cross-government action in response to child abuse disclosure in Aboriginal communities; and *The Hope Report* (2008) details the findings of an investigation into twenty-two alcohol and drug-related deaths of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley (Western Australia State Government Response to The Hope Report 2008). In the introduction to one of the most recent studies, the third and final report of the Indigenous Implementation Board [4] (2011), the Chair, Lieutenant General (Rtd) John Sanderson, provided the following bleak assessment:

> The evidence is clear – the existing strategies are costly and do not deliver sustained change to the wellbeing and prospect of the majority of Aboriginal people in either the cities or the regions (Sanderson 2011).

These reports are clearly complex, and deal with vast and multifaceted issues. However all of these documents highlight the systemic disempowerment of Aboriginal people and call for models of engagement based on community development principles in which the centrality of culture and self-determination are respected. Here, community arts can play –

[4] The Indigenous Implementation Board was established in 2009 by the Government of Western Australia to address the underlying causes of Indigenous disadvantage. http://www.dia.wa.gov.au/en/Boards-And-Committees/IIB/.

and is playing – a vital role. It is therefore timely and important to explore this role, to critically reflect on current practices and to consider future possibilities.

1.2 Research Aims

The primary aim of this thesis is to examine how community arts and cultural development practice[5] enables silenced voices to be heard and to explore how it can be better understood as a powerful tool for social transformation. The thesis aims to do this by reviewing relevant literature and research that addresses this important role for community arts and cultural practice, and by presenting, and reflecting on, relevant case studies of community arts and cultural development practices undertaken by CAN WA.

Specifically, the thesis aims to:

- review the origins and evolution of community arts and cultural development theory and practice, and its potential benefits, in Australia;
- introduce the Community Arts Network of Western Australia as a key exponent of community art and cultural development practice with marginalised communities in WA;
- examine how CAN WA's *Narrogin Stories* project developed as a process that enabled the Noongar community in Narrogin to have a voice;
- examine how CAN WA's *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* project has contributed to affirming cultural identity for Noongar young people in the Wheatbelt region and how it has enabled positive interaction between Noongar and *Wadjela* [6] young people; and
- reflect on how these case studies can contribute to our understanding of community arts and cultural development as a practice that enables silenced voices to be heard and that can be a powerful and effective tool for social transformation.

[5] This thesis will use the term *community arts and cultural development* as it refers to the artistic and cultural practice and *community arts* when referring to the artistic activity or a project.
[6] *Wadjela* is a term Noongar people use to refer to non-Aboriginal people.

In addressing these sub-aims, the thesis seeks to contribute to our understanding of the transformative powers of community arts and cultural development practice. Its insights will hopefully be relevant to all those who aspire to be agents of this transformation.

1.3 Research Methods

In order to answer the primary research aim, and to address the related research aims of this thesis, several methodological approaches have been employed.

The first research aim of this thesis is addressed by undertaking a review of the literature and policy on community arts and cultural development within Australia and overseas. This review will examine the historical development of the practice in Australia and provide some of the political and social context in which community arts and cultural development policy has emerged. In addition, the literature review will identify the theoretical connections between community arts and its social benefits.

The second, third and fourth research sub-aims will be addressed through case studies of CAN WA and two of its most relevant and recent projects.

The last aim will be addressed through critical reflection and an academic analysis of the lessons learnt through the case studies.

Contemporary research contexts are complex and multifaceted, particularly when they involve marginalised communities. I have chosen to use qualitative research methodologies and in particular those research methods that can assist me in navigating these intricate post-colonial spaces where new methodologies and epistemological approaches are being constructed (Smith 2005). Qualitative research enables the researcher to "study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 3).

Case studies are commonly used in qualitative research (Stake 2005). A key feature of "a case study is that it is expected to capture the complexity of a single case" (Jonasson 2003, 2). According to Flyvbjerg (2001) the case study provides optimum opportunities to learn from a context-dependent situation. Context-dependent learning and experience are thought to be more conducive to acquiring a depth of awareness associated with intuition

and holistic knowledge, which in turn are associated with the attainment of expertise (Flyvbjerg 2001, 71; 2006). An important feature of case study methodology is that a variety of research techniques are used to understand the case from diverse angles and viewpoints (Jonasson 2003, 3).

According to Stake (2005) there are different types of case study: intrinsic case study, instrumental case study, and multiple case studies. In an intrinsic case study the key purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the particularities of the case itself; in an instrumental case study the research is undertaken primarily to provide insights into an issue; and in a multiple case study many cases are studied at once, for the purpose of arriving at better theories (Stake 2005, 445–446). In this thesis, I will approach the investigation of CAN WA as an intrinsic case study, while I will be using a more instrumental approach as I research two of CAN WA's most significant community arts projects. This approach is congruent with the guiding research aim of this thesis, which is to elucidate how community arts and cultural development practice unfolds in communities and to better understand in what way it generates social transformation.

As mentioned above, an important feature of case study methods is to use diversity to illuminate *the case*. Therefore in preparing case studies of CAN WA and its projects, critical ethnography and reflective practice will be used to frame the approach to this thesis. Critical ethnography has its roots in classic Marxist theories (Foley and Valenzuela 2005) and emerged in response to more traditional anthropological ethnography that seems to ignore social structures such as class and racism (Cook 2008). As one of its principal exponents, Jim Thomas explains, "conventional ethnography describes what is; critical ethnography asks what could be" (Thomas 1993, 4). In the past decade, contemporary critical ethnographers have begun to abandon the idea of speaking from a universal and objective view point to favour a much more subjective standpoint which positions them as "mere culture-bound mortals speaking from very particular race, class, gender and sexual identity locations" (Foley and Valenzuela 2005, 218).

Critical ethnography and reflective practice are complementary methods. Although there is no precise definition of reflective practice, there seems to be an agreement amongst researchers that the practice is valuable, and that there are many tools and techniques for

reflective practice, and no single way to theorise or conceptualise it (Hickson 2011). According to Foley (2002), reflective practice contributes to making ethnography a more engaging and useful genre. In fact it is argued that reflexivity in its many forms is an intrinsic part of contemporary qualitative research methods (Banister et al., cited in Finlay 2002). Critical ethnographic approaches rely on reflective practice and a number of methods have moved this research practice beyond the more conventional one-to-one interview. Phil Carspecken, in his influential book *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research* (1994), proposed a five-step method of inquiry which includes: documentation of observations, field notes, record of interactions between participants, interviews and videotaped observations and examining the broader social structures and systems that interact with and influence the social situation (Cook 2008, 149).

This thesis explores some of the details of CAN WA's community arts and cultural development practice that are usually invisible and therefore not documented. The above-mentioned methodological approaches will enable the research to be conducted from different standpoints, as an actor, as a witness, and as critical observer. This will be achieved from the vantage point of someone who has been intimately involved in the development, the practice and the evaluations of CAN WA's work for the past ten years (Higgins 2011). I will draw from a combination of my professional experience, tacit knowledge and personal reflections (Kinsella 2010) together with field notes woven with fragments of stories that have occurred during the projects.

In addition to reviewing the extensive written and audio-visual material, project diaries and reports produced during the past three years, I will examine the research, evaluations and theorising of CAN WA's practice for the past decade (Sonn, Drew, and Kasat 2002; Sonn and Green 2008; Palmer and Sonn 2010; Sonn and Quayle 2011; Palmer, Hayden, and Kasat 2011; Sonn, Quayle, and Cruz 2012; Sonn and Quayle 2013). The focus will on refining CAN WA's community arts and cultural development practice with Noongar people in the Wheatbelt region.

I am interested in using reflective practice to describe the processes and interactions that occur between community members and practitioners as part of CAN WA's practice. More specifically I am interested in illuminating the way in which CAN WA has gone about

undertaking community arts and cultural development processes that privilege Noongar ways of knowing (Smith 2005). The Noongar people have historical and cultural connections with the south-west of Western Australia that span thousands of years (SWALSC with John Host 2009). However, their voices are mostly silent and their identities, typically invisible from exercising power and influence in this region (Sonn and Quayle 2013). I intend exploring the spaces that have been generated through CAN WA's community arts practice as they create finer-grain interpretations of Noongar people's life, create space for decolonising, and provide frameworks for hearing and listening to Noongar voices that have been silenced (Smith 2005; Sonn, Quayle, and Cruz 2012).

Following the case study analysis, the suitability of the methodology and the approach used, will be reviewed and its strengths and limitations will be identified. Recommendations will then be made regarding methodological approaches that could be used in future research on community arts as a tool for social transformation.

1.4 Thesis Structure

The structure of the thesis is outlined below.

Chapter Two: History and Benefits of Community Arts in Australia

The second chapter of the thesis provides a brief historical overview of the origins of community arts and cultural development practice in Australia. It focuses on the role that government policy has had in the development of the community arts and cultural development sector in Australia, and it reviews the changes that have occurred in community arts in Australia in the last 40 years. This chapter examines the body of research that has emerged from the mid-1990s that articulates community arts and cultural development and its benefits in the context of social capital creation, community engagement and wellbeing, mental health, health promotion, and rural and community revitalisation. Finally, this chapter considers why so much of the community arts and cultural development research has focused on its instrumental value and explores whether the notion of its intrinsic value has been neglected.

Chapter Three: Introducing CAN WA

Chapter Three introduces CAN WA as a principal exponent and leader in the community arts and cultural development field in WA. The chapter describes the history of the organisation, its origins and the philosophical underpinnings of its foundation. This chapter also examines CAN WA's evolution and the changes it has experienced in its twenty-eight years of existence. It includes an analysis of some of the key internal and external factors that have affected its development.

Chapter Four: *The Narrogin Stories* – A Window into CAN WA's Practice

Chapter Four presents a practitioners' view of CAN WA's community arts and cultural development practice through a case study of the *Narrogin Stories* project. The chapter examines how the *Narrogin Stories* project was conceptualised and how it gained the trust of the community in the context of very complex social dynamics. It focuses on giving the reader an understanding of the multiple and rich layers of the creative and decision-making processes that were involved in this project. Finally, the chapter gives an insight into how the arts were the vehicle that enabled the Noongar community of Narrogin to tell their own stories and create a new narrative.

Chapter Five: *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats*

Chapter Five provides details of how the last phase of a three-year community art project *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* was conducted. It explores the significance of developing trust and long-term relationships within communities and considers the merits of employing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff when working in a Noongar context. This chapter also examines how this community arts project enabled the young participants, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to explore and express a sense of place and cultural identity.

Chapter Six: Critical Discussion

Chapter Six analyses CAN WA's practice, by bringing together a discussion that incorporates the learnings and insights from the previous two chapters. The chapter carefully considers some of the fundamental lessons learnt from CAN WA's community arts and cultural

development practice. These include the values and principles, as well as the effective approaches that help communities to tell their diverse stories. The chapter examines how these insights can inform future practice when working with disadvantaged communities. Finally, the chapter seeks to demonstrate the effectiveness of community arts and cultural development practice in enabling silenced voices to be heard and `better understood, as a mechanism for social transformation.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This chapter summarises the key findings from this research, considers the limitations of the study, and proposes future research that can address these limitations.

Chapter Two: History and Benefits of Community Arts in Australia

2.1 Introduction

For the past forty years, community arts or community cultural development has been widely recognised and practiced throughout the United Kingdom, North America, Europe and Australia with varying degrees of support from government, cultural and development agencies and funding bodies (Goldbard 2006). In Australia, this practice has had a challenging history and a contested evolution. The definitions and terminology surrounding community arts practice and its value and scope, have constituted an ongoing discussion for policy makers, funding bodies and practitioners alike (Hawkins 1990; Pitts 2005; Mills 2006; Correa 2007). Some of these considerations and the diversity of opinions have resulted in community arts or community cultural development having to endure policy shifts, which at times have threatened its very existence (Correa 2007).

This chapter provides a brief historical overview of the origins of community arts in Australia. It focuses on the role that government policy has had in the development of the community arts and cultural development sector, and it seeks to highlight the changes that have occurred in community arts in Australia in the past four decades. The chapter also examines the growing body of research highlighting the many benefits of community arts. These benefits include social capital creation, community engagement and wellbeing, mental health, health promotion, and rural and community revitalisation (Williams 1995; McQueen Thomson and Ziguras 2002; Mills and Brown 2004; Ruane 2007; Lewis and Doyle 2008; Anwar 2011). In addition, the chapter explores the intrinsic and not just the instrumental benefits of community arts (McCarthy et al. 2004; Dunphy 2009). The chapter aims to demonstrate that community arts worldwide, has been significantly influenced by the libertarian ideas of Freire and Boal, and therefore it can also be understood as an emancipatory practice. Finally, the chapter examines the role of stories in community arts practice and explores how enabling communities, which have experienced exclusion, to tell their own stories can be a powerful tool for social transformation.

2.2 Origins and Evolution

Kirby (1991) claims that community arts in Australia has had a distinct political foundation. She argues that, "the impetus to organise and consciously engage ordinary people in the cultural life of the country has historically and consistently come from the political left" (Kirby 1991, 20). The comprehensive education of the working classes, that is the intellectual and cultural development of the proletariat, has been a strong basis from which Marxist theories, socialist movements, including the union movement, have argued that a more egalitarian and just society would emerge (Kirby 1991).

In 1856 Australia won the right to the Eight Hour Day. This achievement gave Australia international standing in the promotion of trade unionism. In turn, this provided the union movement with the reputation and impetus necessary for democratic reforms and for initiating an array of public, political and educational activities. "All these activities gave rise to a distinctive working class culture that was self-sufficient, popular and participatory, much of it influencing, or passing into, the Australian mainstream"(Kirby 1991, 21). In the 1930s and 1940s the Australian Communist Party attracted large numbers of people and, like nineteenth century European socialist parties, it promoted and supported cultural activity. With the slogan "Art is a Weapon" it examined the concept of cultural production and the role of the arts-worker. Although limited in its reach, its influence was noted especially in its promotion of local content and the development of working class audiences (Kirby 1991, 25).

During the 1960s and 1970s Australia and other Western countries such as the United States of America and Great Britain experienced significant cultural and social change (Binns 1991). The rise of Marxism and post-colonial theories challenged the universality and authority of Western values and, combined with an increase in culturally diverse post-war migration, the surge of Aboriginal land rights, activism and feminism, contributed greatly to the re-examination of the Australian national identity (Hoffie 1991). It was during this period that community arts emerged:

> The community arts movement had its origins in the social and political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s that developed around the focal issues of the war in Vietnam, feminism and Aboriginal land rights (Kirby 1991, 19).

Up to this point, the Australian national cultural identity had been primarily constructed on its colonial past. The immigration policy of the Australian government since Federation, the White Australia Policy, aimed to ensure that every migrant would assimilate into the *Australian way of life* and would therefore become part of the existing national identity (Jamrozik, Urquhart, and Boland 1995). Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War between 1965 and 1973 became an important catalyst for the manifestation of social and political changes. Many artists, academics, students and trade unionists found new forms of collaboration, using art as a vehicle for political expression and to resist and condemn the war. The arts had become politicised and in this context the term community arts resonated in Australia (Binns 1991).

The notion that access to arts and cultural life was the privilege of some, together with an increased commodification of art works, resulted in movements seeking ways of engaging audiences in direct art making (Kirby 1991). Concepts such as arts-worker and community artist (rather than artist) emerged at this time, as a way of challenging the process and status of art making. Similarly, many artists grew disenchanted with the exclusivity of the high arts which did not facilitate their practice as political acts. On the contrary, it tended to denigrate artistic expression outside non-traditional art forms (Binns 1991). Community arts became an arts practice that liberated the artist from the constraints of high arts and a vehicle to produce art that would "speak of the lives of ordinary Australians" (Fensham 1990, 11). As a result, arts practitioners looked for inspiration in social and political issues, and pursued alliances, dialogue and collaborations across sectors. Community artists, on the whole, welcomed difference and "marginality was embraced as a space from which a self-defining identity could grow" (Hoffie 1991, 32).

This renewed sense of an Australian national identity embraced cultural diversity and the production of arts as a legitimate activity in the spheres of work and production. *RedPlanet* served as an example of community arts practice that was both a collective arts practice and a political endeavour. *RedPlanet* was the merging of two community arts collectives in Melbourne: *Redletter*, a poster workshop which was founded in 1977, and *Another Planet*, a screen-printing project which was incorporated in 1984. *RedPlanet* contributed 25 years of consistent community arts production, inspired by the belief that "art can be produced collectively to make political statements and influence social action, rather than make

statements about how the artist 'feels'" (Tsara 2005, 95). *RedPlanet* produced highly influential political posters that gave the organisation world recognition in poster design. *RedPlanet* accomplished its successes while maintaining a commitment to its constituents, lower socio-economic and non-English speaking background communities in Melbourne, and to the values of creativity, political expression and diversity (Tsara 2005).

Whilst community arts practice gained momentum and support by challenging the Australian national identity, it also experienced a barrage of criticism under the discourse of *arts excellence*. Deborah Mills, former Director of the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council during the 1990s, observed:

> I think, because community arts actually seeks to re-examine the relationship between the artist and their audience, it is a very subversive concept. And because it is subversive it is very threatening. And because it is very threatening, there is a lot of misinformation and, I believe, wilful ignorance about the excellence of community arts practice (Hecks 1990, 51).

Despite the community arts sector's attempts to challenge the notion of *excellence* in the arts, a perception has persisted over the years that community arts outcomes are *amateur art* (Craik 2005). Furthermore, it has probably been debilitating for the sector to engage in the ongoing justification of its practice, arguing for its artistic merit and that it is therefore deserving of recognition as an art form. Perhaps discussing *arts excellence* is the wrong approach to take when discussing the benefits of community arts or community cultural development.

2.3 The Role of Government in the Development of Community Arts and Community Cultural Development Policy

Community arts practice in Australia has been strongly influenced by government policy. In 1990 Deborah Mills, the then Director of the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council, reflected:

> I think that we will probably find, if we study the local situation, that there has been a very close relationship between the role of the state and the development of community arts practice in this country. Now that might

> be politically unacceptable – it is not something I feel very comfortable about (Hecks 1990, 49).

This in itself presents a contradiction. On the one hand the practice gained visibility and momentum once it became government policy; on the other hand the practice has become dependent on government policy, and has become vulnerable to the agenda of the government of the day.

2.3.1 From the 1970s to the 1980s

Hawkins (1991) argues that the term community arts did not have any real currency or much traction in Australia until it became incorporated into government policy under the Whitlam government in 1973. "As difficult as it may be for many community artists to accept, community arts are an official invention" (Hawkins 1991, 45). The Whitlam government established the Community Arts and Development Committee in July 1973, and in 1975 restructured the Australia Council, giving it statutory authority, its current name, seven art form boards and one hundred per cent increase in funds. In 1977, under threats of axing, the Community Arts Committee and its supporters lobbied for its retention (Hull 1989). As a result of this activity, in 1978 the Community Arts Committee became a fully constituted art form board with all the authority and autonomy of all the other art form boards (Hawkins 1991).

Hawkins (1993, 23) argues that "the creation of the Community Arts Program signalled a shift in cultural policy". The new policy priorities were couched in terms of *access and participation*. These new terms generated some tension and challenges in the justification of arts funding. Questions were raised around what was considered, and could be considered, cultural activity. In addition, questions emerged about the way in which grants were distributed and whose values and interests were, or were not, represented in the existing grant systems (Hawkins 1993). Community arts practice added its voice to contest the orthodoxy of the Australia Council of the time: "the monolithic nature of Australia's national cultural identity, and the notion of 'excellence' in the arts" (Hoffie 1991, 42).

It was at this time that the Australia Council funded some projects that reflected this broader ideological shift. The Gay Mardi Gras in metropolitan Sydney was one of these. This project aimed at celebrating difference and homosexuality. Funding the Gay Mardi Gras

created great controversy for the Australia Council, not only because of the content of the festival, which was very provocative, but because it was funded through the Community Arts Program. That is, public funds were used to support a "carnival for the celebration of homosexuality, revelling in excess and hedonism" (Hawkins 1991, 46). Events such as this one "seemed to represent a fundamental threat to the status of 'culture' in cultural policy" (Hawkins 1991, 47). Another project funded at this time under the principles of difference was the *Art and Working Life Program*. This project highlighted a more pluralistic image of Australia in which marginal cultural traditions were worthy of recognition and public funds. At this point the community arts program argued that cultural diversity was vital not just to demonstrate the nation's tolerance of difference but, more importantly, because it was essential to the health and renewal of the national culture (Hawkins 1990, 51).

From the second half of the 1980s, the term community cultural development began to be used in Australia. In 1987 the Hawke Labor government, under increasing cost- cutting pressures, abolished the Community Arts Board. Once again the allocation of community arts funds was the responsibility of a committee of the Australia Council, this time called the Community Cultural Development Committee (Hawkins 1991, 46).

The name change from community arts to community cultural development also coincided with the appointment of Donald Horne, an influential Australian academic, historian and philosopher, as the Australia Council Chair and the Chair of the Community Cultural Development Committee. This was rather unusual and worked well for advocating the benefits of community cultural development practice across Council. Horne's most important legacy was to emphasise a renewed and more vigorous social democratic justification for arts funding. This rationale was close to the roots of the community arts policy that had originated under the Whitlam government, however Horne differed in that his central themes were citizenship and cultural rights. The issues of access and participation were no longer couched in terms of a deficit model where the "uncultured" needed to access high culture. Horne argued that access to and participation in arts and culture were democratic rights (Hawkins 1993, 81–83).

2.3.2 From the 1990s to Today

One of the long-term successes in the community arts and cultural development field has been the capacity to develop collaborations and partnerships with a range of government and non-government sectors (Horton and Moynihan 2002). One of the earliest examples occurred in 1990, when the Australia Council and the National Office of Local Government initiated a task force to develop a collaborative framework to better support the development of arts and culture within local government. One of the key initiatives of the task force was the 1992 launch of *The Cultural Development Strategy*, which saw a partnership develop between the Australia Council and the Australian Local Government Association (Pippen 2003). According to Hawkins (1993), "this strategy signalled the ultimate triumph of cultural development over community arts" (Hawkins 1993, 85). Cultural development was now promoted into the mainstream; that is, it was no longer relegated to access and equity-related issues, or as a means to meet the needs of specific disadvantaged groups.

Despite the credibility and achievements of the community arts and cultural development sector in the past, the golden decade of support from the Australia Council came to an end in 2004. Policy changes once again affected the community arts and cultural sector within the Australia Council. Hawkins (1993) sadly predicted what was ultimately to occur a decade later.

> An historical record of the Community Arts Program is important. Without this, the program risks sinking without a trace. It remains high on the Federal Liberal Party's hit list for either abolition or devolution (Hawkins 1993, xxiii).

On December 8, 2004 the Australia Council announced, from its headquarters in Sydney, that the Council had undergone a restructure (Goldbard 2005). "Most radically and contentiously", the Community Cultural Development Board and the New Media Arts Board were axed (Craik 2005, 12). The Community Cultural Development Board was the last incarnation of the Community Arts Committee, which had been established in 1973. This sent warning signals throughout the sector. Many felt that the political nature of community cultural development work may have been the reason for its axing (Young 2009) and this

was exacerbated by rumours that the Howard government had requested its demise (Strickland 2004). There was significant community backlash that mobilised the sector across states and territories, forcing the Australia Council to rethink their strategy. The sector was vocal and unified, and demanded wide consultation across the country. The Australia Council responded by commissioning a scoping study, which was published in 2006 (History of NACA 2008).

