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People, Place, Spirit

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My name is Denise Ava Robinson. I am Tasmanian, often referred to as a Tasmanian Aboriginal Artist. Others question or 'challenge' me on being Aboriginal. Almost daily I raise this question myself. I have no simple answer. In the words of Henry Reynolds "There is no easy, nor a collective answer to the question of Aboriginality.... such identification should not be undertaken lightly"¹ My paternal ancestry is Aboriginal, my maternal English.

Being Tasmanian, knowing your ancestral bloodline reaches back to the original caretakers of the place I call home fills me with a deep pride and yet, a deep yearning. A yearning for the belonging I sense and know but unable to experience fully – it is as if I exist in a place between the past and present.

I am not alone in my 'in between-ness'. One forms a universal 'community' with others sharing the complexity of identity. When identity includes a culture once tattered, considered lost this 'community' becomes a vital lifeline to the understanding of who we are. The searching, unveiling and sharing of familial histories, cultural practices and tradition are activities that revive a spirit of belonging. The courage of one individual claiming ground in a complex cultural history encourages another. A healing begins.

In Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* he refers to a quote by Peter Schledermann: "Everything we are is in our spirit. In archaeology, you are examining the long line of what we are"². As a visual artist I attempt to explore the long line of what we are through our relationship to place. This paper's intent is to engage dialogue that considers depth and relevance of relationships between people, place and spirit and how acceptance of diversity is integral to the mending of histories.

As with many colonised nations Aboriginal culture and tradition in Australia were disregarded, scorned, feared and dismissed as primitive and savage ways of an uneducated race. Aboriginal people were herded and driven from their land, forced to adopt the so-called 'civilised' practices of white European settlers. Throughout the nation violent acts were perpetrated, Aboriginal families torn apart, cultural tradition disqualified, native language forbidden, and massacres of Aboriginal people occurred across the land. It is a history that was, and in some instances, is still not widely spoken of!

A deep, psychological wound stains the land.

In David Tacey's *Edge of the Sacred* he states "In Australian cultural experience the landscape is coterminous with the unconscious: it is vast, ancient, mythological, and wholly other. We have denied the true spirit of the land, and its indigenous inhabitants, for two

¹ H. Reynolds, *Nowhere People: how international race thinking shaped Australia's identity*, Penguin Group (Australia), 2005, p237.

² B. Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and desire in a Northern landscape*, Macmillan London Limited, 1986, p187-