The consultation process which ensued as part of the scoping study gave practitioners the opportunity to voice their thoughts and opinions about the practice. People emphasised the importance of naming what "we do" in order to retain the political and social impact for which this work has long been known. Therefore, the sector rejected the Australia Council's proposal to use the term Creative Communities to define community arts and cultural development work. This was perceived as a "watering down of the social and political intent of their practice" (Mills 2006, 11). The sector consultation also clearly reiterated some key particularities that are at the core of defining community arts and cultural development work, in relation to other forms of arts engagement. Community arts and cultural development requires an *exchange* between the artist and the community, and *community participation* that develops a community's own intellectual and cultural production (Mills 2006). These are both essential to the success of the practice.

Furthermore, the scoping study noted a diverse, healthy and entrepreneurial community arts and cultural development field that had been involved in developing partnerships with other sectors including education, social justice, local government and health for the past decade (Dunn 2006; Mills 2006). So, despite losing the Community Cultural Development Board within the Australia Council, the sector gained a measure of unity between practitioners and advocates and enhanced credibility within the communities it sought to assist. The terminology that had defined the community arts and community cultural development sector was back on the federal agenda, albeit slightly modified:

> Community arts and cultural development (CACD) practice encompasses collaborations between professional artists and communities based on a desire to achieve innovative artistic and cultural development outcomes (Community Partnerships 2011, n.p.).

While retaining the terminology might not appear to be significant, for practitioners it signalled a major victory, demonstrating the capacity of the community arts and cultural development sector to mobilise. The backflip from the Australia Council created a new environment from which to redefine the focus of the practice. The Community Partnerships Committee (which finally replaced the CCDB) outlined its initial priorities in specific areas which included "regional Australia, disability, young people, cultural diversity, emerging communities, Indigenous people, remote Indigenous communities and specific critical social and cultural issues requiring focused attention" (Community Partnerships 2011).

The Australia Council restructure appeared to respond to a broader problem encountered by most contemporary governments concerning their approach to arts and cultural policies. Do they endorse elite and high arts in the form of the more traditional art forms such as opera, classical music and ballet, or do they promote an access and equity agenda? (Craik 2005). It seemed that this tension was exacerbated by the Australia Council restructure, and at this time the corporatisation of the arts was finally catching up with the Australia Council (Horton and Moynihan quoted in Goldbard 2005). The Australia Council justified the restructure as a way to "get the biggest possible impact for the tax payers buck" (Bott in Craik 2005, 12)[7]. This was not at all a new argument. In fact, it looked like history had repeated itself, as this rationale seemed almost identical to the one given in 1987 when the Australia Council abolished the Community Arts Board and introduced the Community Cultural Development Committee.

Under governments of both persuasions, the committees and boards that have been established within the Australia Council to support community arts and community cultural development have struggled to maintain and justify policies and programs that use public funds to support the practice as a democratic right. Whilst the community arts boards and committees have changed, and at times been abolished, most of the traditional art form boards (i.e. dance, theatre, music, literature and visual arts) within the Australia Council have remained largely untouched up until now.

It is 40 years since the Community Arts Committee was established. Today, there are significant changes taking place within the Australia Council. In March 2013 the Federal

[7] Jennifer Bott was the CEO of the Australia Council from 1999 to 2006.

Government launched *Creative Australia*, a much-anticipated National Cultural Policy (Taylor 2013). This policy was developed within a much larger arts funding change framework that included yet again another review of the Australia Council.[8] This current review, however, seems to be one of the most significant it has experienced since its inception in 1975 (Eltham 2013). Although the impact of the Australia Council review and the policy itself is yet to unfold, *Creative Australia* makes reference to community cultural development as one of the cultural domains included in the policy (Creative Nation National Cultural Policy 2013).

This is the first time community arts and cultural development is acknowledged in a national cultural policy document of this nature.[9] The sector is hopeful that this inclusion will have positive implications for future funding and support of this practice, however it is fair to say that up until now community arts has always been perceived as 'low brow' (Craik 2010). In contrast, the arts associated with elite cultural institutions continue to receive large amounts of government support in the form of grants, facilities and profile (Craik 2010). As *Creative Australia* was announced, there was no specific funding commitment for community arts and cultural development.

The public policy contest between excellence and access, which has marked the debate to legitimise the practices of community arts and community cultural development, has remained at the centre of the policy debate for the past four decades (Craik 2010). In fact, during the development and formulation of *Creative Australia* this emerged as one of the most contentious issues.[10]

Although the broader government policy debate about community arts has not radically changed, there has been an ongoing debate amongst practitioners in an attempt to define, reposition, and prove the practice. Some of these discussions have been underscored by the distinctive feeling that community arts and cultural development practice will always challenge the status quo, be contentious and struggle to survive within existing government funding models.

[8] http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/news/items/2011/australia-council-review-announced.
[9] The previous national cultural policy, *Creative Nation*, was launched in 1994.
[10] Early in 2012, I was appointed by the Federal Arts Minister to its National Cultural Policy reference group.

2.4 Defining the Practice – Blurry Terrain

Ever since I became involved in this sector over twenty years ago, there has been ongoing debate about defining, naming, and scoping the practice. Ironically, it is probably because community arts and cultural development practice has largely remained fluid and not rigidly defined that it has been able to survive several policy shifts during the past forty years. Its capacity to demonstrate its relevance to other public policy sectors through the development of partnerships has seen community arts and cultural development practice connected to some key government priority initiatives (Horton and Moynihan 2002; Sarkissian et al. 2003). These include initiatives in the areas of health, education, Aboriginal affairs, rural revitalisation, community capacity, social inclusion and community strengthening (Mills and Brown 2004). This capacity to morph and respond to diverse agendas has inevitably brought with it questions about what precisely community arts and cultural development is and does.

The approach has been to try to define two key concepts: community arts and community cultural development. At different times these terms have been used interchangeably (Mills 2006). At other times they have been understood as two separate but complementary processes. Community cultural development has been described as the process and the philosophical underpinnings of this practice, and community arts as the medium or tool to achieve the artistic outcomes. This point is illustrated in the definition below:

> Community cultural development is the process of collaboration between artists and community members on agreed upon goals. Community art is the medium through which this collaboration can take place and includes visual, media and performing arts. The principles behind the work are active participation, intentional inclusivity and ongoing learning. The process builds community, increases awareness of the value of the arts in our lives, develops creativity and addresses common issues (Community Arts – a Definition 2011).

Community arts is the term regularly used in Britain and most other Anglophone countries (Goldbard 2006) and was widely used in Australia until policy shifts in 1987 that saw the introduction of the term community cultural development. From then on, across Australia

the term “community arts” was most commonly replaced with “community cultural development”. Golbard (2005) believes that Australia’s community cultural development practice influenced some of the most progressive community arts practitioners and cultural democracy advocates in the U.S. Ironically, in the past decade a definition that locates the practice and its purpose distinctively in the context of emancipatory discourses has emerged from the United States and not from Australia.

> ‘Community Cultural Development’ describes the work of artist – organisers (‘community artist’) who collaborate with others to express identity, concerns and aspirations through the arts and communications media, while building cultural capacity and contributing to social change. In community cultural development work, community artists, singly or in teams, use their artist and organisational skills to serve the emancipation and development of a community, whether defined by geography (e.g., a neighbourhood), common interest (e.g., members of a union) or identity (e.g., members of an indigenous group) (Adams and Goldbard 2002, 8).

As explained earlier in this chapter, government has had a very prominent role in the development and evolution of community arts in Australia. This has meant that at different times the rhetoric of governments has dictated the terminology used and the field has not had much option but to adopt this language in its discourse. It would be fair to say, however, that despite government influence there has been independent research which defines community arts and cultural development as a collaborative and enabling practice, which not only produces meaningful art with communities but also enables community participation to express identity, concerns and aspirations, and ultimately to contribute to social change (Sonn, Drew, and Kasat 2002; Kapetas 2006; Mills 2006). These benefits are discussed next.

2.5 Instrumental Value and Social Impact

Since the Australia Council introduced the Community Partnerships Committee in 2006, there has been an increased articulation of the practice in relation to the sectors with which it intersects. This has resulted in the development of a growing body of work evaluating the social impact of community arts and cultural development.

The community arts and cultural development sector has been establishing partnerships with others, for decades. Interest in the social impact that participation and engagement in community arts activities have on communities is spreading. The theme of the 5th World Summit on Arts and Culture held in Melbourne in October 2011, Creative Intersections, testifies to this. This conference was supported and partly funded by the Australia Council. Although the terminology used during the Summit did not apply specifically to community arts and cultural development, the theme of the discussion paper prepared to inform the debate during the conference refer, in no uncertain terms, to the intersection of the arts with the community (Laaksonen 2011).

Since the first community arts social impact study published in the U.K. in 1997 (Matarasso 1997), there has been incremental research in Australia examining the social benefits of participating in the arts. As research on the practice grows, so too does the evidence of the social impact that community arts and cultural practice has on community development and capacity building (Jones 2005; Anwar 2011); engendering participation and citizenship (Pippen 2003; Dunn 2006); enhancing creative talent and critical capacity (National Cultural Policy Discussion Paper 2011, 9); rural and regional revitalisation (Anwar 2011); mental health and wellbeing (McQueen Thomson and Ziguras 2002; Mills and Brown 2004; Lewis and Doyle 2008; Anwar 2011) and social engagement and the inclusion of disadvantaged communities (Ruane 2007; Palmer and Sonn 2010; Sonn and Quayle 2011).

Achieving community development outcomes and building capacity in communities has been documented as one of the key advantages of the arts over other forms of community engagement such as sport. Community arts is non-competitive and enables modes of collaboration and inclusion among the participants (Impact of the Arts in Regional Western Australia 2004).

Community arts and cultural development practice also enables people to engage in discussions and take action on issues that matter to them. This active engagement in civic matters is an important antidote to passive consumption of entertainment, news or other mass media communication. In short, engagement in community arts exercises the muscles of cultural participation and citizenship, which run the risk of atrophying if underutilised (Adams and Goldbard 2001).

Educational benefits in participating in community arts have been explored for decades. Among the most common reported benefits are the acquisition of new or enhanced skills in communication, problem solving, and planning and organising complex projects and activities (Williams 1995; Sonn and Green 2008).

Community arts plays an important role in developing social capital within communities, as these activities foster the development of social networks, trust, and cohesion (Duxbury and Campbell 2009; Dunphy 2009; Anwar 2011). Community arts assists with intergenerational dialogue by bringing families together, strengthening existing social networks as well as decreasing social isolation (Palmer, Hayden, and Kasat 2011).

The role of community arts and cultural development in fostering positive health outcomes, particularly in mental health, has been gaining recognition since early 2000 when impact studies were first undertaken (McQueen Thomson and Ziguras 2002). These studies have highlighted the substantial body of research pointing to the positive health impact of community arts practice, while also identifying gaps in the research. More recently, organisations such as Disability in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts (DADAA) in Western Australia have developed research and evaluation practices that demonstrate the scope and scale of community arts and cultural development in regards to arts and health (Lewis and Doyle 2008; Marsden and Thiele 2008).

Community arts and cultural development practice has also had a long tradition of creating civic spaces for disadvantaged communities to have a voice and tell their stories (Adams and Goldbard 2001; Palmer and Wright 2007; Sonn and Green 2008). Social engagement and inclusion of marginalised communities through the arts has been reported as providing opportunities for individuals and communities to develop, preserve and express their culture, which in turn plays a major role in affirming cultural identity and fostering social capital and inclusion (Williams 1995; Ruane 2007; De Bruyne and Gielen 2011).

Whilst community arts and cultural development practice continues to intersect with many and varied sectors, there are risks that understanding the depth of its purpose could be lost (Adams and Goldbard 2002; Putland 2008). That is, community arts and cultural development could be co-opted to become a mainstream development tool to incorporate marginalised communities into mainstream society, rather than being an instrument that

enables communities to have a genuine, diverse and independent voice (Campbell et al. 2010). Many practitioners who have witnessed the creative exchanges that can take place between the artist and communities are mindful of this and loathe seeing its value and purpose diminished. The practice's history is ultimately rooted in creating opportunities for marginal communities to have a voice (Cohen-Cruz 2002). Thus, understanding how the practice works, how opportunities are created and why communities feel encouraged to take them up, is a vital area of research if we are to grasp the transformative nature of this practice.

2.6 Community Arts – More Than an Instrumental Practice

It is apparent from research in Australia that participating in art activities is good for communities. The existing research has focused predominantly on demonstrating the social value of the practice (Khan 2011). This is not surprising, as for the past twenty years the argument for public and private investment in the arts as a whole has been made on the basis of the arts serving broader social and economic goals (McCarthy et al. 2004; Craik 2010). Evidence-based research has been favoured and broadly used to lobby for more resources towards this practice (Khan 2011).

However, what has been less obvious when considering the social impact of the practice is a more in-depth examination of the intrinsic, and not just the instrumental, benefits of community arts (McCarthy et al. 2004; Dunphy 2009). Speaking about the arts in general, McCarthy and colleagues (2004) propose that the intrinsic value of the arts is evident in three spheres: a) at the private level – the captivation and pleasure that the arts give to an individual, b) at the private to public level – the expanded capacity for empathy and cognitive growth that occurs when someone is exposed to the arts, and c) at the public level – the creation of social bonds and expression of communal meaning (McCarthy et al. 2004, xv). This argument refers to the arts as a whole, and not specifically to community arts practice that by definition includes deep relations and exchange between the artist and the participants and between participants. Given this, one could argue that participating in community arts activities has intrinsic value, such as the development of social bonds, the expression of communal meaning, healing and having fun (Sonn and Green 2008).

Holden (2004) attempts to take the debate beyond the dichotomy of intrinsic and instrumental value by creating a "language capable of reflecting, recognising and capturing the full range of values expressed through culture" (Holden 2004, 9). He argues for an overarching shift in funding models that considers the concept of *Cultural Value*. Holden's definition of *Cultural Value* takes into consideration a range of policy angles and funding priorities, which for the purpose of this thesis are not all relevant. However, it is useful to understand some aspects of Holden's concept, and in particular, those that relate to the more subjective benefits of participating in the arts. Holden argues that:

> Cultural Value recognises the affective elements of cultural experience, practice and identity, as well as the full range of quantifiable economic and numerical data; it therefore locates the value of culture partly in the subjective experience of participants and citizens (Holden 2004, 10).

He also argues that the *Cultural Value* framework adopts a long-term view of public goods such as equity, trust, health and prosperity, thereby creating a context where more specific policy goals such as social inclusion and diversity can be better understood (Holden 2004).

If the intrinsic value of participating in art making lies in the subjective experience of the participants, it makes sense to turn our attention to a fundamental part of community arts practice – the process. The process of community arts and cultural development includes the context in which it occurs and those who are engaged directly in it (Lally 2009). Shining light on the practice and understanding *the story* that unfolds during community arts and cultural development processes will help us to better understand its intrinsic value, and might uncover the deeper, less tangible impacts of this practice that lie at the heart of its transformational powers.

2.7 Community Arts – In Search of its Deeper Purpose

Some practitioners have claimed that community cultural development is fundamentally about activism (Pepper 2005) and that the overall purpose of engaging communities in art making is about social change (About Us 2009; BigHart 2011; DADAA 2011). However, it is not clear that combating marginalisation and exclusion is, or should be, the focus of the entire field. After the last comprehensive sector consultation undertaken in Australia in 2006, Mills (2006) reported that some practitioners felt that the association between

community arts and social change has brought with it the stigma that community arts and cultural development practice is defined as a sort of *welfare arts*. Others argue that the practice is fundamentally about shifting power relations, and therefore combating exclusion and the marginalisation of minority groups must be at the core of the practice (Adams and Goldbard 2002; Eames 2008; Sonn and Green 2008; Sonn and Quayle 2011).

What we are seeing in Australia is a diverse community arts practice that is changing, adapting, and responding to different policy and political contexts. As community arts practice is evolving and is being co-opted, for better or worse, into numerous policy agendas, it is timely to attempt to re-visit some of its philosophical underpinnings (Wreford 2011).

2.7.1 Community Arts and Cultural Development as Liberatory Practice

In the United States, community arts practice has not been funded or legitimised by government to the extent that it has been in Australian and the U.K. That is why many U.S. practitioners have looked to Australia as a model of success and validation of this practice (Goldbard 2005). From the U.S., important community cultural development[11] literature has emerged that connects its theory and practice to activist movements for civil and human rights and to theoreticians of liberation, most notably Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal (Adams and Goldbard 2002, 18). Paulo Freire was an influential Brazilian educator, humanist and author who became well known for his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1970 (Hur 2006). Freire has been widely recognised for his contribution in offering critical tools to reflect on and understand the complexities and contradictions of living in colonised, oppressive and unequal societies. Central to Freire's politics and pedagogy is the vision of a free humanity in which oppressed people liberate themselves through a process of critical reflection and education (Giroux 1985; Hur 2006; Macedo 2011).

Augusto Boal, Brazilian theatre director, theorist, writer, cultural activist and teacher, created the social-dramatic form of *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, which has been recognised worldwide as a form of grassroots activism (Paterson 2011). A central theme of his work is the concept of the *spec-actor* in which the audience is empowered to enter into

[11] This is the terminology that has been adopted in the U.S., influenced by Australia's shift from community arts to community cultural development in 1987 (Goldbard 2006).

the play and change the course of the dramatic action. Boal travelled the world and taught extensively throughout Europe, Australia and the United States (Paterson 2011).

Framing community arts and cultural development within the ideological parameters of these thinkers necessitates the understanding of this practice in the milieu of "liberatory ideas" (Adams and Goldbard 2002, 18). In this context, the essence of the work becomes to create opportunities for marginalised communities to find their collective voice and express their concerns and aspirations through the arts. The process of finding a voice is mediated through a carefully facilitated art-making process, where the community artist plays a critical role in creating the conditions for the process and the outcomes to be driven by the community. This idea will be further explored in Chapter Four of this thesis.

In the anthology *Community, Culture and Globalisation* (2002), Adams and Goldbard provide a compelling case for understanding community arts and cultural development as a global movement to foster pluralism, participation and equity in cultural life. Adams and Goldbard advocate that one of the key roles of community arts and cultural development is to raise community consciousness about the importance of expressing one's cultural values, and to encourage communities to resist the homogenisation of world cultures by the forces of globalisation (Adams and Goldbard 2001, 2002; Tesoreiro 2010). Their anthology presents powerful examples of community arts and cultural development work, written by practitioners in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. The vast majority of these stories have a common thread – the work has occurred in communities where there is or has been a consistent silencing of voices through poverty, military oppression and/or colonial power. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that the language used to refer to the role and purpose of community arts and cultural development against this backdrop of marginalisation, is so clearly emancipatory.

Evidence of Boal influencing community arts evolution in other parts of the Western world is demonstrated by accounts from practitioners in Northern Ireland (Eagan 2011; Boyd 2011). A recently released documentary, *In Our Time: Creating Arts within Reach* (2011), traces the history of community arts in Belfast, against the backdrop of the ethno-political and religious conflict that afflicted Northern Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s. The documentary describes how community theatre was at the forefront of bringing together,

at the grassroots level, the divided community of Protestants and Catholics. It refers to *The Wedding*, a community theatre piece that recounts the complexities inherent in a marriage between a Catholic and a Protestant. This play was devised at a time when political discussions were leading to the historic Good Friday Agreement:[12]

> There was a kind of euphoria around what we had achieved, and what they [the politicians] had achieved, and in some way, what was happening at the political level through the political parties, was being mirrored by what was happening at the community level and that was an extraordinary feeling (Lynch 2011).

The story of community arts in Northern Ireland unfolds in the documentary as a social movement rooted in a political conflict. Community arts practice is described as the catalyst for a creative force that assisted in providing a forum for the community to make sense of what was happening and to respond to the realities of the time. As one of the people recounted, "given the context of the North [of Ireland], of a highly politicised understanding of the contention of culture, I think that is why we had this big outpouring of creativity" (Shield 2011). In this context, community arts and cultural development could be more akin to a social movement because "social movements seek to reshape power relations rather than gain power" (Campbell et al. 2010, 963).

Community arts practice was also viewed as a vehicle for creating a safe forum to express, and to cope with, the loss and grief that the community was experiencing:

> Often what you are doing is, you are holding a space for people and making it safe for people. Richard [indecipherable] talks about the art workshops as a place where very dangerous things can be said, once a safe space has been established (Moriarty 2011).

Overall, community arts activity was described as creating a sense of hope and civic normality on the streets of Northern Ireland, where festivals and parades were finally conducted after years of deserted streets because of the armed conflict (Ingram 2011):

[12] The political deal which aimed to form the lasting settlement following the 1994 paramilitary ceasefires in Northern Ireland, known as the Good Friday Agreement, was signed on 10 April 1998 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/4079267.stm.

> The arts changed that very destructive and negative scene, something that all the combined troops, all the battalions of the British Army and the RUC[13] could not do, the arts did! (Hyndman 2011).

Community arts and cultural development can use its creative techniques to question social values and dominant discourses. However community arts and cultural development might not always be used as tool for change. This can be for many reasons, including the context in which the practice is developed and the role of the community artist and or arts-worker, and the experiences that influence their work.

> The passion for global justice does not attach to the human spirit as a good idea: it is acquired through first-person experiences that concretize concepts such as freedom and equality, allowing them to be integrated and to lead to constructive social action (Adams and Goldbard 2002, 26).

2.7.2 Community Arts – A Vehicle to Tell Stories

Stories and their role in community arts deserve more attention because they can "often provide a far richer understanding of the human condition" (Sandercock 2003, 12). Freire assigns significant importance to the concept of the *word*. He believes that the word is more than an instrument that makes dialogue possible. "Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action ... There is no true word that there is not at the same time a praxis" (Freire 2011, 87).

This summarises the power of the story; it is both reflection and action and thus in itself, epistemology and a methodology (Sandercock 2003). Stories exist, and they have a powerful effect on humans (Rappaport 1995). Stories express who we are in the present, can explain who we have been, and help us to imagine who we can become in the future (Boal 1998; Rappaport 1995). Narrative creates meaning, recovers memories, and helps to affirm identity (Marshall-Clark 2002; Rappaport 1995).

Stories can be used as a way of understanding and explaining the world, as a catalyst for change, as well as to inform pedagogy and policy (Sandercock 2003). Stories can also be understood as liberatory experiences when individuals who are experiencing oppression can

[13] Royal Ulster Constabulary or RUC, was the state police force in Northern Ireland.

speak for themselves. This is because stories can unleash power that can be channelled and organised in a dynamic form in order to combat inequalities (Marshall-Clark 2002). For those who have been silenced, stories can help them to recover their power in history (Marshall-Clark 2002):

> However, although most of these papers tell us stories about people, we do not often hear their actual voices. Ironically, those of us who have spoken about empowerment have not usually found our theories and our methods useful as a means to make a place for people to tell their own stories (Rappaport 1995, 800).

Community arts practice has long claimed its capacity to facilitate the telling of stories through the arts. Therefore, in this thesis I argue that one of the key purposes of community arts practice is enabling community to tell their own stories. The implications of encouraging stories and narrative in community work are that we commit to listening to the stories of others and also that we give value to the stories told by the people we work with (Rappaport 1995).

In the context of community arts practice, this sounds like a very straightforward process, which might generically be described as: people tell stories, and an artist or a group of artists facilitates the interpretation of those stories. There could be one communal story or several stories, which must manifest in some creative form through the use of one or more art media. Most commonly, community arts uses one or a combination of the following: theatre, dance, music, film, community festivals and parades, visual art (e.g. a mural or photography), and more recently an array of digital technologies.

However, when community arts work is undertaken with marginalised communities, reaching an understanding of how that process happens becomes imperative. This is because the story-telling process can be empowering or it can perpetuate ongoing narratives of marginalisation:

> If narratives are understood as resources, we are able to see that who controls that resource, that is who gives stories value, is at the heart of a tension between freedom and social control, oppression and liberation, and empowerment versus disenfranchisement (Rappaport 1995, 805).

Nigerian-born writer Chimamanda Adichie (2009) talks about the danger of what she calls the “single story”. She argues that it is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. Stories are defined by power relations and questions such as: whose story is being told; who tells the story; how the story is told; and when are they being told? These questions are key to defining the way in which these stories are communicated and understood (Adichie 2009). Not reflecting on these questions in community arts practice can result in the perpetuation of stories and narratives that continue to reproduce power inequalities. The power to tell other people’s stories, especially those of minorities and disadvantaged communities, is not uncommon in Australia. Donovan (2011) argues that we only need to understand the monopoly of media ownership in Australia to realise that there are very few stories being told by the people who experience marginalisation and exclusion. Most commonly, what is reinforced by media, large and small, are narratives of stereotypes. This could not be more evident than when it comes to portraying Aboriginal people in the media (Bullimore 1999).

Adichie (2009) argues that the single story creates stereotypes and that the problem with stereotypes is not so much whether they are true or untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make the single story become the only story. Community arts and cultural development enables communities to tell their own unique stories and in so doing this practice is capable of social transformation.

2.8 Summary

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the origins and history of community arts and cultural development and examined its potential benefits. It reveals that community arts in Australia had its origins in the politics of the Left and the social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s that were centred around the Vietnam War, feminism and Aboriginal land rights. In addition, community arts practice has been largely influenced by government policies and has experienced several policy shifts that at times have threatened its very existence.

The chapter has summarised some of the emerging research that highlights the instrumental value of community arts practice in relation to specific social policy agendas. The chapter has explained why it is also important to reflect on community arts’ intrinsic

value and to examine how the process unfolds in communities, especially where people are experiencing social disadvantage. In addition, the chapter has positioned community arts in a broader international context and as an emancipatory practice, inspired by the libertarian ideas of Boal and Freire. Finally the chapter has highlighted the role of community arts practice in enabling communities, who have experienced exclusion, to tell their own stories, and how this can be a tool for social transformation.

The next chapter introduces CAN WA as a peak body for community arts and cultural development in Western Australia and a key agency seeking to harness the benefits and transformative potential of the practice through its work with marginalised communities.

Chapter Three: Introducing CAN WA

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines CAN WA as a principal exponent of community arts and cultural development in Western Australia. The chapter explores the background history and the philosophical underpinnings of the organisation from the viewpoint of its initiators, who provide a vivid account of the context in which the network was established. The chapter examines CAN WA's twenty-eight year evolution and the changes it has experienced whilst maintaining an ongoing commitment to developing opportunities for disadvantaged communities to have a voice through the arts.

3.2 Background, Origins and Philosophical Underpinnings

The Community Arts Network of Western Australia was established during the mid-1980s, at a time in which several other community arts networks were being established across Australia. The Community Arts Board of the Australia Council was instrumental in these developments, providing funding and infrastructure that enabled community arts practice to grow across Australia (Beahan 2002).

> The debate moved from the view that community arts was about arts activity in the local community to one where community arts was seen as a way of giving the community a collective voice through cultural expression and being an empowering agent of cultural and social change (Beahan 2002, 6).

By the late 1980s there were seven community arts networks across Australia, all funded by the Community Cultural Development Unit (former Community Arts Board) of the Australia Council. They were: the Northern Territory Community Arts Network, Community Arts Network South Australia, the Queensland Community Arts Network, Community Arts Network (Victoria), Community Arts Network Western Australia, NSW Community Arts Association, and Community Arts Network Tasmania (Artlink 1990, 82–83).

Jenny Beahan, one of the co-founders of the Community Arts Network Western Australia, explains where the seminal plans to form the WA network were conceived:

> We were all to attend a national training conference for community artists and arts officers in Adelaide, at which we began to make our first concrete plans to establish a network in WA along the lines of the Victorian Community Arts Network (Beahan 2002, 6).

On July 8, 1982, an inaugural public community meeting[14] was convened to discuss the formation of a community arts network in Western Australia. This process culminated three years later in the birth of the Community Arts Network Western Australia, which was officially incorporated and established in Perth as a not-for-profit association. Ali Sumner, CAN WA's first Chairperson, expressed some of the ideals behind the formation of the WA network:

> [We] shared a vivid sense of the revolutionary nature of empowering communities to reflect on their history, celebrate their present and take an active role in designing their future, through communion with practising artists (Sumner 2002, 3).

Likewise, Beahan reveals some of the thinkers and authors who influenced those who were involved in the formation of CAN WA:

> We read rapaciously, treatises such as Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Bob Connell's Democratising Culture and Peter Ansorge's Disrupting the Spectacle (Beahan 2002, 7).

These ideological influences are consistent with the formation and origins of community arts across Australia, as explained in Chapter Two of this thesis.

The values and ideals of community empowerment through arts and culture, and the philosophical underpinnings mentioned above, were not documented or formally incorporated into the organisation's core values and/or purpose. Once CAN WA became incorporated, the network stated its objectives to be a pragmatic organisation assisting in linking, networking and lobbying for and on behalf of those interested in community arts. CAN WA's objectives were articulated in its first newsletter in 1985:

[14] The invitation flyer read: "Please come along to drinks on Thursday July 8, 1982 at 250 St Georges Terrace Perth-Trade Union Training Centre to discuss the formation of a community arts network RSVP Jenny Beahan 293 2111 Alross Whittington 3230311".

- to provide a forum for all interested in community arts.
- to act as an informal exchange of activities, resources, employment and related matters through meetings and the media.
- to initiate, co-ordinate, develop and promote community arts in the community and the media.
- to act as a lobby group where necessary, and to gather, collate and disseminate statistics related to community arts (In the CAN 1985).

Despite lacking formal articulation of the organisation's values in its documents, from its inception CAN WA demonstrated a commitment towards social justice and critical debate. This was exemplified by having a strong emphasis on working with marginalised communities including Aboriginal people, cultural and linguistically diverse communities and young people. As CAN WA's first Executive Officer, Jenna Zed, reflected a few years later:

> We achieved much in that first year of operation. We had a forty strong Aboriginal artists committee that was later to become Dumbartung.[15] We had a number of workshops on Arts Law and forming constitutions for community groups (Zed 2002, 8).

CAN WA showed a commitment to critical debate by coordinating the first Western Australia Community Arts conference in Fremantle in May 1986, a year after its incorporation. This conference revealed the thinking that was influencing the practice of community arts at the time, both in Western Australia and nationally. Key conference themes included an examination of the social and political implications of community arts practice, the role of community arts as a catalyst for social change and the function of the arts-worker (Mills 1986; Gillam 1986; Zed 1986). The conference enjoyed the support of the state and federal governments of the day and included an address from the State Minister for the Arts and representatives from the Australia Council for the Arts. The conference program outlined the key participating groups, which included representatives from the Aboriginal, multicultural, youth and arts sectors (McAtee 2002).

[15] Dumbartung is the Western Australia Aboriginal Advisory, which was incorporated in 1987. http://www.dumbartung.org.au/report1.html. Retrieved July 8, 2009.

The keynote address provided by the Minister revealed the position of the community arts movement within federal government politics of the time:

> The Community Arts Board has had its difficulties – difficulties which are natural and expected in any growth pattern. The Community Arts Board has always provided a lead – it introduced the philosophies, the policies and the programs and in the face of severe criticism and skepticism and being dubbed 'the angry, young rebel' of the arts – it still forged on to prove that there was a place and a very important place for the community art movement in our country (Parker 1986, 2).

In her Executive Officer's address, Jenna Zed argued that community arts had been practiced for thousands of years by Aboriginal and Maori people in Australia and New Zealand. Zed described how Maori people have demonstrated that language and art play a significant role in self-determination. She also argued that industrialisation brought with it the divide between art and daily life, and that one of the roles of community art was to bring these together again. She stated that artists have a great aptitude to conceptualise and to express ideas, and therefore they have the capacity to make strong statements in society. Zed used the example of Chilean people who, after the military coup in 1973 and the oppressive regime of Pinochet, used the arts as a tool to have a voice nationally and internationally (Zed 1986).

A Senior Project Officer with the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council, Deborah Mills, reflected that the term community had changed from the 1960s when it was used to signify empowerment and self-determination, to the 1980s when, she argued, the term was co-opted and lost its capacity to illustrate power relations in society (Mills 1986). Mills also proposed that one of the key roles of the community artist and arts-worker was to:

> Affirm and celebrate cultural diversity and encourage activity and experiences which help people challenge and reconstruct the mono-cultural myth promoted everyday through the media. In the community arts movement we look forward to a society in which all of the varied and overlapping communities that make up our culture have the right and the resources to contribute their vision to the overall picture (Mills 1986, 3).

The Arts Officer from the Trades and Labour Council of WA, Cliff Gillam, suggested that community arts was a necessity, a tool to assist communities in achieving cultural democracy and to oppose cultural hegemony. Gillam added that community arts-workers should not evade the political implications of their work. In fact in his view, art-workers had two key tasks: to empower communities to make their own choices in regards to their cultural expression, and to bring about change to the dominant ideology and its power structures (Gillam 1986). Gillam suggested that the Community Arts Board at the time was gaining momentum in radicalising the Australia Council as a whole, which he saw as a positive step. However, he warned that the process would be hampered by the inertia that characterises dominant cultural ideologies and by resistance from those whose interests are served by the status quo (Gillam 1986).

This first community arts conference organised by CAN WA was a significant event. It produced an important record that illustrates the political discourse associated with community arts practice of the time, and specifically within CAN WA. These political leanings are consistent with what was happening in the rest of the country, where community arts was being talked about as a movement anchored in the politics of the Left (Kirby 1991).

This conference also revealed some critical themes that have been a source of continual debate throughout the history of CAN WA and its practice. These included questions surrounding the values that underpin the practice, its purpose, the role of the artist and the arts-worker as well as the influence that the federal government has had in setting the framework for its support and evolution nationally. All of these themes have been integral to the debate on community arts in Australia for the past four decades (Mills 2006).

3.3 CAN WA During the 1990s and into the New Millennium

During the 1990s, CAN WA continued to critically engage with the key issues pertaining to community arts and cultural development practice. There is not one document in which CAN WA has tackled all of these issues in any systematic fashion. However there is documentation at different stages of CAN WA's history that has attempted to articulate the values and purpose of the practice, the role of the arts-worker, and its relationship with the Australia Council's policy framework.

In 1985, the year CAN WA was incorporated, its role was identified as having a network function for the purpose of dissemination of information and discussion about the role of community arts practice and the arts-worker. The values of the organisation were not articulated (In the CAN 1985). The values of the organisation have however been stated at different stages in its development, sometimes overtly, as empowerment and social change, and at other times they can be inferred by examining CAN WA's work (Beahan 2002; Sumner 2002).

In 1991, CAN WA published the first occasional paper as part of the series, *A Kick up the Arts*. The series aimed at raising the level of critical debate within the community arts sector in Western Australia (Smith 1991). The first paper published was *Community Arts and Cultural Democracy*, which interrogated the role of the arts-worker and the dilemmas confronted by those who want to effect change through arts practice. Two key and fundamental questions were raised in this paper. The first was whether practitioners accepted structural societal inequalities as inevitable or unable to be changed, or whether practitioners accepted the challenge to actively seek to change the basis of this inequality. The second was around the need for arts-workers to closely scrutinise their own motives and ideologies if they were serious about effecting social change (Petersen 1991).

It was also in 1991 that CAN WA adopted a more political overtone by defining the purpose of community arts practice unambiguously as an agent for change:

> We engage in Cultural "Warfare" through the creation and generation of cultural expression in unvoiced communities. We fight for the recognition of cultural expression, which is grounded in the actual experience of WA life. We aim to bridge cultural and geographical isolation through communication, networking and sharing of resources. We advocate for recognition and the development of Community Arts practice as an agent of change (Grant Application to the Department for the Arts 1991).

In December 1995, CAN WA was put "on notice"[16] by the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council (CCDB).[17] Although this was considered serious for the

[16] This 'on notice' is a practice that funding bodies use with funded organisations, which means that the organisation is given a warning that its funds can be withdrawn.
[17] The CCDB replaced the Community Arts Board in 1987.

organisation at the time, it was also justified as a mechanism used by the CCDB to engage in strategic discussions. The reasons why the organisation was put "on notice" were that CAN WA needed to clarify its focus and to develop a business plan that addressed management, operations and funding. CAN WA completed this business plan in 1996. In it, the language chosen to articulate the reason for the organisation's existence departed markedly from that used in 1991:

> To facilitate partnerships with communities, artists, governments and non-government organisations and business to contribute to community cultural and economic development (A Business Plan for Community Arts Network 1996).

The pressure from the CCDB explains, to some extent, the radical departure from the language of activism expressed in CAN WA's 1991 mission statement. The other reason could have been the appointment of a new Director earlier that year. CAN WA's new mission statement contained new words, which had not been seen before in the lexicon of the community arts discourse: *economic development* and *business*.

Both these changes were challenging for its membership and for the many artists and activists who had been part of CAN WA's formative years, as the then Director recalls:

> There was a lot of resistance from the sector and from within the membership to anything that was linked to economic development or financial gain (Krempl 2006, 28).

Fortunately CAN WA survived the challenge presented by the CCDB by developing a business plan that addressed the concerns expressed by the Australia Council. Other community arts networks were not as lucky. The CCDB made decisions at that time that had drastic implications for two other networks in Australia. Community Arts Network (Victoria) was de-funded and ceased to exist in 1994 and Community Arts Network Tasmania suffered the same fate in 1997 (Phillip-Harbutt 2009; Smithies 2009).

Clearly these events signalled a policy shift by the Australia Council and a departure from the way it had supported community arts practice from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. These changes brought about uncertainty amongst practitioners in relation to the social and

political imperatives that had characterised the sector. This was reflected at the opening address of the 1997 National Community Cultural Development Conference in Brisbane:

> The political and economic climate is quite clearly a lot harsher, certainly compared with that at the time of our last national conference in Adelaide in 1986. Then we were citizens living in communities. Today, increasingly we're little more than customers crashing around, and against one another, in market segments, they would have us believe (Spokes 1997, 5).

A year later in 1998, thirty community arts practitioners from around Australia gathered in Brisbane for a day-long symposium to discuss sector issues. The discussion covered topics such as Culture and Pluralism, Funding and Sustainability, Relevance and Politics. This debate suggested that during the 1990s there was a clear decline in community arts work with a political focus (Kyle et al. 1999).

Once again definitions of *community*, *art*, *community arts* and *community cultural development* were in question. Most importantly, issues about the empowering nature of community arts and community cultural development (CCD) practice were raised:

> I think the empowerment language has been co-opted. I am perfectly happy to say that. I think if this is the leadership of the group of community cultural development, well I can tell you that from where I sit in various different guises I am rarely seeing anything coming back from this group in terms of empowerment. That is the rhetoric that you spin, we spin, and it's not happening. So wear that! (Kyle et al. 1999, 49).

During the late 1990s community arts and CCD had come under scrutiny and its purpose and definitions could not be taken for granted (Kyle et al. 1999; Spokes 1997).

I joined CAN WA in 1999, in the role of Cultural Planning Project Officer. During that time, CAN WA's rhetoric departed from the political discourse of struggle and empowerment that had characterised the language of the sector for the previous two decades. CAN WA's corporate documents and business framework changed to encapsulate a different kind of language, one which sought to reposition the organisation as a mainstream corporate entity (Krempl 2006). As a result, CAN WA began a process of engagement with mainstream sectors such as local government, tourism and training (Krempl 2006).

In early 2000, CAN WA began to foster independent research that attempted to document, evaluate and conceptualise its CCD methodology. This research began to provide a slightly different and much-needed language to articulate the work that was emerging. In 2002, CAN WA published *Conceptualising Community Cultural Development – The role of Cultural Planning in Community Change*. This research found that CCD, in the way that CAN WA had applied it, had a valuable role in fostering community participation and community-building outcomes. The researchers found that CCD was an enabling practice that facilitated the expression of the community's voice and assisted participants in understanding themselves as cultural agents. The research also identified that there were both individual- and community-level outcomes as a result of CCD work. Among the individual-level outcomes, it was identified that CCD offered opportunities for dialogue, which helped to break down barriers, create a shared understanding and develop personal networks. Community-level outcomes identified included the creation of a shared vision, creation of shared goals and formation of community partnerships to achieve common goals (Sonn, Drew, and Kasat 2002).

This research was the first academic exercise CAN WA had engaged in which began to illustrate the organisation's CCD methods. Following this report, CAN WA published *Paving Pathways for Youth Inclusion – The Contribution of CCD* in 2007 (Ruane 2007). This publication examined CAN WA's CCD work with youth at risk and the role of these methodologies in fostering social inclusion. In 2008 CAN WA produced *Drawing Out Community Empowerment Through Arts and Cultural Practice* (Sonn and Green 2008), which explored the process of empowering Aboriginal communities through CAN WA's CCD practices. And in 2010 CAN WA published *Naked Practice: Outcomes of Two Community Arts Projects in Regional Western Australia* (Palmer and Sonn 2010) which provides further insight into the way CAN WA goes about its community arts practice. These publications have laid the foundation for the research in this thesis, which seeks to illuminate how community arts and cultural development practice enables silenced voices to be heard and to explore how it can be better understood as a powerful tool for social transformation.

3.4 Commitment to Working with Marginalised Communities

Despite the changes CAN WA has experienced since its origins, the organisation has consistently focused its effort on working with marginalised communities. CAN WA's commitment to disadvantaged and minority communities has been manifested in three key ways, through: a) ongoing advocacy for community arts activities focusing on disadvantaged communities; b) documented internal policy priorities, which have articulated the organisation's commitment towards social justice; and c) direct and long-term community arts production with Aboriginal communities in the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia. Some examples of CAN WA's work with disadvantaged communities are described below.

CAN WA's commitment to working with Aboriginal communities was a priority from its early days. In 1987, CAN WA employed the first Aboriginal arts management trainee, David Milroy. This led to the creation of the CAN WA Aboriginal Artists sub-committee, which later became Dumbartung, the Western Australian Aboriginal Advisory, and David Milroy became its first Coordinator. Milroy went on to having a very successful career in the arts as a musician, writer and director (McAtee 2002, 20).

In 1991, CAN WA prepared a comprehensive application to the Department for the Arts. In this document, CAN WA outlined several priority areas for its development. The second of these priorities reads:

> To encourage community arts workers to give priority to those communities silenced as a result of such factors such as class, political and religious beliefs, ethnicity, age, physical, economic or geographical isolation and gender (Grant Application to the Department for the Arts 1991).

In 1992 CAN WA conducted a Community Arts Needs Study in the Pilbara region. As a result of this, CAN WA engaged in the development, coordination and management of a community theatre project, in partnership with the Pilbara Filipino Community WA. *Babae in the Land of the Big Sky* aimed at raising awareness of domestic violence and racism issues affecting women and in particular Filipino women in the Pilbara.

In 1998 CAN WA employed a full-time Aboriginal arts worker and established a community-mapping project in partnership with the residents of Ieramagadu (also known as

Roebourne) in the Pilbara for 12 months. This project aimed at using cultural mapping techniques to assist the Aboriginal community of Ieramagadu in creating a shared cultural vision. This project was a first of this kind in WA (Broun 1998).

In 2002, CAN WA, in partnership with the Arts, Sport, and Recreation Industry Training Council, completed a major consultation and research project entitled *Making Art Work*. This project aimed at understanding how best to support young people at risk of not succeeding in traditional education by exploring alternative pathways into education and employment. Following on from this initiative, CAN WA developed and delivered a range of training opportunities for at-risk young people (Ruane 2005).

In 2003 CAN WA employed an Indigenous Cultural Development Manager, whose brief was to advance Indigenous cultural development in local government. It was quickly recognised that the barriers to Aboriginal participation were vast and complex, covering both community arts and cultural development and Indigenous issues. CAN WA realised that to be effective in supporting Indigenous arts and cultural development, it needed to develop a long-term strategy for direct Aboriginal participation.

In 2004 I was appointed CAN WA's Managing Director. One of my key priorities became the development of a long-term model of Aboriginal arts and cultural development that recognised the economic and social inequalities experienced by Noongar communities in the Wheatbelt. In 2006 CAN WA established its first Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development Unit in Kellerberrin, a Wheatbelt town located 200 kilometres east of Perth. This unit employed two Aboriginal people whose brief was to assist and develop Indigenous self-determined arts and cultural activities in Kellerberrin and the surrounding areas. Since its inception, the Aboriginal unit has undertaken a series of community arts and cultural development projects and activities that aimed at empowering the Aboriginal people of the region. Some of these include an oral history project with Noongar Elders called *Noongar Voices*, an international cultural exchange with dancers from the Solomon Islands, and a community festival, the *Keela Dreaming*. The most noteworthy initiative that emerged from the work that CAN WA developed in this region is the *Voices of the Wheatbelt* project. This project began in 2008 and turned into a three-year community arts and cultural development project. The overarching objective of this project was to enable the

participants to explore and express their sense of place and sense of belonging. *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats*, which is the third phase of this program, forms the basis for the case study presented in Chapter Five of this thesis.

In 2010, CAN WA established its second Aboriginal program in the Wheatbelt town of Narrogin. CAN WA secured four years of funding for an overarching Aboriginal arts and cultural development strategy known as *Strong Culture Strong Community*. This is in stark contrast to the short-term funding that has characterised and continues to be a hindrance to community arts practice aspiring to catalyse social change. During the first year of this program, CAN WA initiated a community-wide conversation that culminated in the production of the *Narrogin Stories* soundscape. This has been one of CAN WA's most important projects and forms the basis for the case study presented in Chapter Four of this thesis. The *Narrogin Stories* aimed to transform the narrative of the Noongar community from pain and grief to one of hope for the future (Strong Culture Strong Community – the First Steps 2010).

In deepening this engagement with Noongar communities, CAN WA is changing itself and the way it undertakes community arts practice. For example, over forty per cent of CAN WA's employees are now Aboriginal and most of the regional work CAN WA engages in is linked to Noongar communities and culture. These fundamental changes call for a closer look at the way in which CAN WA approaches community arts practice. Chapter Two of this thesis revealed the theoretical links between emancipatory practice and community arts practice. CAN WA's underpinning philosophy is that community arts and cultural development is fundamentally a liberatory practice that uses the power of stories to catalyse social change. The following chapters examine in detail how CAN WA has approached the notion of liberatory practice and how stories have been used to give voice to otherwise silenced Noongar voices.

3.5 Summary

This chapter has traced the history and the philosophical underpinnings of CAN WA, which is considered a lead organisation in community arts and cultural development in Western Australia. It described CAN WA's foundations from the viewpoint of its proponents, who provided a personal account of the context in which the network was established. The

chapter also reviewed CAN WA's twenty-eight year evolution and the changes and challenges it has experienced throughout this time. In addition this chapter has provided examples, spanning the organisation's history, of the work CAN WA has undertaken with disadvantaged communities. The chapter raises the spectre of the need to further investigate how community arts practice can give voice to otherwise silenced voices and in doing so become a tool for social transformation.

The next two chapters examine in detail CAN WA's approach to community arts and cultural development practice, through the *Narrogin Stories* and the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beat* case studies.

Chapter Four: The *Narrogin Stories* – A Window into CAN WA's Practice

> Stories matter, many stories matter, stories have been used to dispossess and to malign but stories can also be used to empower and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of the people but stories can also repair that broken dignity (Adichie 2009).

4.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the *Narrogin Stories* as a case study of community arts and cultural development practice. This project was conceived and developed by CAN WA in 2010 in response to multiple youth suicides and family feuding that occurred amongst the Noongar community in the town of Narrogin from 2008 to 2010. The chapter aims to describe aspects of community arts and cultural development practice that are rarely documented. For example, it examines how the creative personnel went about establishing relationships and trust with members of the Noongar community. It also reveals the thinking behind choosing arts workers to work in such complex community projects and how the creative process that led to the *Narrogin Stories* evolved. Finally the chapter reveals the capacity of the arts to unlock some untold stories which inspired the Noongar community of Narrogin to have a *voice*.

The chapter is written from the perspective of a practitioner directly involved in this project. Additionally I draw community voices from three sources: the entry diaries detailed by the lead community artists, video documentation recorded by CAN WA, and written material produced as a result of this project. Moreover, I provide details, reflections, and viewpoints that are not often documented in community arts projects, in order to illuminate *how* the *Narrogin Stories* project unfolded.

4.2 The Context

As explained in Chapter Three, in 2006 CAN WA established an Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Development Unit in Kellerberrin in the eastern Wheatbelt of Western Australia. From this locally based Aboriginal centre, a series of successful arts and cultural community building initiatives took place (Sonn and Green 2008). In early 2009 CAN WA was approached and

encouraged by a local Wheatbelt development organisation to undertake some community engagement initiatives with Aboriginal people in the Wheatbelt town of Narrogin (Wheatbelt Development Commission Strategic Plan 2009). Narrogin is situated 190 kilometres south-east of Perth and had an estimated population of 4328 in 2006, with about 300 of those people being Aboriginal, mainly Noongar (ABS 2006).

Given CAN WA's experience working with Noongar communities, and the awareness of some of the issues surrounding the town of Narrogin, the organisation decided that firstly it needed to carefully evaluate its capacity and readiness to undertake work with the Noongar community of Narrogin. Secondly it needed to ascertain whether the Noongar community wanted CAN WA's presence in the town.

I was aware at the time that Narrogin was a complex community. In 2008 there was a spate of youth suicides in Narrogin; six young Noongar men had taken their lives (Norman 2009; Bell 2009; Davies 2010). This left the community shocked and ill-equipped to deal with such a collective grief (Silburn et al. 2010). During 2009 family feuds ensued, exacerbating an already complex and delicate community situation (Davies 2010). In September and November 2009 the Noongar community of Narrogin featured in mainstream media, including in ABC primetime news bulletins. The issues covered in these bulletins were unfortunately consistent with the intense media coverage that Aboriginal violence attracts (Cripps 2010).

> **Take 1 – ABC News, September 2009**
>
> Last term claims of racism were highlighted when a group of Aboriginal parents withdrew their children from the school amid concerns for their safety (Norman 2009).
>
> They are not safe; they are not being treated, as students should be. There should be punishment across the board, not just for different ... certain groups (Kickett 2009).
>
> The problems at the school have been played out in the backdrop of wider cultural issues in the town, the State Coroner is currently investigating the deaths of six Aboriginal men who are believed to have committed suicide within months of each other in Narrogin last year (Norman 2009).

Take 2 – ABC News, November 2009

Two people are recovering from gunshots wounds in hospital after a violent feud broke out between two families in Narrogin overnight. The brawl involving more than one hundred and fifty people erupted following the funeral of an Indigenous Elder (Bell 2009).

It is a long running dispute which picked up eighteen months ago with a series of tragic suicides of young men in both camps (Short 2009).

4.3 Gaining Trust, the Invisible Work

CAN WA had been recognised for its successful work with Noongar people before, however to be asked to reproduce this success in Narrogin was a different matter. Narrogin could potentially be an impossible task, beyond the capacity of a small organisation such as CAN WA.

The first step was to gain as much information as possible to begin understanding what was happening in the community. Central to this process was to ensure that the information gathered came from different perspectives. The focus was on obtaining direct insights from Aboriginal people as a way of gaining trust and forming relationships (Sonn and Green 2008; Morgan and Drew 2010).

This was done by activating some of CAN WA's existing networks in the town. One of CAN WA's Noongar staff had a sister who lived and worked in the town. This was the first point of connection with the local community. This lady's husband was considered one of the community leaders and therefore he was an important person to talk with. CAN WA's Aboriginal manager Frank Walsh, who is married into a Noongar family, was the first one to make contact with this male leader in Narrogin and this led to a face-to-face meeting with members of one of the feuding families.

This meeting was the beginning of a series of informal conversations with Noongars and Wadjelas in Narrogin. Three senior CAN WA staff members were involved in these conversations: Frank, Andrea Hammond and myself. We agreed that it was essential to invest the time to learn about the dynamics of the community before embarking on any project. The three of us had personal and professional connections across the Noongar

community and within relevant government organisations. This assisted us in beginning to formulate a picture of what was happening in the town. We began by getting to know some of the key people, including Elders and community leaders. We also started to cultivate relationships amongst some of the key family groups. Lastly, we sought to find out if anyone was willing to engage in community arts projects.

The process of probing and asking questions across the community required a sensitive and culturally appropriate approach. Having Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff working together was a key to building some bridges across the community (Sonn and Green 2008). These informal discussions gave us a fair understanding of the community dynamics, resulting in more-targeted contact with Elders, Noongar leaders and other local organisations, such as the local government, the schools and the police. In addition, we contacted a number of other organisations based in Perth that had connections in the region. These included sympathetic individuals in state government departments responsible for Indigenous Affairs, Culture and the Arts, and Family and Community Services.

These extensive conversations took approximately eight months and during this time we learned about the complex issues and circumstances affecting the Noongar community. Most of these were consistent with the recognised social and economic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people across Australia (Parker 2010). Key challenges included racism, lack of employment opportunities, poverty, low levels of education, poor health, substance abuse and family feuds (Walter 2007; SCRGSP 2009).

Throughout this time, there was a very close and continued dialogue between Frank, Andrea and myself. We knew that the community was fragile and therefore we needed to monitor and gauge the mood of the community very closely. Frank was the person who was having the conversations with the Noongar men, whilst Andrea was mainly talking to the women. At some point Frank told me that the community asked him to act as a mediator for the two feuding families. This revealed something important: representatives from the feuding families were prepared to enter into mediation, and Frank had gained the trust and rapport of key members of the feuding families.

A mediation role was beyond CAN WA's skills set and scope. Therefore we declined to act as mediators. However after very considered internal deliberations, we agreed that a face-to-

face meeting with representatives of the feuding families would be a huge step forward. The meeting was scheduled for midmorning on November 9, 2009. The tension in Narrogin had been escalating in the days before this meeting, and it was somewhat risky attempting to have a dialogue at this particular time. I was taking my guidance from Frank, who had a sense that this was an important opportunity to show CAN WA's commitment to the community.

I went to this meeting not knowing exactly how I was going to approach it. This was the first time I was meeting representatives of the feuding families and certainly the first time we were all meeting together. I knew I needed to explain CAN WA's intention and our commitment to Noongar people. The meeting took place at the local government office. This was considered a neutral space. The meeting involved three representatives from each of the two key feuding families and three people from CAN WA (Frank, Andrea and I).

The tension in the room was palpable. Everyone seemed nervous. I was certainly anxious. There were the usual handshakes as Frank introduced me to each of the family members. Both Frank and Andrea had either met or had numerous phone calls with each of the people present at this meeting. So I introduced myself by telling the people in the room something about me, including where I was from and why I had migrated to Australia. I told them my personal reasons for being involved in this kind of work. I needed to ground myself into that space, to declare my intentions and be transparent about my motives for being there. I explained the work of CAN WA as an arts and cultural organisation and provided some examples about our work with Noongar people in the eastern Wheatbelt. The meeting was very difficult and both parties were voicing their frustration and despair with each other. Nonetheless it was also evident that those present could see that the family feuding was damaging the community.

The breakthrough during the meeting came from the realisation that they shared a similar concern. They all cared deeply about their young people. I remember vividly how this moment came about. I asked them directly, "Who benefits from this family feuding?" To my surprise, on one side of the table someone said, "No one", and this was echoed on the other side by stating that the feuding was affecting their children negatively. Answering this simple question was a very powerful moment. They *named* their common ground.

Amongst all the difficult issues that the family members were experiencing, there was one thing they shared: the concern for their children and the damage the continuing feuding was doing to them. We agreed at the meeting that CAN WA would begin a process of talking with young people to find out what kind of activities they would like to engage in. This meeting was a significant step forward. CAN WA had gained *permission* from key Noongar leaders to start a process of consultation and engagement in the town of Narrogin.

In the previous months, as the relationship between CAN WA and the community was developing in Narrogin, CAN WA began the *Voices of the Wheatbelt: Our Place Our Stories* project in the surrounding towns of Pingelly, Brookton and Wagin. This project had been successfully tried and tested with Noongar people in the eastern Wheatbelt region, producing some very important outcomes (Palmer and Sonn 2010). Amongst the outcomes there was a beautiful full colour 180-page coffee table book with vivid photographic images from the Wheatbelt, taken mostly by Noongar people, both children and adults. One of the key aims of *Voices of the Wheatbelt* was to enable young Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to express themselves and their sense of place and community through the medium of photography (Voices of the Wheatbelt 2009). Extending the concept of this successful project into the southern Wheatbelt was an important strategy. On the one hand it was imperative to wait for community endorsement before commencing any work directly in Narrogin; on the other hand it was very important to start making some connections with Noongar people in the region as a way of forming networks, gaining trust and credibility (Sonn and Green 2008).

4.4 Getting the Right People on Board

4.4.1 The Cultural Worker

When the second phase of *Voices of the Wheatbelt* was under way in the southern Wheatbelt, CAN WA advertised for an Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Development Coordinator to be based in Narrogin. This position was advertised as a 50-D classification, which meant that the candidates needed to be Aboriginal to apply. Besides the standard requirements for a coordinator with CAN WA, such as writing and reporting skills and highly developed interpersonal skills, the organisation was looking for someone who had connections to Narrogin and could develop positive relationships at the community level.

Fundamentally, there was a clear awareness within CAN WA that this position would be crucial to the success or failure of a program in Narrogin. Therefore the selected candidate needed to display some unique qualities such as leadership, compassion, understanding and, above all, the ability to work and communicate with and across the Noongar community without taking sides.

Geri Hayden, a Noongar woman, was the successful candidate and was employed full-time in February 2010. Geri had lived and worked in Narrogin for over ten years in the past, so she knew and understood the complexities of the community dynamics. She also demonstrated a strong desire to go back and work in Narrogin and had strong family connections in the region. A key attribute that Geri exhibited was her capacity to reflect and understand that her role needed to be neutral; her task was to reach the whole Noongar community in Narrogin and surrounding towns. Geri's role would be instrumental in establishing community connections on the ground. Now that this position was established, CAN WA began the process of recruiting a community artist who could work closely with Geri and the community.

4.4.2 The Community Artists

CAN WA recruited several community artists to undertake a series of discrete community arts projects during this time. For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on the role of the artistic director who was contracted to undertake the most complex aspects of these community arts projects and entrusted to bring them all together for a final community celebration.

Engaging a community artist who could work in a community that had experienced trauma and grief required careful consideration. The search ended in Melbourne where I met Catherine Simmonds, a seasoned theatre practitioner with extensive experience in working with diverse communities. We met in a coffee shop in Fitzroy. As I began explaining the background of the project and some of my thoughts, I had an almost instant sense of relief. Catherine's responses indicated to me that she understood the complexities we were facing and how delicate the community dynamics were. Her responses and vast experience working with Aboriginal communities, refugees and trafficked women reassured me that she would be able to work with Noongar people in Narrogin.

The brief provided to Catherine was simple: “This project needs to help create a new narrative in Narrogin”. The current narrative in the community was about pain, suicide, violence, and family feuding. Catherine’s challenge was to facilitate a creative process to draw out a *new* narrative from the community. When I came back to Perth we had a teleconference where Catherine, Geri and I discussed the project and shared some ideas about the approach. CAN WA was attempting a very delicate community engagement process in a community in which Noongar people had experienced loss, violence and very adverse media reports (Davies 2010).

Geri’s response to Catherine on the phone was very similar to mine. Geri seemed to connect with her. Catherine was clear about her ideas, she listened to what both of us had to say and above all she demonstrated sensitivity and an understanding that the creative processes needed to be guided by the community. Catherine also understood that Geri was the key person who could take her into the Narrogin community, so their relationship would be pivotal for the success of the project.

Geri and I agreed that Catherine should travel to Narrogin as soon as possible, to begin a scoping process with the community. Catherine warned us that she could not imagine that Noongar people, given the circumstances, would be equipped for performing in public, but perhaps she could do a soundscape. This is something that she had done successfully before. It basically entailed a series of interviews in which people would tell their stories to produce a collective narrative. This concept sounded simple and yet powerful, and it could create the opportunity for people to talk and to participate without feeling intimidated or too self-conscious. It didn’t require any particular skills on the part of the participants, just them and their stories (Kwaymullina 2007); they would be free to share whatever they wished.

Catherine arrived in Narrogin in early May 2010. The following are excerpts from a project diary jointly written by Catherine and a Perth-based theatre worker, Erika Jacobson, who made some initial contact with the people in Narrogin and facilitated a couple of workshops before Catherine’s arrival. This diary reveals important reflections about how Catherine, Geri, and Erika moved into the community and how they approached the subject:

Diary entry 10 May 2010

At this point we tell the group that we know about the feuding in the community and that the motivation for this project is to create a new narrative. That is why we are asking the questions:

- How can the community move forward?
- Is the fighting what you want?
- If you keep going this way what's going to happen?

(In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 2)

Diary entry 11 May 2010

The day is flowing well and Geri (like a mother walking in front of kids) is somehow clearing the trail, there is a sense of permission to our presence within the community as we enter people's homes and the connections we are making and the way we are making [them] mean that we can return to the trail by ourselves thereafter (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 6).

Diary entry 12 May 2010

Today we had planned to record the young men at the TAFE during a family barbeque but it was postponed. We called people and left messages hoping to arrange meetings. We decided to go into town and trusting we would find our way. Intuitively we head for the Best Start Program. We loiter for some moments in an empty room and then everybody arrives. Something is guiding us (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 8).

Diary entry 14 May 2010

People had encouraged us to come to the footy (it's Saturday) and then to the Karaoke afterwards. We planned to go to the footy – it is a big night tonight and everybody is there. We had been told that since the trouble people are parking in their respective family mobs during the football. We took Ross to the oval to pick up his child and as we drove in and witnessed the three separate sections we decided that it would be detrimental to our

> relationship and presence with the community if we were perceived to be partial to one group more than another.
>
> We took Ross and his son home and drove back to Williams to write up our notes (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 14).

4.5 Gathering the Stories

Geri wove through the community, taking Catherine with her around the town and spontaneously arranging meetings as they saw people on the streets. Most of these conversations happened over a *cuppa* in people's living rooms, sitting around kitchen tables and with small groups in the bush. Some of the recordings were done with individuals, however most were done in small groups of family members.[18] These community conversations happened for over a period of approximately ten days.

People began by sharing stories about discrimination and stereotypes of Noongar males:

> My son was accused of stealing in one area and I know where he goes and he doesn't hang around there. Once it was when he was in jail so who was doing it then? (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 4).

Another young man talked about the difficulties in finding a job:

> I've applied for a few jobs – had an interview but when they find out I've got a record it gets difficult (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 2).

When people were asked about the feuding, they expressed a desire for the community conflict to end:

> No! Nobody wants this. I don't want this for my kids. We don't want this to go on, we don't like it (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 3).
>
> What's there for our kids? Kids are dreaming about it. Even when it's fireworks kids think it's shooting. Young kids out there are not getting a chance because the adults are arguing (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 6).
>
> I wanna forgive, but I don't feel like I'm ready to forgive yet (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 10).

[18] CAN WA obtained release forms of every person who participated in these interviews.

The questions asked by the CAN WA facilitators sought to encourage an open and honest conversation about what was happening in the community. People were being invited to express their views in a safe environment and without judgement. The conflict and the family feuding had to be central to the conversation because this *was* the issue. Catherine and Geri's role was to encourage people to tell their stories, to interpret and to reflect on what was happening, and also to express their ideas on how to move forward. One of the Elders suggested:

> People need to sit down to talk about it. The womans have to sit down and get together and say how they are gonna handle anything. The mens gotta sit down and say what they gonna do. Instead of saying let's go fight one another. We gotta say 'no we don't wanna fight all our life' (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 11).

In another conversation, a younger woman offered the following:

> At the end of the day I want peace, I want it for our kids. Narrogin, everyone is a family, we all grew up together. There comes a time when you have to let it all go. If you don't forgive yourself and others you're putting yourself in a dark hole. The whole town's getting dark. If your heart forgives all the darkness goes away top to toe (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 13).

In total, more than thirty people, including members of the feuding families, participated in these conversations and interviews. This simple process of engaging with the Noongar people and talking with them about their feelings and hopes for the future fulfilled multiple objectives for CAN WA. It assisted CAN WA staff in establishing rapport and forming relationships with the Noongar community. It enabled the facilitators to understand what was happening in the town from the Noongar people's perspective. It gauged the level of community interest in participating in future CAN WA activities and provided some insights into what these activities could be. It also provided a rich source of Noongar-specific elements from which to formulate an artistic vision for a community celebration, which will be explained later in this chapter.

4.6 The Pieces Are Coming Together

Catherine collected hours of recorded conversations with the Noongar Elders, men and women. These long recordings needed to be edited to produce a *soundscape* that could be effectively listened to at a public event. CAN WA agreed that it would be imperative to have a public acknowledgement of the community's involvement in the project. A launch would create the opportunity for the community to come together in Narrogin and celebrate their collective achievements. This community celebration was scheduled for June 24, 2010. At this event CAN WA would launch the second phase of *Voices of the Wheatbelt: Our Place Our Stories* and an array of other community arts projects that were designed to engage the local and surrounding Noongar communities in creative processes.

Voices of the Wheatbelt: Our Place Our Stories was the culmination of dozens of photography workshops, where more than one hundred people across the towns of Brookton, Wagin, Pingelly, and Narrogin learned the technical and artistic aspects of photography, including design, composition, and ways to use light. The work produced was showcased in the form of photographic exhibitions that toured at significant local events, some of which attracted thousands of people (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories 2010; Palmer, Hayden, and Kasat 2011).

This was followed by filmmaking workshops attended by twenty-six people and facilitated by professional filmmakers. Participants learned aspects of film production including storyboarding, camerawork, sound, and lighting. The young participants had the opportunity to interview and record their Elders telling stories about places of significance to them. Each participating community produced a 10-minute short film, which acknowledges Noongar stories (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories 2010; Palmer, Hayden, and Kasat 2011).

The community celebration would also bring together Noongar children and young people who participated in hip-hop music workshops and in the creation of a series of public art sculptures depicting the six Noongar seasons, in the form of seats at the Gnarojin Park (Palmer, Hayden, and Kasat 2011). All of these community arts projects attracted significant positive media coverage, in print, on line and on television (Garnham 2010; Boase 2010; Penny-Narkle 2010; Wilson-Smith 2010). This was in stark contrast to the media coverage

that had depicted Narrogin since the family feuding had escalated just a few months earlier (Davies 2010).

These positive media reports, alongside the encouraging reaction from the Noongar people, were generating high expectations for the community celebration. CAN WA recognised that this launch would present a vital moment for the whole community to come together after many months of tension. Catherine, Geri, and I decided that the soundscape needed to be the cornerstone of the launch, the symbolic and literal representation of the community's voice. Therefore the content of it and how it was to be presented became extremely important. The soundscape needed to acknowledge the hurt and the pain but it also needed to provide some hope for the future.

There were some serious risks associated with including the soundscape, as it would be a public acknowledgement and a reminder of the community's grief and feuds. Listening to the soundscape could exacerbate an already volatile community situation and open up wounds that CAN WA was not capable of containing or dealing with. It could also create a bigger rift between the feuding families and create more animosity. In addition it could destroy all the positive work done previously and risk CAN WA's relationships within the community and with the funding bodies.

Nevertheless, the idea of playing the soundscape at the community celebration had remarkable potential. It could create the opportunity for a dialogue amongst the feuding families and begin a healing process. It could also begin improving community relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the town, by demonstrating the willingness of the Noongar community to redress community conflict. Furthermore it could consolidate CAN WA's trustworthiness both at the community level and with the funding bodies.

When Catherine wasn't in Narrogin she worked from Perth and stayed at my place. That meant we could thoroughly debrief as she travelled to and from Narrogin. Every time Catherine came back from Narrogin, there was an outpouring of information and emotions. Geri and Catherine had been privy to some deep and sometimes painful conversations with the community. As the interviews progressed, people candidly shared their pain and spoke

about the difficulties of forgiveness. They also spoke about their hopes for their children and the future of their community.

Despite the limited time Catherine spent in Narrogin, she gained an acute sense of how people were feeling and she was able to relay those feelings back to me. Catherine and I are both mothers of sons, so we could not help but reflect on the hurt and the unimaginable pain a mother would go through in losing a son to suicide. It seemed so clear that people were yearning for opportunities to heal.

I recognised the growing potential and significance of this project. For the community this could be the beginning of a healing journey, where the narrative of loss, pain and feuding could begin to shift (Seaton 2008).

Catherine and I agreed that the soundscape had the opportunity to reflect the community's story and move from what is now (pain and conflict) to what could come (the hope for the future). We recognised that in order to be effective, the soundscape needed to be relatively short, 15 minutes maximum, for people to maintain their attention. We also knew that for it to be genuine, all the voices had to be represented and that no one individual could be singled out in the soundscape. In short we recognised that the soundscape had the potential to be a voice of the Noongar people of Narrogin.

4.7 Weaving the Narrative – The Stories Create Their Own Magic

One Saturday afternoon, Geri, Catherine, and I met at my place to figure out how the soundscape would flow as a story. Catherine spent hours listening to the recordings. She had begun the process of selecting segments that were representative of the key themes the community had spoken about. Geri's input was essential during this process. She knew the community's *code* about what material could be used and what could be damaging to include. She was able to gauge what was poignant but could be repeated in public, in contrast to statements that might sound harmless to *Wadjelas* but could be considered offensive to the community. Her insider knowledge was invaluable. The community recordings needed to come together in a narrative which would flow naturally and, at the same time, contain nothing that would be potentially inflammatory. The aim was to develop

a narrative that reflected what the community had said, it was a delicate balance, but it had to be real.

Catherine showed us dozens of direct quotes she had transcribed from the recordings. She cut them on strips of paper and we scattered them on my kitchen table. We read them aloud. Particular quotes were very powerful and full of heartbreak, while others were witty and funny. Some were a declaration of remorse and even admittance of wrongdoing. There were also memories that contained rich and evocative descriptions of Noongar cultural life. A key theme that emerged from the quotes was a sense of *family*, *culture*, and *community*:

> We used to all go out together as a mob, didn't matter what family you were from we was joking and laughing.
>
> People were sharing meals together, singing together laughing together.
>
> Used to have that fire going, put that damper in.[19]

The themes of community (moort), knowledge and culture (kaitijin) have been identified as two defining elements in Noongar cosmology (Collard 2007). Therefore it is not surprising that these elements featured so strongly in the conversations with the Narrogin community.

The second overall theme that emerged from the recording was the *sense of loss*, *hurt*, and *forgiveness*:

> We need time to recover and heal.
>
> There is a time to let go and move on.
>
> If your heart forgives the darkness goes away top to toe.
>
> Walk away say I forgive you.[20]

Finally, the last theme that emerged was about their *hope for the future*. In many cases the hope was symbolised by the next generation, the children:

> At the end of the day, I want peace; I want it for our kids.

[19] All of the above quotes are from the *Strong Culture Strong Community* card game produced during the *Narrogin Stories* project. Each playing card consists of one quote from a community member. Many of these quotes were included in the *Narrogin Stories* soundscape.
[20] As above.

> It's choices really; people can make their own choices.
>
> Makes you feel good, taking little steps towards a better future for everyone in this town.
>
> Nurture our land and nurture our people.
>
> I want my kids to be free, play with who they want to play with.[21]

A community narrative was beginning to emerge and, with it, an array of theatrical elements started jumping out from the pages. The first one was the idea of *playing cards*. Noongar people talked about having a good time when they gathered with family and friends and played card games:

> When are you fellas gonna sit around play cards and have a yarn?[22]

The second element was to do with the concept of turning the light back on. This emerged when one of the women during the community conversations said:

> It's about turning the light back on in Narrogin and encouraging our people to come back home.[23]

The third element was the concept of *fire, family, and food*:

> A paddock lit up at night with the fire of the mallee roots burning-yeah lovely.
>
> We used to have that fire going, put that damper in.[24]

These three elements began to shape the way in which the community-gathering event was conceived. But before the event, we needed to complete the soundscape.

Geri gave her support for all the quotes that could and should be used. The next step was to work with a sound engineer to mix and develop the soundtrack to accompany the voices on the soundscape. In addition we needed a filmmaker to add some visual images to complement the sound and to create something visually beautiful which would engage the

[21] As above.
[22] As above.
[23] As above.
[24] As above.

audience. This was very important, as the final product needed to be soft, powerful, and disarming. It needed to reflect all the elements that had been expressed already by the community.

Catherine shared her ideas on how to transform the poetic elements the community had spoken about into some tangible theatrical components that would stand out at the community celebration. After many conversations about logistics, resources and possibilities, we decided that a set of *playing cards* containing some of the most meaningful and hopeful quotes that had emerged during the interview process would be designed and printed. We decided that it would not be appropriate to use quotes that were directly related to the suicides or the family feuding. The cards needed to be something that connected people to a good time and to the possibilities they had identified. We would print enough packs of cards for each family to take home after the event. This would be a nice reminder of the event and their own voices.

In relation to the concept of *turning the light back on*, we decided to engage another community artist who could assist in creating appropriate props to decorate the venue for the launch and enhance the community ritual that was emerging. Karen (the additional community artist) and Catherine came up with the idea to re-create the geographical location of Narrogin as a valley. This would be done with cane and cloth and it would be placed in the centre of the room. The tables and chairs where the audience would sit would be located around this centrepiece. The surrounding towns would be represented by creating tissue paper lanterns in the shape of little houses that would be located on plinths. Each table would have a paper lantern on it. At the point in the evening at which we would listen to the soundscape, we would invite the children to light a candle located inside the paper lanterns. The fluoro lights would go off and the soundscape would be heard under the soft candlelight.

The third element of *family, food and fire* needed the cooperation and organisation of some of the men in the community. Geri, with the help of two other Noongar CAN WA staff members, coordinated a group of men and women. The men agreed to prepare three 44-gallon drums for the fires and go hunting for kangaroos, and the women agreed to cook them.

4.8 An Important Additional Element – Humour!

> When someone makes you laugh, you are more likely to trust them-and more likely also to hear what they are saying (Parkinson 2009, 186).

The date of the launch had been scheduled around Mark Bin Bakar's[25] availability. Mark is a famous Aboriginal comedian and when I approached him to perform at the event he was thrilled. He welcomed the opportunity to perform in Narrogin, as he was cognisant of the challenges the community was facing. In addition, performing in the town had another dimension for him. His wife is a Noongar woman from Narrogin and has many family members who live in the town. She would be coming along with him. Mark Bin Bakar's alter ego Mary G would be the Mistress of Ceremonies at this event. Mary G is much loved, especially amongst Aboriginal audiences across Australia, for her weekly national radio shows and multiple TV appearances.

Securing Mary G to be the MC made me feel very confident that Noongar people would attend. Mary G has a big following and had not been in Narrogin before. However it was very important to brief Mary G, as we felt that she would play a vital role in preparing the community to listen to the soundscape. Catherine and I had the opportunity to meet with Mark and his wife in Perth a few days prior the event. We talked about what we hoped for, but most importantly we asked them to listen to the soundscape. Their impressions were the first real test as to whether the soundscape contained the key elements we had been looking for: truthful, moving, hopeful and genuine. He nodded and she was moved to tears. The soundscape was speaking for itself!

4.9 Days Before the Event

I went to Narrogin a few days before the launch; I travelled with the event manager to check the venue and final logistics. Catherine, Geri and a few others had been working in Narrogin for the past few days. It was important to have a team meeting on site to go over all the aspects of the event. In addition, I wanted to visit a few people in town to personally invite them to the event. The most memorable encounter was when I went to invite the Senior Sergeant at the Narrogin Police Station. The event manager and I walked into the police

[25] Mark Bin Bakar is very well known, respected and highly recognised Kimberley Aboriginal performer, comedian and advocate http://www.maryg.com.au.

station to hand out a few invitations. The Senior Sergeant agreed to make himself available to talk to us. I introduced myself and explained the purpose of the community gathering and the activities that had led to this event and I handed over the invitation. His first reaction was in the form of a question: “Have you got security for this event?” I hesitated for one moment, and I thought to myself, no, we don’t have security. However the answer that came from my mouth without too much thinking was “No, we don’t need security; we work with the community in establishing relationships”. I felt somewhat frustrated; his response was not what I had hoped for. I was inviting him to come along and to be part of this event. I was hoping for the police to show their support for this community activity and be there in a community-policing role. Maybe that was a naive request.

I left the police station and a huge wave of concern came over me. His words about security went around and around in my head. I felt a very big responsibility on my shoulders; the whole event could turn sour. CAN WA could be held responsible for bringing this event together without taking the appropriate precautions, given the level of antagonism that the community had experienced. That night I could hardly sleep; I was extremely worried. I called Geri first thing the next day. She reassured me. She had complete trust in the process and told me not to worry. She knew that the community had embraced the process and that there would be no confrontation at the event. She told me one more thing, which deeply moved me. She said that her sons and her mother would be there to perform. They wanted to be there for her and the community at no cost to CAN WA. Geri’s mother is a well-respected Noongar Elder and sought-after performer of Welcome to Country. Geri’s sons are also well-known Noongar artists who have travelled the world teaching Noongar song and dance. The fact that they would perform at no cost to CAN WA demonstrated to me that Geri had made this event hers. It was a Noongar event, and therefore she was prepared to invest herself and her family in it. This was an incredible sign to me that the process was right.

4.10 The Day Finally Arrived

June 24, 2010, the day of the launch had arrived. It was a very cold, crisp and clear winter morning. I travelled early in the morning with a few other CAN WA staff in the car. The event was scheduled for 5:30 pm, when we arrived there about 11 am the venue (a large

community hall) was a hub of activity. People were coming and going as the *Voices of the Wheatbelt: Our Place Our Stories* exhibition was being set up in the hall. Inside, tables and chairs were decorated, projector and screens were set up. The valley of Narrogin (made with cane and cloth) was installed in the centre of the venue and lanterns were placed at each table. Outside the venue, barbecues were prepared and three big half 44-gallon drums had been mounted to hold open fires. The idea was that as people walked into the venue they would be able to see the fires burning outside through the glass walls.

A number of the Noongar people who had been very close to the process were at the venue helping to prepare the fires. One of the Elders was telling one of the younger men what wood they needed and where to get it. A group of young Noongar boys who had taken part in one of CAN WA's public art projects in town were getting instructions from CAN WA staff. No one was standing still, everyone was busy, the phones were ringing, and there was a truly hectic and anticipating atmosphere.

The venue had over 150 chairs and I had no idea if we would fill them or not. Would people come? At one point a Noongar Elder said to me laughing: "Don't worry there will be 500 Noongars here soon". We didn't have enough space in the venue or enough food for that many people. I hoped he was wrong but I desperately wanted to have a full house. CAN WA had done all it could to enable Noongar people to get there. Two buses were picking up people from the surrounding towns and a mini bus would do the rounds of Narrogin. All we needed was for the people to get there.

And they did! Over two hundred and thirty Noongar men, women, and children and a few Wadjelas packed the John Higgins Centre in Narrogin that evening. The atmosphere was truly extraordinary. People laughed and people cried. I have never felt so humble and so proud of the work I do. That evening was so meaningful; I truly felt we had made a difference.

Figure 2. Children and Lanterns
Photographer: Bo Wong

The only way to faithfully reflect the impact of that event is through *hearing* the voices of those who were there. Those voices provide an insight into what happened that night. The following are a few quotes from video interviews that Murdoch University students conducted on the night and that later featured on the CAN WA' documentary film *Strong Community Strong Culture Strong Community – the First Steps* (2010):

> Encouraging, very encouraging, good to see all the Noongars coming together and the white people too.
> (Jock Abraham, Narrogin community member)

> This is tremendous; to see all the Noongars together like this. It just blew me away. That's why I become a bit emotional.
> Last time I came up here they were so split.
> But tonight seeing the faces of all the people who were so against each other and seeing their children all mixing up on the floor.

To see the way they were tonight, it blew me away.
(Janet Hayden, Noongar Elder)

We have had so many issues in relation to feuding and anti-social behaviour issues in Narrogin over the past 12-18 months, it has been systemic. It's good to see that these people are coming together as a collective, and they are actually working together.
Looking from a policing perceptive, it is very pleasing to see that we've got different parts, different facets of the community coming together and reconciling. So it seems to me that there is a very long road ahead of us, but it has to start somewhere.
(Mick Williams, then Senior Sergeant Narrogin Police)

I think it's giving people a voice and empowering people, and allowing people to see that they are worth something, that they do have value and that they can contribute to other things. And, but you know, people have to listen too, you know, and I am talking about local governments, government services, and business in towns like this. They've got to listen to the issues within the Aboriginal community. For too long people have been turning deaf to our people's plights, you know.
So tonight is about coming together, there was non-Aboriginal people here and Aboriginal people here, and all celebrating this town.
That's what it's all about, coming together. I think it has been a huge step forward, allowing people to feel good about themselves.
(Mark Bin Bakar)

I know I am going to cry all the way to Perth, because just to see so many Noongars in one place, and they prove they can actually be in one place and enjoy themselves and their kids can be happy.
(Geri Hayden, CAN WA's Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Development Coordinator)

This evening was about a healing for the community and I feel like, I hope it started; it seems to be the feedback from people, that's started.
(Catherine Simmonds, event artistic director and community artist)

4.11 Summary

The *Narrogin Stories*[26] case study illustrates *how* CAN WA's community arts and cultural development practice inspired the Noongar community of Narrogin to tell their own stories. This case study reveals some critical processes which are rarely documented in community arts practice, such as the importance of understanding the community context, the collaborative and enriching decision-making process that results when practitioners work alongside Aboriginal people, and the power of enabling people to tell their own stories. The *Narrogin Stories* study highlights the importance of investing time in establishing relationships and trust in a community that has experienced trauma and the significance of engaging experienced and knowledgeable community artists and arts-workers who are able to navigate these complex community dynamics. The case study also emphasises the benefits of involving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural workers as a way of negotiating across a range of stakeholders in the community.

Most importantly the chapter uncovers *how* community arts practice was used to unlock untold stories that enabled the community of Narrogin to be heard.

[26] The *Narrogin Stories* soundscape can be viewed at http://www.vimeo.com/14440975.

Chapter Five: *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats*

5.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces a second CAN WA case study, the *Voices of the Wheatbelt*, a three-year community arts and cultural development project undertaken by CAN WA with communities across the Wheatbelt region. The aim of this project was to provide these communities with opportunities to express their sense of place and sense of belonging through the arts. The chapter first provides a brief overview of each of the three stages of the *Voices of the Wheatbelt* project. It then focuses on the third phase of this project, *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats*, examining how this community arts project evolved at the grassroots level. The more specific aim of this phase of the project was to enable young people to express their feelings about community life, culture and growing up in the Wheatbelt, through youth-friendly art media (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

Most of the information used in this case study was obtained from two sources. The first was from my direct involvement in the initial stages of the project, including the planning and development phase and during discussions with the artists and the project coordinator. The second was from the resources produced as part of this project, the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* song and DVDs booklet[27]. The booklet is an A5 professionally designed resource that contains a summary of the project and relevant photographs, profiles of each artist who worked on the project and the lyrics of the songs produced for each of the towns, "Brookton We Represent", "True Dat", "This is Our Life" and "Bring The Rain". The resource also includes two DVDs. One contains four video clips, one for each of the songs, and the other is a 35-minute documentary titled *Behind the Scenes* that captured the project process and feedback from participants, teachers and parents.

I selected the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* as a second case study because it contrasts with the *Narrogin Stories* project. The *Narrogin Stories* was developed amidst extremely complex circumstances, as explained in Chapter Four. In contrast, *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* was developed following two years of successful community arts activities that generated a set of relationships and community good will, and this meant that

[27] An electronic copy of this resource can be viewed and downloaded from http://www.canwa.com.au/projects/voices-of-the-wheatbelt/.

the project was fairly easy to establish and deliver. Another key difference between the two projects is that the participants in the *Narrogin Stories* were all Noongar people living in one community, Narrogin, whereas *Wheat Beats* project participants were both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young people living across different communities in the Wheatbelt.

The majority of the participants in the *Wheat Beats* project were children attending Wheatbelt schools. Most of these children were non-Aboriginal (as the proportion of children in Wheatbelt schools who are Noongar is 4.6 %). The case study illuminates how community arts and cultural development practice was used to facilitate young people expressing a sense of place, community and cultural identity.

5.2 Background

The *Voices of the Wheatbelt* project is the largest community arts project CAN WA has embarked on. It evolved as part of a partnership with the Noongar community that commenced when CAN WA established an Aboriginal arts and culture hub in the town of Kellerberrin[28] in 2006. The overarching objective of this project was to engage Noongar communities and willing Wadjela participants in community arts activities that explore and express a sense of place and belonging.

The *Voices of the Wheatbelt* project began in July 2008 and culminated in June 2011 (*Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* 2011). It was funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), for a period of twelve months initially, and was subsequently funded for another two consecutive years (Voices of the Wheatbelt 2009). This cycle of funding meant that each year, *Voices of the Wheatbelt* was developed, designed and delivered as a 12-month project. This time frame presented CAN WA with the opportunity to deliver the project in different geographical locations within the Wheatbelt and to engage with different Noongar families and other community members. It also meant that CAN WA was able to evaluate, and learn from, the previous phase and apply that knowledge to the development and delivery of the next phase.

Voices of the Wheatbelt Stage One in 2008–2009 was delivered in four communities in the eastern Wheatbelt, where CAN WA already had strong community connections. The art

[28] The town of Kellerberrin is located 200 kilometres east of Perth in the central east Wheatbelt region. (http://www.kellerberrin.wa.gov.au/About.aspx).

forms used during this project were photography, music and song writing. Stage Two of the project, *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories*, was delivered in 2009–2010 in four towns in the southern Wheatbelt, where CAN WA wanted to increase its connection with Noongar people of that region, with the view to setting up a second Aboriginal arts and culture hub in the town of Narrogin. The art forms used during this project were photography and filmmaking. Stage Three, *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats*, was delivered in 2010–2011 across the eastern and southern Wheatbelt with the purpose of establishing connections across the region. The art forms used during this phase were traditional Aboriginal dance, hip-hop music and song writing.

5.3 *Voices of the Wheatbelt*: Stage One

Voices of the Wheatbelt had its genesis in a youth art and skills development program that CAN WA conducted with young Noongar women in Kellerberrin in 2007. One of the art media used in this program was photography. This sparked the interest and imagination of these young women and gave CAN WA the opportunity to develop a broader 12-month initiative where local people and school students could come together and explore their community while learning some new skills (Voices of the Wheatbelt 2009).

Over three school terms in 2008, students from Tammin and Merredin Primary Schools, Kellerberrin and Quairading District High Schools, and Merredin Senior High School participated in photography excursions and song-writing workshops. Over 16 weeks, professional artists including two (male) non-Aboriginal photographers and two (female) Aboriginal musicians travelled together with CAN WA staff to each of the schools, conducting photography and music workshops (Voices of the Wheatbelt 2009).

More than 100 school students participated in this project, learning about the technical and artistic aspects of digital photography including elements of design, composition and ways to use light. The students were challenged to develop creative assignments using digital cameras provided at each workshop. Song writing and music workshops were also included and the students had the opportunity to write and record songs about their place. Photography exhibitions of the students were held at each of the schools. Images were selected from over 16,000 photographs taken by the participants. Each student had at least one photograph represented at each of the exhibitions, and parents, teachers and students

were encouraged to attend and see the creative work that the young students produced (Voices of the Wheatbelt 2009).

Towards the middle of 2008, CAN WA continued the project by facilitating photography workshops with adults in the community. The workshops were advertised widely and in total 40 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults participated. During the latter part of 2008, follow-up workshops were conducted in all four communities. All the adults and children who participated in the program were invited to attend and to share the meaning of their photographs. The discussion that emerged from these workshops was broad ranging, encompassing issues of representation of regional people, their sense of place and engagement with their communities (Voices of the Wheatbelt 2009).

After the workshop series was completed, there were a number of regional public exhibitions of the work produced by both the students and the adults. These included events such as the NAIDOC[29] celebrations in Quairading, the *Back to Badjaling Cultural Festival*, and the *Wheatbelt Cultural Festival* held in Northam. The project culminated in the production of a high-quality publication called *Voices of the Wheatbelt*. This is an A4-180 page full colour, hard cover, professionally designed and printed book, which contains photographic images taken by community members during the course of the project. In this book, every participant is represented and acknowledged, and each photograph is attributed to the participant/photographer.

The launch of *Voices of the Wheatbelt* and a celebration of the project were held in Fremantle on Thursday June 4, 2009. Project participants were encouraged to attend through provision of transport and facilitated access to the event. The launch was conducted by Dr Carmen Lawrence, former WA Premier, and enjoyed the patronage of other prominent Western Australians. This gave participants the opportunity to see their work exhibited at an urban gallery and also provided an important and rare platform for Noongar people to represent themselves and their place through their own eyes in a showcase in the capital city (Voices of the Wheatbelt CAN WA 2010). The project received

[29] NAIDOC originally stood for National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee. Now it is known as NAIDOC Week where celebrations are held across Australia each July to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (http://www.naidoc.org.au/about/).

very positive local, state and national media coverage (Bevis 2009; Boase 2010; Brown 2008; Barr 2009).

5.4 *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories*: Stage Two

The *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories* project was conducted in the southern Wheatbelt towns of Narrogin, Brookton, Pingelly and Wagin. Before the project began, there was an initial period of community consultation with key Aboriginal organisations and community leaders. The consultation highlighted that a key community concern was the increasing disengagement of young Aboriginal people from all aspects of community life and in particular from education and employment. This feedback provided CAN WA with essential information to shape the project and to establish partnerships with key organisations including the local schools, the technical college and other service providers. Responding to the community's concern, the overarching objective of the project became "to foster a sense of belonging and strengthen relationships between Aboriginal families and among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities" (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories 2010, 4).

A professional photographer with community development experience was engaged to facilitate the delivery, design and implementation of the photography workshops and to assist the CAN WA Project Manager with the community engagement process. Between November 2009 and March 2010, photography workshops were conducted in the four towns. Four 5-week and two 3-week photographic workshops were conducted, attracting participants who ranged from 7 to 75 years old. To facilitate the exploration process, excursions were organised by bus and on foot. The participants had the opportunity to sit on buses and walk together around their towns, taking pictures of objects, places and people that mattered to them. At the end of each workshop, the participants were encouraged to select their favourite image and write a caption for the chosen photograph (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories 2010). Those involved in the workshops learned technical and artistic aspects of digital photography, including design, composition and ways to use light (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories 2010).

Throughout the photographic workshops, participants talked about their desire to take part in further community arts projects such as public art, youth retreats, filmmaking and a

cultural festival that could bring together Noongar people from across the region. After discussion with key community leaders, CAN WA decided to proceed with filmmaking workshops (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories 2010).

Filmmaking was presented as an added opportunity to use a digital medium to tell stories of the Wheatbelt. Three 4-day filmmaking workshops took place between April and June 2010. They were held in the towns of Brookton, Narrogin and Wagin, where Noongar Elders, adults and children participated in a documentary planning session that involved brainstorming the ideas, choosing the location and agreeing on the central narrative for a 10 to 15-minute documentary. These sessions were followed by a 3-day workshop in which participants covered topics of storyboarding, camera work, sound and lighting (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories 2010). The locations for these filmmaking sessions were Aboriginal reserves and sites of importance to the local Noongar people. The young Noongar participants were encouraged to use documentary techniques as they interviewed Noongar Elders about their experiences growing up in the reserves and in the missions. This presented an opportunity for the young people to hear and document the stories of their Elders (Palmer, Hayden, and Kasat 2011; Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories 2010).

A DVD called *Koorliny Noonook Boodja*, or *Back to Country*, was produced as a result of these filmmaking workshops. This DVD contains three short documentaries; each one tells a story from the perspective of Noongar people (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories 2010; Palmer, Hayden, and Kasat 2011).

Four photographic exhibitions were held to showcase the work produced by community members in each of the towns. Each exhibition was held in conjunction with another community event in order to maximise public exposure to the project. A photographic exhibition of *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories* was held in Wagin at the Wagin Woolorama[30], which is one of the largest agricultural shows in Western Australia, attracting over 20,000 visitors each year. In Brookton the exhibition was held at the Brookton Old Time Motor Show, a bi-annual event aimed at preserving and restoring

[30] http://www.wagin.wa.gov.au/tourism/wagin_woolorama.html.

vintage vehicles. Approximately 5000 people visited this event in 2010.[31] In Pingelly the exhibition was held at the Annual Market Day[32], which attracted approximately 500 visitors. In Narrogin an exhibition was held at the Nursery Café and also at John Higgins Recreation Centre on June 24, 2010. This event coincided with the launch of the *Narrogin Stories* as part of CAN WA's Strong Culture Strong Communities[33] program, which attracted over 200 Noongar people from across the region (Palmer, Hayden, and Kasat 2011).

Finally, a book, the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Our Place Our Stories* was produced. This is a 110-page full colour publication, containing hundreds of photographs taken by more than 100 residents of the southern Wheatbelt. The following quotes illustrate some of the emotions the photographs in the book evoke:

> Place and belonging is at the very heart of this great compilation of imagery and clearly the children are the heartbeat of the country.
>
> The balance is captured majestically in the splendour of a land that many would not know about, but the residents of this region are much richer for knowing this secret treasure. They open up and share through this collection of images for all to appreciate (Bakar 2010, 1).

[31] http://www.otms.org.au/index.html.
[32] http://www.pingelly.wa.gov.au/events/calendar.
[33] A 3-year community arts and cultural development program focusing on the southern Wheatbelt. The Narrogin Stories was one of the projects conducted during the first year of this program.

Figure 3. People Celebrate Their Book.
Photographer: Bo Wong

5.5 Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats: Stage Three

Wheat Beats emerged from the desire to foster community connections across the Wheatbelt and to enable young people to explore a sense of place and a sense of community through different arts media. CAN WA was keen to ensure that Noongar children participated in this program. This was a determining factor in choosing to work with Year 7 to Year 9 high school students. These classes had the highest number of Aboriginal children in the participating high schools.

The inspiration to do a music program had its genesis a few months prior to the commencement of the project. CAN WA conducted a 2-week school holidays hip-hop program in Narrogin in April 2010. This program was facilitated by the renowned Western Australian hip-hop artist Scott Griffiths, also known as MC Optamus (Wilson-Smith 2010). This music and song-writing project was mainly attended by young Noongar boys aged between 10 to 15 years of age. The participants wrote and recorded a song entitled 'Come Along' and created a local hip-hop group called New Balance.

This outcome was a clear indication that young people in Narrogin had enjoyed the project and wanted these workshops to continue. In June 2010, CAN WA was advised that there would be a continuation of funding from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) for another 12 months. This gave CAN WA the opportunity to focus on a youth arts initiative for a full year.

In order to maximise the participation of Aboriginal children, CAN WA gave deep thought to selecting the right artist with the right art medium. CAN WA had achieved very positive results when it contracted MC Optamus in 2010. Scott demonstrated some personal and professional qualities that made him a strong candidate to be the key artist facilitator for this program. He had considerable experience and a real passion for working with disadvantaged young people. He had conducted a similar program in a high school on the outskirts of the metropolitan area with great results. He had also demonstrated excellent facilitation skills and was an accomplished musician with extensive experience in recording and performing. In addition Scott understood CAN WA's aims, in terms of artistic expression, sense of place and cultural identity, and the need to link this project to the school curriculum. He was able to support CAN WA in discussing this program with school principals and teachers in the context of enhancing students' learning outcomes. Most importantly, CAN WA was well aware that hip-hop appealed to young people and that MC Optamus had a high profile with young people in WA.

Furthermore, CAN WA knew that in order to engage young Noongar people, it was important to employ Aboriginal artists. Olman Walley, a Noongar dancer and musician, was known to CAN WA through his mother Geri Hayden, who had previously been employed by CAN WA as the Coordinator of the programs in Narrogin. In a conversation with Scott, it was revealed that he knew Olman well, as they had toured internationally together. This seemed an ideal combination of an Aboriginal and a non-Aboriginal artist who knew each other, had worked together and were willing and available to undertake a community arts program that would combine elements of traditional Aboriginal culture with contemporary hip-hop techniques.

After the first project-planning meeting, Scott suggested that in addition to recording songs, we should consider the production of video clips. He suggested Mat De Koning[34], an award winning young filmmaker who had worked with Aboriginal groups in the Kimberley and had a good reputation for producing great videos. The plan was that each workshop would be filmed and the young people would be engaged in the process of video clip production. This audio-visual element would enrich the workshops and would increase the expectation of the outcomes. The project would be asking young people from each of the participating schools to record a song and produce a video clip that represented them and their sense of place.

This was an exciting development in the planning of the project. The selection of the community artist is always a critical aspect of such projects and in this case this process had seemed seamless. The coordination of this project was assigned to one of CAN WA's younger and less experienced staff members, Nicola Davison. Nicola had an academic background in arts management and had shown great capacity and a willingness to take on a bigger challenge. Her youth and enthusiasm seemed fitting for the project team. Nicola would be working alongside very experienced community artists, with the support of senior CAN WA staff.

The key project partners were the schools in the towns in which we wanted the project to take place. CAN WA identified Kellerberrin and Quairading in the eastern Wheatbelt, and Brookton and Narrogin in the southern Wheatbelt. This decision was based on a combination of criteria including the geographical spread of the schools, the quality of previous working relationships with the schools in these towns, and the potential of future plans which this project could build on.

There was a high degree of formality associated with introducing the idea of the Wheat Beats community arts program to the high schools. Schools have tight control over their activities and tend to plan them in advance, and therefore program timing can be an issue. In addition, there are a number of rules and regulations for entering school premises. CAN WA needed to ensure that program personnel had Working with Children checks and that forms were completed granting permission to have children photographed or taken

[34] Mat De Koning Wins at Super 8 mm Festival http://www.fti.asn.au/news/625-
Pumu Stories http://www.awesomearts.com/projects/13.

outside the school grounds. Throughout this process it became apparent that most of the schools provided very few opportunities for engaging the children in extra curriculum activities, especially when these activities were aimed at expressing Noongar culture (Williams 2007). Therefore, gaining the confidence of school staff was critical.

The program CAN WA was offering required the schools to be willing to allow students to participate in arts activities during school hours, have teacher supervision and to ensure that all parents were contacted and gave permission. CAN WA was providing all other expertise and resources – human and material. The final program of activities was planned in consultation with the artists and some key teachers. The result was that CAN WA would conduct a six-part workshop series with each of the schools, in which they would introduce the young people to Noongar culture through stories and traditional dance, the history of Australian hip-hop, and hip-hop techniques such as MCing, rhyming and freestyling.

5.6 How *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* Unfolded

The workshop series took place during 2010. The full program consisted of a six-part workshop series, delivered once a fortnight over a period of two school terms. The workshops were designed to complement school learning areas, so that the schools would support the implementation of this program within the schools. The lead artist, Scott Griffiths, reported on these learning outcomes to each of the schools.

Each workshop was designed to be highly interactive. The artist facilitators introduced the purpose of the workshops to the students, including what they were expected to do and the outcomes they hoped to achieve. Each workshop was designed to incrementally build on the skills and themes covered as the series progressed. Workshops were conducted with the whole class and also in small groups. The artists took time to tell the students something about themselves and their artistic journey and careers. They took turns in teaching and demonstrating their specific skills to the students. For example, Olman told the children about growing up in the Wheatbelt as a Noongar boy, how he lived in Kellerberrin until he was in Year 1 and then in Narrogin until Year 10, when he moved to high school in Perth. He spoke about his professional career as a traditional Aboriginal dancer and about some of the international performing tours he had been a part of (Behind the Scenes – Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

Olman also taught the young people Noongar dance steps consisting of movements imitating animals such as the kangaroo, the emu and some native birds. He would demonstrate the movements and encourage the student to follow him. He developed short dance routines that the students could shadow and practice. He also taught the students the names of these animals in Noongar language. He explained the origins of a traditional Aboriginal instrument, the didgeridoo, and gave the children the opportunity to have a go at playing it. Olman told dreamtime stories and facilitated discussion amongst the young people about the meaning of these stories (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

Scott described the background of his musical journey, showed students a video of him performing live and talked about the origins of Australian hip-hop. He explained the similarities and differences between North American hip-hop and Australian hip-hop. He demonstrated hip-hop techniques and guided the young people through the process of how to develop rhymes and rhythms. He demonstrated techniques of MCing, rhyming and freestyling, and encouraged the students to try them (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

During the workshops the students had the opportunity to express their creativity and skills in poetry writing and rhythm development. The facilitators made sure that all students were encouraged to participate. Even some of the teachers were encouraged to join in at times, to demonstrate their rap abilities, causing much amusement amongst the students.

The project team agreed that producing video clips would enhance the project and the scope of the program greatly. However, it was also recognised that this would demand more skills and confidence from the young participants, as they would have to sing and dance in front of a camera. The lead facilitator realised that the young people would need extra support and motivation to get in front of a camera to perform their songs so he suggested two other community arts practitioners who would be able to assist. These were two young women: Nelle Hokianga, a dancer and hip-hop facilitator with extensive family connections and personal experience working with Aboriginal communities, and Eve Kermack, who had acting and coaching expertise (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

Figure 4. Making Video Clips.
Photographer: Dion Cochrane

Engaging these two women at this stage of the process was important for the success and the vibrancy of the program, both from an artistic point of view and in providing an important gender balance. Up to this point, the project had three male facilitators. Having two young women join the project added a new dimension to the process and encouraged the girls to participate more fully. The women artist facilitators were involved in the video clip production; their role was to encourage, prepare and challenge the students to perform their songs for the video clip.

The following are detailed descriptions of how the project was unfolding. This was captured on video by Mat De Koning and later become part of the *Behind the Scenes* documentary of the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats*.

5.6.1 Vignette One: I am a Noongar

In one of the early workshops, Scott was telling a group of children sitting in a big circle about Australian hip-hop. He explained that in Australian hip-hop, the rap must be done in Australian accents. The key themes in Australian hip-hop are to talk about where people live, about their towns and the local lives. Scott told the students:

> The Lyric writing and poetry writing is very important and for you to be a voice of your town, and for to hear people to be able to listen to your song and hear your story and hear your story, is a very important thing (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

In the classroom, all the tables and chairs have been moved to the sides of the room. There are small groups of about five students, all sitting or lying on the floor with pieces of butcher's paper in the middle of each group. They are all brainstorming lyrics for their songs.

Scott had spoken earlier about the importance of being honest about what you write. He approaches one of the groups of children who were brainstorming lyrics. In this group there were mostly boys, two of whom were Noongar. As he came closer to the group, he noted that the first line of the poem read: 'I am a gangster'. He looked at what the children had written and said:

> A big element of hip hop and rapping is to talk about honesty in your own life when you say here "I am a gangster" I can guarantee you that there no gangsters here (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

The response from one of the Noongar boys who had the pen in his hand and possibly had written the words, was to cross out the word gangster and replaced it with the word Noongar, so now the first line of their song read: "I am a Noongar". The replacement of the word gangster with the word Noongar is very interesting. Upon being challenged by the facilitator about the honesty of the writing, the child decided to identify himself as a Noongar. What does it mean that this Noongar boy replaced the word gangster with the word Noongar? Does it mean that the child had an opportunity to reflect on his identity and chose to be defined as a Noongar rather than a gangster? Does it mean that the child was in the first instance using a cultural construct gangster that resembled something about his

identity? In what way do the words Noongar and gangster have a similar underlying meaning? Is this about identification with marginalised groups?

Perhaps the word gangster for this child had a positive connotation in the context of popular hip-hop and rap youth subcultures. The act of redefining the word Noongar with what is perceived as the cool term gangster is an act of cultural affirmation (Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspective in Schools: A Guide for School Learning Communities n.d.). This Noongar child is making explicit to himself, to the group of other students and to the facilitator, his cultural identity (Vickery et al. 2007). This, I would say, encapsulates a very important aspect of this project – the creation of the space and the conditions for making explicit one's otherwise silenced identity (Goldbard 2002; Chappell 2008).

Another example of how these workshops enhanced identity formation and celebration is expressed by one the teachers who, when asked to comment about the workshop, said:

> This relates to them, it's the music that they listen to, it's the language they use frequently, particularly the Noongar kids, it is about them. It's not about our perspective of what they need, or anything, it's just everything bout them, and about their world.
> (Janine Anderson, Quairading District High School, in Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

5.6.2 Vignette Two: *I See My Pop*

There are a group of six children, three of them Noongars, sitting in a circle and they have butcher's paper and markers on the floor. Their task is to write lyrics for their song. They have written a few words. One of the Noongar boy is making a rhyme, one of the students calls out the word *pops*, they all laugh, and in the video it is clear that this laughter reflects them having a good time. One of the Noongar boys rhymes "I see my pop walking in the shops" and this rhyme is accompanied by him doing rap movements. There is more laughter. The young boy goes again. "I see my pop walking in the shops for some coco pops." He smiles, he looks pleased with himself that he made a rhyme, they all laugh.

This scene reflects a process in which this Noongar boy is leading a group of students, he is in control of the creative process and he is encouraged by his peers (their laughter clearly

indicates they are relaxed and enjoying the process). It is hard to make a general judgement about whether this Noongar boy is a high achiever or otherwise in the school. In this instance he appears to be popular, creative and participating fully in this activity. It is well known and very well documented that rates of Aboriginal participation in schools are well below their non-Aboriginal counterparts and that these participation rates decline in middle and high schools (Bell, Boughton, and Bartlett 2007). Creating opportunities such as this community art program within the school provided an important opportunity for this Noongar boy to enjoy participating, and to excel.

His suggested lyrics became the verse of the final song for Brookton:

> I see my pop walking in the shops
> To get a pack of chops and some Coco Pops
> I got smelly socks mum don't want to wash
> Came to get my jocks and she got lost
> (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

5.6.3 Vignette Three: Thunder Is Coming

One of the groups of young children is gathered together. There are two boys and two girls, and the girls are Noongar. They are being interviewed about what is happening in their groups. Three of them reply speaking at once: "We just recorded our lyrics". One of the Noongar girls continues:

> It sounds really, really good! Our story is about this girl who is driving a Ute and the Ute has broken down in the back paddock with no one else around, and thunder is coming. And her dad has gone out to look for her. And everyone else's lyrics gonna be added and it's gonna sound really, really good (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

5.7 Themes That Emerged from the Young People's Songs[35]

There are some clear themes that emerged from the lyrics that the young people wrote for the songs in each of the towns. These themes can be grouped as:

[35] All quoted lyrics, from *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat – Beats* pages 20–21; 28–29; 36–37; 44–45.

- **Sense of place**: this is mostly reflected in specific elements of country life and activities that young people referred to in their songs.
- **Sense of community**: reflected in the positive and negative references made in their songs about aspects of their lives: community issues, dynamics and concerns.
- **Cultural identity**: expressed through use of language and references to dual cultural identity (including Noongars and Wadjelas).

Sense of place is expressed, for example, in the final Kellerberrin song called "Bring the Rain", which has the following lyrics:

> Chooks squawking dogs howling down by the dam
> Mum's in the kitchen wondering where I am
> Running in the country – running everywhere
> I can feel the country wind blowing in my hair

In the song "This is Our Life" produced by the students in Quairading, we see a similar sentiment expressed:

> My life here, swimming in the weir
> With the sun in the sky it's great atmosphere
> Having fun with friends – our day never ends
> Sitting as one watching the sun set

In regards to sense of community, the children's lyrics honestly express various aspects of their lives in their communities. Through the songs, young people express their views about what concerns them and what issues are affecting their communities. For example the "Bring the Rain" song emerges from the young people's lived experience in a community that has suffered drought over time. The choreography for this song is a large group of children drumming on tables. This percussion action, their dance, and the lyrics could be interpreted as a rain dance. Through their song the students are expressing something that matters to them, they are voicing their wish for the drought to break:

> Keller town is what we're all about
> Bring the rain no more droughts

Some examples of the positive aspects of their lives are expressed in the following lyrics:

The country's fine – the country's great
There's lots to do with all my mates

Living in Keller is so much fun
There's lots to do for everyone
There is a pool manager – and a lunch lady too
They're all there just to help you

Helping out each other like a sister or a brother
We're on our way – on the road to discover
This is the country – that's how we live
A little bit of take and a little bit of give

They also candidly express more negative elements of their community life, such as boredom and violence. These verses are from three of the four songs produced by young people from Kellerberrin, Quairading and Brookton:

Sometimes it's hard there's family riots
Most of the time it's nice and quiet

This town is really quiet
Except the Youth Centre of Friday night
That's our life, sometimes boring
That's just Quairading, our life story

Now it's Saturday night feelin' alright
Wanna have a good time and not see a fight

Cultural identity is also expressed by the students in their lyrics:

Noongar's and Wadjelas is who we be
Livin' in da country is the life for me
Black and white – dance and sing
Cos we live in Quairading

This particular verse is a clear indication how these young people are choosing to portray their sense of place in Quairading. They identified the two main cultural groups as being Noongars and Wadjelas. They portray Quairading as a place where black and white people

have a shared identity. This sense of shared identity is unlikely to be the view of the wider community (Sanderson 2011), however it is inspiring to see that these young people have chosen to express their identity in an inclusive way.

In Brookton's song "Brookton We Represent" and in the Narrogin song "True Dat", there are elements in the lyrics that can be described as Aboriginal English:

> So I rang my cuz to see what's up
> And we walked to the pool but it was shut
> We were down so we headed to the farm
> We got a bit'a tucker and then we had a yarn
>
> To all the Wadjelas and the black fellas
> Have a good time and don't be jealous
> I'll tell ya a story about how to be stronger
> If you've been good you'll live longer

5.8 Feedback from Participants, Teachers, and Parents

In the documentary *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats: Behind the Scenes*, some students, teachers and parents were asked what they thought about the project. A Noongar child said that the project had been about "getting your confidence up and doing things that you have never done before". A non-Aboriginal child said that the project resulted in "getting your confidence up and making friends and making some good music!" One of the teachers said: "I have never seen them so relaxed and so happy, perfect!" Another positive aspect was expressed by one Noongar mother from Narrogin who said; "Oh I think it's really good to bring the kids together – Indigenous and non-Indigenous kids and seeing them having a good time together as one community" (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

5.9 Summary

This chapter has described the CAN WA *Voices of the Wheatbelt* project from 2008 to 2011. The case study has focused in particular on the third phase of the project, *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats*, which was conducted between July 2010 and June 2011. The

project aim was to enable young people, and especially Noongar young people, to express their feelings about community life, culture and growing up in the Wheatbelt.

During this phase, CAN WA worked with young people across four Wheatbelt towns and facilitated skills development in hip-hop music and dance, traditional Aboriginal dance, filmmaking and photography. The workshops were offered to young people in their towns, primarily through local schools. The community arts program consisted of a six-part workshop series, which introduced the young people to Noongar culture through stories and traditional dance, the history of Australian hip-hop, and hip-hop techniques such as MCing, rhyming and freestyling. In addition, the participants learnt basic elements of filmmaking, directing and digital photography. The young people used this background knowledge and hip-hop techniques to write, record and mix their songs using music production software. The students also developed and choreographed a dance routine, which included both hip-hop and Aboriginal dance elements. A group from each of the participating towns created an original song and music video clip that expressed the young people's unique experience of living and growing up in a Wheatbelt town.

The case study has highlighted how the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* community arts project created the conditions for young people to express their unique sense of place, sense of community and cultural identity, and for young Noongar people to have a voice amongst their peers.

Chapter Six: Critical Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses key insights that can be gained from the case studies of CAN WA and its *Narrogin Stories* and the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beat* projects. The chapter first explores some of the lessons that can be learnt from CAN WA's community arts and cultural development practice with Aboriginal communities, and then considers how community arts practice can be understood as a tool for social transformation. Finally it places community arts on a continuum from Interpretative to Transformative practice and provides a comparison table that relates CAN WA's community arts and cultural development practice to processes of collective empowerment and a cycle of liberation.

6.2 Lessons from CAN WA's Practice with Aboriginal Communities

6.2.1 Building and Gaining Trust

Trust is recognised as a key element that contributes to the capacity and ability of people to work together (Sarkissian and Wash 1994; Drew 2005; Ruane 2007). Building trust in communities that have been subjected to policies of assimilation and systematically marginalised requires sensitivity and empathy. Aboriginal people tend to be wary of non-Aboriginal service providers and therefore gaining trust is a fundamental step in relationship-building (Morgan and Drew 2010). In several research and evaluation reports, trust was identified as an important outcome of CAN WA's community cultural development practice (Drew 2005; Ruane 2007; Sonn and Green 2008). Below I illustrate how trust was developed in the case studies presented in Chapter Four and Five.

6.2.2 Building Genuine Relationships

Building genuine relationships with Aboriginal people requires a depth of understanding of the impact of colonisation and of the broader socio-cultural, political and historical context in which community arts and cultural development practice with Aboriginal people is situated (Sonn and Quayle 2011). Since the British colonisation of Australia, Indigenous people have experienced disruptions in their ways of life that have resulted in significant disempowerment and marginalisation (Parker 2010). CAN WA's approach to community arts

and cultural development involves understanding this post-colonial context and its continuing effect on the Noongar people of the Wheatbelt (Sonn and Quayle 2011; Sonn and Quayle 2013).

Secondly, building genuine relationships with Aboriginal people necessitates forming close relationships with community members at the local level. As described in Chapters Three, Four and Five, CAN WA established local offices in Kellerberrin and Narrogin and employed Noongar people. This signalled a commitment to the Noongar communities with whom CAN WA intended to develop close relationships at the grassroots level (Sonn and Green 2008). All CAN WA staff are encouraged to form genuine relationships with Aboriginal people in their day-to-day practice and these are considered essential to sustaining CAN WA's programs in the community (Morgan and Drew 2010). CAN WA staff are encouraged to respect and validate their own emotions and feelings as well those of the people they work with (Clifford 2010). Listening to other people's stories and allowing oneself to be *moved* and *touched* by their stories is an intrinsic feature of working at CAN WA.

In the context of working with Noongar people, this way of building relationships can begin by simply being available to talk, visiting people in their homes, having telephone conversations, sitting down and having a cup of tea, going bush together and sitting around the fire, attending community events and gatherings and being around the community. In short, sharing and socialising with the people you are working with is an essential aspect of building trust and relationships (Sarkissian 2005; Kapetas 2006; Marsden and Thiele 2008; Clough 2011). In the case studies, it was demonstrated that CAN WA listened carefully to what the community said. The community arts projects that emerged from this dialogue, were intimately shaped by the community.

6.2.3 Listening and Spending Time with People

Listening deeply is a very important part of working with communities (Sarkissian et al. 2003). The simple act of listening enabled CAN WA staff to develop a sophisticated understanding of the community dynamics, the key issues and the opportunities. During the *Narrogin Stories* project, Indigenous community members were initially mistrustful (Sonn and Green 2008; Simmonds and Jacobson 2010). This mistrust progressively changed, as

Noongar people expressed frustration, followed by sadness because of the family feuds. They voiced feelings of regret and anguish for the loss of family and social cohesion (Simmonds and Jacobson 2010). As the conversations progressed, and prompted by sensitive questions from the leading team (Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 2), Noongar people shared stories of happier times when the community and families were united. These positive memories inspired people to imagine new possibilities and hope for the future (Narrogin Stories Soundscape 2010). The act of listening allowed the *tellers* to have a moment of catharsis in which they could re-tell some of their stories, reflect, and in some cases reinterpret the past and reinvent the future (Parkinson 2009). This is a powerful process that enables both personal and social change (Rappaport 1995).

During the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats*, there were different kinds of opportunities for listening to the participants in the project. The artist facilitators created multiple settings for school children to work together in large and small groups in the classrooms, which in turn created opportunities for students to listen to each other and to be listened to by adults including teachers and artist facilitators. The following quote illustrates how young people were encouraged to tell their stories through song during the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* project:

> The lyric writing and poetry writing is very important and for you to be a voice of your town, and for other people to be able to listen to your song and hear your story, is a very important thing. It makes the people out there know the story of you guys and also know where you live. Give yourselves a round of applause for writing lyrics (Scott Griffiths, in Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

During group discussions, Noongar children's stories were heard and validated, as were the stories of the non-Aboriginal children. This represented a rare opportunity to undertake an activity within schools in which the content of the activity, as well as the methodology, contains and validates Noongar knowledge. This is in contrast to "mainstream education [which] marginalises Indigenous learners because of its entrenchments in a Western worldview" (Williams 2007, iii).

In both case studies, the process of deep listening to community stories enabled the community artists and art-workers to use particular concepts expressed by the participants for the creation of the community arts process and presentations.

Chapter Four described in some detail the three theatrical elements that the community artist developed based on the Noongar people's stories. The first element was the act of *playing cards*, which symbolised better times when the community and families were united. The second was the concept of *turning the light back on* as a symbol of hope and an invitation for other Noongar people to come back to Narrogin. The third element was *family, food and fire*, representing Noongar culture. The act of listening and receiving the stories, and interpreting them sensitively, had a healing effect on those who attended the event. This was acknowledged by many of the Noongar participants on the night of the launch of the *Narrogin Stories* (Strong Culture Strong Community – the First Steps 2010). In Narrogin, as in other communities where hurtful or traumatic events have happened, healing can occur when the stories of the sad events are retold or reinterpreted in a supportive way (Kearney 2002; Sarkissian 2005; Seaton 2008; Sonn and Green 2008).

6.2.4 The Importance of Employing Aboriginal People

Research indicates that employing local Noongar people as cultural workers can be one of the most important elements in gaining Noongar communities' trust in community arts and cultural development projects (Sonn and Green 2008). In the case studies, Noongar people were employed as cultural workers and also as artist facilitators. That meant that there were Noongar people embedded in the community before, during and after the projects were delivered. Having Noongar people visible and active in promoting CAN WA projects on the ground signalled to the community that CAN WA was serious about establishing long-term connections with the community. Also, in establishing an office in the local community, CAN WA has created a space that people feel comfortable coming into. The CAN WA office has become a place where people just drop in (Hayden 2011). This nurtures ongoing exchanges with the Noongar people of Narrogin and provides opportunities to listen to what is happening in the community, to debrief with the CAN WA Noongar staff and to have an informal, ongoing two-way communication.

Employing Aboriginal people to work with non-Aboriginal people has been documented as central to embedding Aboriginal perspectives in the workplace and to influencing the way in which community work is carried out (Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspective in Schools: A Guide for School Learning Communities n.d.). The case studies exemplify this, demonstrating how Noongar staff members were very influential in shaping the way CAN WA's projects were developed and delivered.

6.2.5 Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Staff Working and Learning Together

Both case studies reveal that another key element in building trust and relationships with Aboriginal people is providing opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff members to work together. They illustrate the centrality of these relationships and their role in establishing connection with the community and other key stakeholders. In particular, Chapter Four describes in some detail how CAN WA's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff and extended team worked together as they grappled and made sense of complex community dynamics. This way of working enabled a mutual learning between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the team. The Aboriginal cultural workers brought to the partnership their own cultural knowledge and well-established local connections with leaders and Elders in the community (Jeffries-Stokes and Stokes 2011). The non-Aboriginal CAN WA staff brought specific skills such as management, coordination and problem solving, as well as extensive networks (Sonn and Green 2008).

This collaborative approach to relationship- and trust-building highlighted that Aboriginal people have greater responsibilities than non-Aboriginal people when working with their own communities. For CAN WA's Aboriginal staff members, building relationships with Noongar people means that they are often connecting with members of their extended family. These relationships carry different levels of accountability and obligations. Some of these obligations are noted as needing "to be seen to be involved and active within the community" and "a sense of responsibility or commitment to use one's skills for the benefit of the community" (Dudgeon and Ugle 2010, 182). This is illustrated in the *Narrogin Stories*, where Frank Walsh, who is married into a Noongar family, was the first to connect and establish a more intimate conversation with the Noongar people of Narrogin. He was able to develop trust with members of the feuding families and this led to CAN WA being invited to

have a face-to-face meeting with the families, to discuss how the organisation could become involved in Narrogin. The relationships that Frank established were the doors to the initial dialogue with the community. Although this was a very positive start for CAN WA's engagement with the community, it was also risky for Frank, as he had a heightened sense of personal responsibility to uphold the trust that was vested upon him. How CAN WA responded to the trust he built became very important to him personally.

My involvement as a non-Aboriginal person in Narrogin was as a result of Frank's groundwork. As I explained in Chapter Four, attending the first face-to-face meeting with Noongar people required an awareness that I was coming into already formed relationships. As a way of introduction, I told the story of who I was, where I came from and why I was interested and committed to this work. I expressed my personal sense of loss for my culture, my family and my country and briefly shared aspects of the colonial history experienced in Latin America, which has left large populations including many indigenous people with societal poverty and great inequalities (Montero 2007) similar to those experienced by Aboriginal Australians (Haebich 2000; Smith 2005). This personal disclosure made me vulnerable and, as a result of this, more open to connect and communicate with the Noongar people (Brown 2010). I was being myself, which is considered by Aboriginal academics to be an important aspect of communicating and engaging with Aboriginal people (Dudgeon and Ugle 2010).

> Stories spoken from the heart hold a transformational power, they are a way for one heart to speak to another (Kwaymullina 2007, 7).

As the project evolved, the CAN WA team deepened their relationships with many other community members. The following diary entries illustrate a sense of openness and genuine interaction that occurred between Catherine Simmonds, Geri Hayden and the community. Their respectful openness and vulnerability were key ingredients that enabled a deeper connection which assisted in building a fabric of trust (Brown 2010).

> There is the usual self-conscious start to the conversation as the intention of the project meets the natural caution of the people, however it only takes a few jokes and a sincere statement by Geri and Catherine as to the

> nature of the project and we are off and running (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 6).
>
> An elder guiding the craft lesson says that this is the first time that any Wadjela has listened in this way. They need to let it out a bit. She tells a crying woman about the counselling service available for free.
> It felt like a moment of softness and opening had taken place (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 10).
>
> We are starting to feel we have "permission" to walk this trail through stories and encounters around Narrogin. With respect and a clear objective people want to communicate (In Simmonds and Jacobson 2010, 12).

Similarly, in the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* case study described in Chapter Five, artists Olman Walley (Aboriginal dance facilitator) and Scott Griffiths (non-Aboriginal hip-hop music facilitator) worked together and took the time, during the workshops, to tell the students something about themselves. Olman talked about growing up in the Wheatbelt as a Noongar boy and spoke about the towns in which he lived before moving to Perth. He shared experiences about his career as a traditional Noongar dancer, which has seen him travelling to over twenty countries (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011). Scott also talked to students about his life, including his career as a musician and his passion for Australian hip-hop (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011).

6.2.6 Embodying Respect, Reciprocity, and Self-Reflection

Respect, reciprocity, and self-reflection have emerged as fundamental elements of CAN WA's community arts and cultural development practice. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has published important work that deals with the concepts of cultural competencies when working in cross-cultural contexts (Walker and Sonn 2010). "Cultural respect" is one fundamental element of cultural competence and "involves the recognition, protection and continued advancement of the inherent rights, cultures and traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" (Walker and Sonn 2010, 161). The notion of *cultural respect* is demonstrated in both case studies. Both projects were conceived and developed in a way that acknowledged and validated Noongar cultural expression. The *Narrogin Stories* and the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats*

projects created an environment where cultural differences were respected and where the rights of Aboriginal people to maintain, protect and develop their culture were upheld (Walker and Sonn 2010). This concept of cultural respect is also consistent with the notion of "principled practice" (Morgan and Drew 2010, 260), which is an approach to relationship building with Aboriginal people that locates trust at the heart of any successful long-term engagement process.

The notion of reciprocity is consistent with the ground-breaking work of Paulo Freire and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 2011). For those who have experienced oppression and marginalisation, Freire's theories have become welcome tools to "reflect on and understand, the process through which we come to know what it means to be at the periphery of the intimate yet fragile relationship between the colonizer and the colonized" (Macedo 2011, 11). This concept of critical reflection and consciousness-raising is pivotal when working alongside Aboriginal people. CAN WA's community arts and cultural development projects enabled Noongar participants to critically reflect on their circumstances and find their "cultural voice" (Macedo 2011, 12). In the *Narrogin Stories* and the *Voices of the Wheatbelt* projects, participants expressed their sense of cultural identity through different artistic media and in many different ways. The process of sharing stories enabled a collective enunciation of key issues affecting the community and empowered the communities to articulate their own solutions to their problems.

Self-reflection is another crucial element of CAN WA's community arts practice. The case studies described how these self-reflective practices occurred through journal writing, one-to-one mentoring and debriefing meetings with managers and external researchers, and through informal sharing opportunities during the day-to-day activities (Walker and Sonn 2010). Understanding and challenging how social inequalities are maintained and perpetuated through cultural expression is an ongoing challenge for CAN WA staff (Cruz and Sonn 2011). One way in which CAN WA has responded to this challenge has been by increasing the level of influence of Aboriginal people within the organisation. Today more than forty per cent of CAN WA staff members are Aboriginal.

6.3 CAN WA's Practice: A Tool for Social Transformation

The centrality of using arts in CAN WA's practice has been documented in previous research and evaluations conducted in the past few years (Sonn and Green 2008; Palmer and Sonn 2010; Sonn and Quayle 2011). The research has found that the use of the arts in working with Noongar people has a number of positive effects, including the acquisition of new skills, personal sense of achievement, improvement and strengthening of social networks, enjoyment, healing through sharing stories, and providing a way of addressing social issues (Sonn and Green 2008; Sonn 2010; Palmer and Sonn 2010). Some of the key ingredients necessary for community arts practice that contributes to social transformation are the role of the artists and cultural workers, the capacity of community arts to facilitate and build social networks, and the capacity to enable silent voices to be heard.

Figure 5. *Wheat Beats*: Narrogin.
Photographer: Matt Scurfield

6.3.1 Engaging the Right Artist and Cultural Workers

The artist who practices community arts is an individual who is proficient in one or more particular art form(s), and who uses his or her "skills talents, and personality to enable

others to create, compose, design, devise, create, perform or engage with works of art of any kind" (Animarts 2003, 9). Arlene Golbard (2006) states that community artists "recognise their obligation to deploy their gifts in service of larger special aims as well as awareness and transformation" (Goldbard 2006, 58). The artists CAN WA seeks to engage are those, who like effective community development workers, have the awareness to recognise and reflect on the complexities and multiplicity of their roles and are committed and passionate about facilitating a creative process that leads to positive transformation in the community (Ife 1995; Goldbard 2006; Tesoreiro 2010).

In the case of the *Narrogin Stories* and the *Voices of the Wheatbelt* projects, the lead artists were able to creatively and sensitively draw out silent Noongar voices. They enabled these voices to express deep emotions and to articulate a way forward. As outlined in the case studies, Noongar people expressed grief and loss, and also hope and ideas for the future. The artists took their work to where people were, in their homes and outdoors, and they interacted with family members and their children around them (Clough 2011). They listened carefully to what people said and drew upon the language that people used – not changing or translating it, but understanding it and then using it as part of the final creative outcome. The artists showed sensitivity and appreciation for the key conceptual themes that were important to people, for example the importance of *bush* and *country*, *fire*, *family* and *language*. They enabled Noongar people to be creative and supported their endeavours by encouraging, assisting, and asking the *right questions* at the *right time*. The *Narrogin Stories* case study, described in Chapter Four, shows how the lead artist asked Noongar community members important and sensitive questions, and helped them to create a new narrative for the Narrogin community.

Depending on the size of the project, the artist and/or additional cultural workers perform the role of cultural producer. In the case studies outlined in this thesis, CAN WA acts as the cultural producer by deploying staff with specific skills and qualities to fulfil this role. The cultural producer understands the principles of community arts and cultural development, that is, community development *located* within a cultural context. In most cases the cultural producer finds the resources to undertake the project, conducts all the necessary background work, creates goodwill in the community, and forms the partnerships. They also tend to be involved directly in the project from the onset and over a longer period of time

than the community artist. They are the front-runners and the *foot soldiers*. The cultural producers need to have specific skills such as highly developed interpersonal skills, local knowledge, organisational and management skills.

In working with Aboriginal communities, and in particular with Noongar people, CAN WA has found that the cultural producer role demands the employment of Noongar people. A key ingredient for effective community engagement has been to employ Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together and on equal footing from the outset of any project that involves Aboriginal people. This important point has been discussed earlier in this chapter.

6.3.2 Building Social Networks

Community arts and cultural development practice is an effective medium to build social networks. This was reported in Deidre Williams' seminal work on social capital creation and community arts (Williams 1995; Evans 2004). Since then, there have been an array of reports that articulate the social impact of community arts practice and its effectiveness as a tool in facilitating the development and strengthening of social networks (Sarkissian et al. 2003; Evans 2004; Mills and Brown 2004; Mills 2006; Ruane 2007; Sonn and Green 2008).

Furthermore many examples described in the literature reveal how community arts is an effective mechanism for initiating relationships within disadvantaged communities with historically poor records of participation (Sarkissian 2005; Kapetas 2006; Marsden and Thiele 2008; McDonald 2008; Venning 2011).

> People are used to the culture of silence. Their inhibition about voicing their views limits their social participation (Paranjape 2002, 81).

At the *Narrogin Stories* launch, Senior Sergeant Williams of the Narrogin Police explained that, from a policing point of view, bringing the community together was an important first step towards restoring community relations. His comments were made on the night of the event and contrasted to the misgivings he had expressed before the event. The success of the event in helping to restore community relations reflected the culmination of a sustained and continued relationship-building process that had started 18 months earlier. This is described at length in Chapter Four. This event exemplified the strengthening of the social

fabric of the Narrogin community through these community arts and cultural development processes: people sat together, laughed, and cried. There is thus a need to recognise the role of public and community gatherings and celebrations as both a process and an outcome of building social networks.

It was demonstrated through the case studies that Noongar people were able and more inclined to express their feelings, views, and hopes for the future, once they had participated in a systematic process in which their views were heard. This process of building Aboriginal leadership as well as strengthening social and cultural institutions that help protect and restore languages and culture has been identified as an important step in changing the status quo in Aboriginal disempowerment (Smith 2005).

6.3.3 Enabling Noongar Voices to Be Heard

There is a burgeoning desire among Indigenous researchers, activists and educators to foster ways of working with Aboriginal and other non dominant communities, that privilege their knowledges, voices and experiences (Smith 2005; Cruz and Sonn 2011; Chappell and Cahnmann-Taylor 2013). The community arts and cultural development case studies described in this thesis created the conditions for Noongar stories to be told and voices to be heard.

During the *Narrogin Stories* the Noongar people had the opportunity to openly talk about and reflect on what was happening in their community, to express regret, and to articulate their own solutions to the community's problems. Most importantly, they embraced the opportunity to imagine a better future, as they spoke about their hopes and aspirations for their families and in particular for their children (Narrogin Stories Soundscape 2010).

> In the present, we re-live the past to create the futures (Boal 1998, 9).

This process of telling their stories is both healing and cathartic. The themes that emerged during the development of the soundscape described in Chapter Four were *family, culture and community*; *sense of loss, hurt and forgiveness*; and *hope for the future*. This indicates the community's willingness and capacity to have a voice and to express what, until then, had more often been expressed collectively through feuding and violence (Short 2009; Bell 2009).

This capacity to reflect on the past and to bring those positive memories back into the present can aid in community and personal healing (Kearney 2002; Putland 2011). Noongar people reminiscing on their past and their family connections, and reflecting on the good times when the community was united, had a positive effect in drawing these optimistic memories into the present. The possibility to be reunited as a community became more real as people remembered that this was once the case.

In addition, people had the opportunity to express their feeling of sadness and grief, to recount the stories of pain, both inflicted and received, and to reflect on what had been happening:

> I got home and I regret what I did, I shouldn't have done it
> I cried and I took out of town
> (Narrogin Stories Soundscape 2010).

These stories transported the participants to a different time and place where they could experience things *otherwise*, creating the power to feel and to "know what it is like to be in someone else's head, shoes or skin" (Kearney 2002, 137). The telling of the stories had a role in generating empathy and at the same time detachment, allowing time and space for reflection (Kearney 2002). In this specific case, the *Narrogin Stories* allowed people to articulate the need to forgive, to say sorry, and to reconcile.

Furthermore the launch of the *Narrogin Stories* provided the opportunity for the Noongar people to come together and to listen to *their own* stories in a public forum. The stories that had been *taken* by the artist were *given* back to them at the launch, for the whole community to hear and to witness. As Kearney (2002, 140) has observed, "the ability to receive repressed stories and return them to the speakers themselves – and to other listeners and readers" can have "extraordinary healing results". Community ritual and ceremonies can reawaken their sense of belonging to a higher community (Oropeza 2002). Many of these families had not gathered together for years due to the family feuds (Palmer, Hayden, and Kasat 2011; Strong Culture Strong Community – the First Steps 2010). Public presentation of their stories extended the opportunity for others in the community to feel sympathy.

> The narrated action of a drama, for example, solicits a mode of sympathy more extensive and resonant than that experienced in ordinary life. And it does so not simply because it enjoys the poetic licence to suspend our normal protective reflexes (which guard us from pain) but also because it amplifies the range of those we might empathise with –reaching beyond family, friends, and familiar to all kind of foreigners (Kearney 2002, 138).

In communities such as Narrogin, where there has been such public family feuding (Short 2009; Davies 2010; Palmer, Hayden, and Kasat 2011), engendering sympathy and understanding amongst the wider population is a fundamental step towards repairing relationships.

Another clear example of how community arts practice acted as the voice of the Noongar community was at the launch of the *Narrogin Stories*. The John Higgins Centre, where the launch took place, was transformed from a local government civic centre, a white institution, into a Noongar cultural space. Upon entering the venue, Noongar people could recognise themselves, their place and their people. This event was a showcase of Noongar knowledge and cultural production. As described in Chapter Four, three open fires burning outside framed the space. At the entrance there was a photographic exhibition *Voices of the Wheatbelt*, which incorporated both people and places of significance to Noongar people. Non-Aboriginal waiters dressed in white uniforms served kangaroo stew to Elders and families who sat together around colourful tabletops, which represented the streets of their town. A well-known and much-loved Aboriginal comedian, Mary G, was MC for the evening, introducing Elders, musicians, dancers and young people who showcased traditional and contemporary Noongar cultural expression. Finally, the audience and participants listened to the soundscape of the *Narrogin Stories*. That night, the Noongar people of Narrogin took centre stage and they were the authors and the audience of their *own* stories; they engaged in a different kind of knowledge production, affirming and celebrating Noongar culture.

> Life is pregnant with stories. It is a nascent plot in search of a midwife (Kearney 2002, 130).

In the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* project described in Chapter Five, traditional Noongar and contemporary dance and music, and the writing of lyrics and poetry, were the

media enabling the students who participated to tell their stories. The themes that emerged from the lyric writing and poetry were a sense of place, a sense of community, and a sense of identity and belonging. These themes are consistent with other research into arts education (Chappell and Cahnmann-Taylor 2013) and the use of the arts as a way of telling community stories (Kelaher et al. 2008).

Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats also created an opportunity consistent with the "third cultural space":

> The third cultural space recognises that Indigenous communities have distinct and deep cultural and worldviews, views that differ from those found in most Western education systems. When Western and Indigenous systems are acknowledged and valued equally, the overlapping or merging of views represents a new way of educating (Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspective in Schools: A Guide for School Learning Communities n.d., 9).

The "third cultural space" draws on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and understanding the world, as well as their histories and stories. This process is mediated and balanced with Western ways of knowing, being and doing (Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspective in Schools: A Guide for School Learning Communities n.d.).

The poetry that the school children produced reflects Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal aspects of living in the Wheatbelt. The lyrics were developed through a facilitation process whereby the artists encouraged and shared Noongar and Western ways of knowing, including stories and dances as well as contemporary music making. One of the young people who participated in the program spoke about the knowledge he gained from listening to Olman telling Noongar stories. He said that Olman's stories were very intriguing and everyone was asking him questions and requesting that he play the didgeridoo (Watkins 2012). The lyrics the young people produced are a product of their combined knowledge and experience – neither white nor black, but a product of a symbiotic relationship, created in the "third cultural space".

> If art shapes and articulates values, it matters very much who controls it (Matarasso 2005, 2).

6.4 Community Arts: A Continuum

As outlined in Chapter Two, community arts practice worldwide has been substantially influenced by the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paolo Freire and the theatre practitioner Augusto Boal, both of whom asserted that a key purpose of education and theatre is to liberate humanity from oppression. Boal explains that theatre creates the "capacity to observe ourselves in action" (Boal 1998, 7). This capacity, he argues, enables us "to reinvent the past and invent the future" (Boal 1998, 7), thus opening up the possibility of transforming one's reality. Hence it is not surprising that community arts and cultural development processes that aim at emancipation and social change have been more readily practiced in communities that have experienced exclusion and marginalisation, such as African-American and Chicano communities in the USA, migrant and black communities in the UK, among Aboriginal people and people with disabilities in Australia, and in many Latin American, African and some Asian countries (Adams and Goldbard 2002).

Community arts practice, however, is very diverse and I suggest that it is not always practiced with an overt social change agenda. This is particularly true in places such as Australia, where community arts practice, as explained in Chapter Two, has been shaped by government policies and agendas, and has been championed in the context of an access and equity framework for its social benefits rather than for emancipatory and social change opportunities.

Gielen (2011), in *Community Arts the Politics of Trespassing*, offers a *map* of where community art is located in contemporary Europe. He argues that all community art is relational, that is, in order to call a work community art it must actively involve people in an artistic process and/or in the production of art. Gielen goes further to say that the relational nature of community arts can move from auto-relational to allo-relational. That is, from a process that "abides by the rules of professional art" to allo-relational, which serves the purpose of social interaction (Gielen 2011, 21). This purpose of social interaction, Gielen explains, adds another two dimensions to the map. One is community arts as a radical social subversion and the other is what he calls a digestive purpose: that is, community art as *tonic* for social integration.

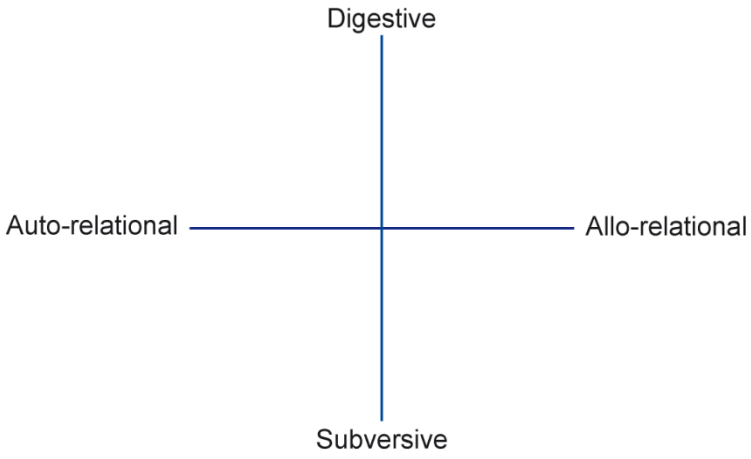

Figure 6. Gielen's map of community arts (Gielen 2011, 22)

The digestive community arts practice helps to integrate social groups into society without necessarily questioning the dominant values, norms or habits of the society (Gielen 2011). This form of community arts is widely supported by governments and private companies. On the other hand, subversive community arts practice implies a much more radical act which challenges societal values and at the same time acts as a catalyst for change.

Gielen warns against looking at these relationships as the end points of a practice, but rather as gradations on a continuum (Gielen 2011). This is indeed useful, as it is helpful to understand community arts practice on a continuum: at one end it could begin as an artist-driven process which involves community members exploring local issues and interpreting them; at the other end the art making with community serves as a social and more radical vehicle for consciousness raising, denouncing, protesting and liberating.

Based on Gielen's concept and my experience of the practice of CAN WA, I offer an alternative way of understanding the continuum of community arts. This might be particularly useful in the context of Western democracies such as Australia, the UK, Canada and the USA where the notion of subversive practice might not be understood as a justifiable form of voicing dissent, given the legislative frameworks that in the main protect and safeguard the rights of their citizens. Consequently, the concept of community arts for the purpose of liberation might not be perceived as relevant or applicable in these contexts. However community arts for the purpose of social change and liberation is still very relevant

for people in these Western democracies who continue to be marginalised by their colonial legacy. In Australia this is very true of Aboriginal people.

I describe this as a continuum from *interpretive* to *transformative* community arts and cultural development practice. This continuum concept is based on the existing premise that community arts is a relational practice: that is, the people who participate in community arts are as important as the artistic outcome (De Bruyne and Gielen 2011; Mills 2006).

Figure 7. The Community Arts Continuum

Interpretive community arts and cultural development occurs when an artist works collaboratively with a community to express, represent and/or confirm its identity. For example, community arts practice is commonly known for the development of murals, mosaics, festivals and other forms of public art that depict aspects of a local community, such as its landscape, its people and its past. Creating visual performance representations of what is important to the community plays a crucial role in the formation of individual as well as collective identity. Community arts projects can assist in reclaiming public spaces that help individuals to determine what it means to be oneself and a member of a community (Thomas and Rappaport 1996). The art outcome, in this case, acts as a mirror, representing what is relevant or important to people in a community at that particular time.

Interpretative community arts can be an important avenue for raising awareness of a particular issue or concern in a community. Environmental degradation, the protection of heritage sites, human rights abuses, better ways for community engagement and participation, and concerns around social cohesion, are issues commonly addressed through community arts practice. So while for some, interpretive community arts might simply be understood as a means of representing and/or recording a community concern, for others it could be the first step in raising both awareness and consciousness of something in the local community that they were not aware of. In this sense, interpretative community arts can

serve as a mechanism for community expression as well as for a deeper and transformative process.

Transformative community arts and cultural development occurs when collective art making, facilitated by an artist, enables a group of people who are in some way marginalised, oppressed or discriminated against, to critically reflect on and understand the way in which they exist in the world, their circumstances and their pain. Transformative community arts can help to change dominant narratives and help create different stories, whereby minority communities can be the protagonists of their reality and, from that reflection, hope can be envisioned (Freire 1985; Macedo 2011; Ife 2012). This capacity to envision is a fundamental ingredient of transformative practice, because hope and vision signal a way forward and a possibility to move from a current situation to a better one (Boal 1979, 1998; Thomas and Rappaport 1996; Freire 2011; Macedo 2011).

The transformative aspects of such experiences not only affect the project participants, but also the artists and art workers who are involved. The creative process usually makes people more open and therefore likely to be affected by what they see and hear. The creative exchange enables people to share personal stories and make human connections. This can be a powerful experience that challenges "dominant cultural narratives" (Thomas and Rappaport 1996, 319) and entrenched perceptions about the meaning of poverty, race, difference, resilience, power and privilege.

The case studies presented in this thesis as examples of CAN WA's practice reveal how community arts can be both interpretative and transformative. During the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats*, the participants became more aware of each other and their place, as they explored their sense of place through lyric and poetry writing (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011). The students had the opportunity to express different aspects of their lives, as young people growing up in small towns in the Wheatbelt. The opportunity to do this through the arts strengthened their sense of self and identity (Thomas and Rappaport 1996; Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011). In creating shared narratives that identified their towns as being both Noongar and Wadjela, these young people were actively shaping a renewed sense of identity for their culturally diverse communities. This can be interpreted as a powerful and transformative experience,

particularly considering the challenging history of race relations in the Wheatbelt. In addition, the opportunity for cultural affirmation and expression engendered increased self-esteem and confidence, as reported by both the teachers and the students involved in this project (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011). As one of the teachers observed, the artistic tools used were relevant and enabled the students to represent themselves through the language they use and the things that interest them. Therefore, the project afforded an opportunity for the students, and in particular the Noongar children, to express their uniqueness and to be celebrated and acknowledged for that.

For some of the young people, this project also had significant impact at a personal level (Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats 2011). One of the participants, who everyone assumed was one of the non-Aboriginal students, told me over the phone that his grandmother, on his mother's side, was Aboriginal. He said that he didn't know much about this side of the family, however he reflected on the fact that he had never thought of himself as Aboriginal (Watkins 2012). One of the many students who thrived during this project, he became one of the key *rappers* who performed live at the launch of the Voices projects in Narrogin and Perth and also at a major Noongar regional festival, the *Keela Dreaming* 2011. The acknowledgment and disclosure of his cultural heritage could be interpreted as a shift in his awareness and understanding of his cultural identity, which could have profound influence on the way he sees himself and the world in the future.

The *Narrogin Stories* project contains many examples that confirm community arts is an interpretive practice. I will however focus on highlighting its transformative potential. The *Narrogin Stories* helped change the dominant narrative that had prevailed in the media and within the community, which was about violence, suicide and family feuding (Davies 2010). During the *Narrogin Stories*, the community had the opportunity to critically reflect on the reasons for the feuding and to grieve for the loss of young men to suicide (Narrogin Stories Soundscape 2010). In addition, the community collectively created a new narrative that embraced reconciliation, looking to the future, and moving forward in a united way. The *Narrogin Stories* launch demonstrated signs of a community ready to come together and most importantly it signalled the possibility of sustaining these changes. The *Narrogin Stories* soundscape affirmed the hopes of each community member who spoke out about the need to reconcile and to build a new future for their children (Narrogin Stories

Soundscape 2010). It is very difficult to sustain personal change without the support of a collective that understands the *new narrative* (Rappaport 1995). Therefore the *Narrogin Stories* launch became a powerful public forum that helped consolidate the will of the community to move forward and demonstrated the transformative capacities of the project.

Community arts and cultural development can also be better understood as a transformative practice when set against empowerment theories and concepts of liberation. Both of these concepts have been traced back to Latin American thinkers: the concept of empowerment to Brazilian Paulo Freire (Hur 2006), the articulation of liberation theology to Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez, and later a psychology of liberation to Ignacio Martín-Baró from El Salvador (Montero and Sonn 2009). Empowerment has been used and referred to in a number of disciplines and settings, including political science, education, women's studies and feminism, management and community psychology (Hur 2006; Cattaneo and Chapman 2010). Liberation ideas and practices have been applied within social science, and political and community psychology (Montero and Sonn 2009).

In defining empowerment, Hur (2006, 524) explains that:

> First, empowerment is multidimensional in that it occurs within sociological, psychological, economic, political and other dimensions. Empowerment also occurs at various levels, such as individual, group and community. Third, empowerment, by definition is a social process because it occurs in relation to others.

A key feature of empowerment is that it is an iterative process and can be defined as a mastery over one's affairs and as participation in a group in order to gain access and control over resources (Rappaport, cited in Cattaneo and Chapman 2010, 648); as a goal achievement where the individual sets goals and ways to achieve them (Mechanic, cited in Cattaneo and Chapman 2010, 648); and as a social good (McWhirter, cited in Cattaneo and Chapman 2010, 648). The definition of empowerment as forwarding social good aligns with the idea that increasing the power of the marginalised is essential to achieving social justice, as proposed by Freire and Martín-Baró (Cattaneo and Chapman 2010).

Moane (2009) argues that "a key process in liberation is the development of consciousness, which includes a social analysis of the systemic nature of oppression and a capacity for

action" (2009, 140). Freire refers to this process as *conscientization*, which is the idea of the cyclical and symbiotic relationship between awareness and action when grounded in the lived experiences of those who are oppressed (Freire 2011). Moane (2009) refers to a developmental and community-capacity building component of conscientization, explaining that "people must begin at their own level of consciousness and abilities to take action and ultimately aim to develop their own potential and to achieve social justice" (Moane 2009, 140). According to Montero and Sonn (2009, 1), liberation can be understood as:

> A process entailing a social rupture in the sense of transforming both the conditions of inequality and oppression and the institutions and practices producing them. It has a collective nature, but its effects also transform the individuals participating, who, while carrying out material changes, are empowered and develop new forms of social identity (Montero and Sonn 2009, 1).

As much as liberation is directed to those in society who are oppressed, the process seeks also to free those who perpetuate oppression, enabling them to understand the benefits of living in a just and democratic society (Montero, cited in Montero and Sonn 2009, 1).

The summary table on the next page shows how community arts, from interpretative to transformative practice, relates to the components of collective empowerment as proposed by Hur's (2006) and Moane's (2009) cycle of liberation. The purpose of this comparison is to situate CAN WA's community arts practice with Noongar communities in the WA Wheatbelt as transformative and consistent with theories of empowerment and liberation of marginalised communities.

Table 1. Community arts and cultural development practice as it relates to components of collective empowerment and a liberation cycle

Components of Collective Empowerment (Hur 2006, 536)	**Liberation Cycle (Moane 2009, 142)**	**Community Arts and Cultural Development Processes**	**CAN WA Examples *Voices of the Wheatbelt* and *Narrogin Stories***
Collective belonging	Awareness	***Interpretative*** Enables the affirmation and/ or discovery of collective awareness and identity.	Through poetry and lyric writing, young people affirmed their collective identity. Working with Noongar artists increased awareness and understanding of Noongar culture. Narrative was used to voice and make explicit silent stories.
Involvement in the community	Building strengths	Encourages community participation; enables community connections; and strengthens social networks.	High levels of participation in art workshops including photography, filmmaking and storytelling. Noongar people actively participated in project launches.
Control over organisation in community	Making connections	Skills are gained. People exercise control over how they are represented. Communities affirm their connection between themselves and others.	Skills were gained in writing, dance, photography, filmmaking, performing, team work, and organising. Noongar people were actively involved in how to present their stories to the wider community.
Community building	Taking action	Community celebrations, and creation of empowering settings. ***Transformative***	The *Narrogin Stories* brought together feuding families and a new narrative was created, where hope is envisioned and forgiveness and healing can take place. People spoke about healing and renewal.

6.5 Summary

This chapter has reflected on CAN WA's community arts and cultural development practice, discussing insights and learnings that can be gained from the case studies presented in the previous three chapters. Some of the lessons learned included the importance of building and gaining trust; building *genuine* relationships; the relevance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff working together; and the importance of listening. The chapter has explored the challenges in working with communities that have experienced marginalisation. The chapter has also re-framed community arts and cultural development practice as an effective and powerful mechanism for social transformation. It has done this by locating community arts practice on a continuum, which goes from 'Interpretive' to 'Transformative' Practice. Finally the chapter has included a comparison table that shows how CAN WA's community arts and cultural development practice relates to components of collective empowerment and a cycle of liberation.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this thesis has been to examine how community arts and cultural development practice enables silenced voices to be heard, and to explore how it can be better understood as a powerful tool for social transformation. In order to address this primary aim a number of sub-aims were addressed. The thesis has sought to:

- review the origins and evolution of community arts and cultural development theory and practice, and its potential benefits, in Australia;
- introduce CAN WA as a key exponent of community arts and cultural development practice with marginalised communities in WA;
- examine how CAN WA's *Narrogin Stories* project developed as a process that enabled the Noongar community in Narrogin to have a voice;
- examine how CAN WA's *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* project has contributed to affirming cultural identity for Noongar young people in the Wheatbelt region and how it has enabled positive interaction between Noongar and Wadjela young people; and
- reflect on how these case studies can contribute to our understanding of community arts and cultural development as a practice that enables silenced voices to be heard and that can be a powerful and effective tool for social transformation.

This concluding chapter will review the key findings with respect to each of these aims, and will make recommendations and suggest future areas of research that could contribute to furthering the understanding of community arts and cultural development as a tool for social transformation.

7.2 Summary of Findings

7.2.1 History and Benefits of Community Arts in Australia

Chapter Two revealed that community arts practice worldwide has been considerably influenced by the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire and theatre practitioner Augusto Boal. In

Australia, the origins of community arts are linked to the social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which centred around the Vietnam War, feminist theories and Aboriginal land rights. The history of community arts practice has been characterised by several policy shifts that at times threatened its own existence. The chapter showed that the existing research in this field has mainly focused on demonstrating the social value of the practice and that evidence-based research has been used as a tool for lobbying for more resources to support this practice. The intrinsic value of this practice could be found in the processes that occur when people participate and experience community arts and cultural development methods. The chapter concluded that there is limited research on, or understanding of, how community arts practice is actually undertaken within communities, especially in complex contexts where people are experiencing social disadvantage. Finally it showed that community arts and cultural development practice is an effective mechanism for communities to tell their own stories and that stories can be a powerful vehicle for social transformation.

7.2.2 The Community Arts Network of Western Australia

Chapter Three outlined CAN WA's long history as a key exponent of community arts and cultural development practice with marginalised communities in WA. For twenty-eight years it has shown a commitment to working with socially and economically disadvantaged communities, as demonstrated by its involvement with Aboriginal communities, young people at risk and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. CAN WA's origins are closely linked to the changes that community arts practice has experienced across Australia and its history reflects broader socio-cultural and political shifts that the community arts sector has experienced in the past 40 years. In order to survive, CAN WA had to adapt to shifts in funding priorities and policy direction. Despite these changes, the chapter showed that the organisation is firmly focused on enabling marginalised communities to have a voice through the arts.

7.2.3 Examining CAN WA's Practice

Two case studies of CAN WA's community arts practices were presented in Chapters Four and Five of the thesis. The case studies showed that community arts and cultural development practice is an effective tool for enabling marginalised communities to tell their

own stories. The *Narrogin Stories* case study demonstrated that community arts and cultural development practice helped the Noongar community of Narrogin to voice their collective pain and sorrow and articulate their hope for the future. Similarly, the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* case study revealed how the project contributed to affirming cultural identity for Noongar young people and facilitated the expression of their unique sense of place and sense of community.

The case studies highlighted that trust, which is produced in and through interpersonal and social relations, is a fundamental building block for communities to work together. CAN WA's practice embedded key elements that facilitated gaining and building trust. Some of these elements were: listening carefully to the community, investing time in establishing relationships at the local level, boosting opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together, and employing Noongar people. In addition, engaging experienced and knowledgeable community artists and arts workers, who were able to artfully navigate complex community dynamics, was found to be crucial. CAN WA's practice also demonstrated that community arts has the capacity to build and facilitate social networks and in so doing improve the conditions for Noongar people to have a voice among their peers. Most significantly, the case studies underlined the unique and constructive use of the arts to unlock untold stories that enabled the community to find its own voice.

7.2.4 Community Arts: Enabling Silenced Voices to Be Heard, and a Powerful Tool for Social Transformation

Chapter Six reflected on the CAN WA case studies. The chapter found that there were important ways of understanding how community arts practice enabled silenced voices to be heard and how it can be better understood as a tool for social transformation. CAN WA's community arts and cultural development practice was based on fundamental values and principles that aided in building trust and relationships with Aboriginal communities. These were respect, reciprocity, and self-reflection. These values and principles combined to create a powerful platform from which sharing stories and revealing personal narratives become possible. The creative process was sensitively and skilfully facilitated by artists and arts workers who used the arts as a vehicle to manifest the community's stories.

The chapter also showed that community arts can be better understood as a tool for social change when it is placed on a continuum from Interpretative to Transformative practice. The case studies presented in this thesis demonstrated that community arts can be both interpretive and transformative. During the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* project the participants explored and strengthened their sense of self and sense of place. The participating young people created shared narratives and in doing so actively shaped a renewed sense of common identities for their communities. This can be interpreted as a powerful and transformative experience, particularly considering the challenging history of race relations in the Wheatbelt. Similarly, the *Narrogin Stories* helped change a pervasive narrative of violence and family feuding, when the community had the opportunity to critically reflect on the reasons for the feuding and to grieve for the loss of young men to suicide, in the town of Narrogin. Through the *Narrogin Stories*, members of the Noongar community collectively created a new narrative that encouraged families to reconcile, look to the future, and move forward as a more united community.

The transformative aspects of community arts were seen at all levels of the community. At the individual level, practitioners, participants, and community members reported increased cultural competencies and awareness, articulation of hope, healing, enhanced artistic skills and a renewed sense of possibilities. At a community level, there was evidence of improved and strengthened social interactions amongst Noongar family groups. There were also reports of increased confidence and sense of cultural identity in young people and evidence of people laughing together, enjoying each other' company, and having fun, which modelled a new and harmonious way of Noongar interactions. The public launch of the *Narrogin Stories* and the positive media reports about Noongar people were a very powerful example of the transformative capacities this project had in the community.

Finally, community arts and cultural development can also be better understood as a transformative practice when set against empowerment theories and concepts of liberation as presented in the summary table included at the end of Chapter Six. Understanding community arts and cultural development as empowering and liberating poses interesting questions about what happens after the community has found its voice, who is prepared to listen and ultimately who has the power to make changes? Furthering the dialogue of community arts and cultural development practice as a vehicle for community

empowerment and liberation could be very relevant for Aboriginal groups and other minority groups in Australia who continue to be marginalised. However, this could also be contentious as community arts practice in Australia has been shaped and funded by government for its social benefits rather than for its *emancipatory and* social change opportunities.

7.3 Limitations of This Study and Areas for Further Research

Having summarised the key findings of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research and to suggest further research that could address these shortcomings and build on our understanding of community arts practice.

7.3.1 The Use of Case Studies

The use of case studies was an effective way of examining the history and the challenges experienced by CAN WA throughout its existence. Intrinsic case study methodology, as explained in Chapter One, was used to examine CAN WA as the object of the first case study. Instrumental and multiple case study methodology was used to examine the *Narrogin Stories* and the *Voices of the Wheatbelt – Wheat Beats* and to explore the social and political context within which the projects were developed. Most importantly, the instrumental case study method provided answers to the guiding question of this thesis – how does community arts practice take place in communities and how does it generate social transformation?

Despite the widespread use of case study methodology, it continues to be contested as a research method on the basis that it provides detailed examination of a *single* example and therefore researchers cannot develop general propositions and theories from one or very limited case studies (Flyvbjerg 2001). In contrast to this, I found the case study methodology a valuable tool, especially when combined with reflective practice. Overall, presenting more than one case study, or multiple case studies, contributes to the understanding and better theorising about community arts and cultural development practice.

The key challenges I encountered using case study methods were finding a balance between my position as a researcher and my role as the managing director of CAN WA, and demarcating each of the case studies as they were not easily defined as a single project and

or activity. Each case study has been part of a collaborative planning and delivery of multiple and concurrent projects. As a researcher, the focus was on analysing archival and research data about past projects to clarify the role of community arts practice. During this process there was a conscious attempt to ensure that other voices were also represented; that is, the voice of the artists, the participants and other fellow researchers.

7.3.2 Critical Ethnography and Reflective Practice

CAN WA have been engaged in reflective practice for a long period of time. The organisation has regularly invited university researchers to contribute to this by conducting insightful evaluations of CAN WA's projects. This ongoing evaluation and research has assisted in creating a culture of reflection and ongoing learning within the organisation as well as leaving a legacy of documented findings (Sonn and Quayle 2013).

It is worth noting that one of the shortcomings of critical ethnography is the difficulty in providing a social critique without potentially reinforcing existing power relations (Vandenberg 2011). In addition, the complexities of enabling marginalised communities to have their own voices heard is an ongoing challenge for those attempting to practice critical ethnography; ultimately it can be argued, the researcher has control over the questions he or she asks, how they are asked and their interpretation (O'Byrne 2007). Advocates of critical ethnography are calling for their fellow academics to be deliberate in their efforts to use multiple epistemologies in order to interrogate their own ethnographic practice (Foley and Valenzuela 2005).

In attempting to speak from a contextual, historical, and cultural standpoint, two fundamental factors influenced my research: firstly being the managing director of CAN WA, and secondly growing up in Chile under an oppressive military regime. It was impossible to enter this research without the established power relationships I have with the communities, other staff members and the artists CAN WA works with. As CAN WA's manager, I influenced the way decisions about the case study projects were made. Furthermore the power relationship I had in the planning and executing of these projects has been informed, as explained in Chapter One of this thesis, by my personal experience of the role of the arts for communities who have experienced oppression, and by my personal politics and my pre-existing worldview, values and beliefs.

Therefore I chose a methodological approach that allowed me to be a participant as well as a researcher. However, at times I struggled to differentiate and maintain a balance between my voice and the voice of the organisation. A way to try to address this challenge was by accessing artist's diaries and reports and by using the extensive audio-visual material collected during the projects. This material contained interactions between the participants, the artist and arts workers, as well as teachers and parents. In addition, I sought to test and examine my claims and assumptions by having a regular dialogue with the lead artist and Noongar project coordinators on the ground (Chappell and Chappell 2011; Vandenberg 2011).

Notwithstanding these limitations and challenges, I found these research methods useful and congruent with the aims of the research. Ultimately the case studies in this thesis have been a window into a series of complex decision-making processes that occurred in difficult contexts of power relations, a unique set of shared experiences and learnings, and personal and professional reflections by those closely involved in the projects. These are very sophisticated processes providing valuable insights that reflect the deep learning that can be gleaned from case studies and critical reflection. This is an incentive to continue to develop organisational ways that could support and encourage CAN WA's practitioners to engage more often in critical reflection and contribute to the collective writing of case studies in the future.

7.3.3 Areas for Further Research

There are number of aspects of community arts practice that warrant further research. Some research priorities are briefly identified below.

The history of community arts practice in Australia is very limited. Although this thesis addresses some of the existing gaps, it has mainly focused on the history of community arts in relation to Australia Council's policies. Further research is needed to understand the history and evolution of community arts and cultural development practice from other viewpoints including practitioners and participating communities.

This thesis suggests that there has been increased research interest in the instrumental benefits of community arts practice. The thesis argues that community arts should also be

understood for its intrinsic value. Additional research is needed to enhance our understanding of both the instrumental value and intrinsic benefits of community arts practice.

This thesis has argued that the educator Paolo Freire and theatre activist Augusto Boal have influenced the philosophy of community arts practice in terms of its capacity to engender empowerment and liberation in communities. Their influence has been more explicit in places where community arts is practiced with communities which have experienced oppression such as in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Further research is needed to shed more light on how marginalised communities such as Aboriginal communities could benefit from a more explicitly emancipatory approach to community arts practice in Australia.

Finally, longitudinal research is needed to assess the long-term effects of community arts participation on marginalised communities. This thesis has identified some of the benefits of community arts participation on communities in places such as Narrogin and Kellerberrin, but it has not been able to assess the extent to which these positive outcomes are enduring.

7.4 Final Comments

This thesis has sought to make a contribution to documenting, and reflecting on, community arts and cultural development practice in Australia. Documenting the origins and evolution of CAN WA provides a valuable record of the organisation's internal changes and its responses to a broader policy and political environment. Detailed case studies of community arts practice, where the processes and the benefits for the communities are analysed, are very important for community arts organisations and practitioners. This is especially important when considering working with disadvantaged communities. Trust within Aboriginal communities who have experienced trauma and grief is very fragile, and research that explores how this trust might be gained is therefore valuable. Deeper understanding of community arts and cultural development practice and how it can strengthen communities to reflect on their reality, so they are more effective in effecting change, is critical for the ongoing enhancement of the practice. Without this research, community arts, and its transformative potential, can be underestimated.

Most community arts practitioners find it very difficult to engage in systematic reflection and/or academic practice. Practitioners, who are mostly self-employed, usually find themselves engaged in short-term projects and are likely to question whether they have the time or the skills to engage in academic writing to document their processes and practice. In addition, many of the established community arts organisations across the country, such as CAN WA, have staff who devote a great deal of their energy to ensuring the sustainability of their organisations, and lack the time or resources to engage in self-reflective practices. This thesis is an attempt to redress these research gaps: to conduct reflective research that makes a contribution towards a deeper understanding of community arts practice from a practitioner's standpoint.

Community arts practice is a two-way street. It is about artists and other reflective practitioners lending their creative talents and gifts to the community, which in turn responds with imagination and willingness to share their precious stories. When these creative exchanges come from a place of self-awareness, mutual respect and from the desire to create a new narrative, a unique and social transformative phenomenon occurs – the imagining of hope.

This is one the most powerful and inspiring human dimensions!

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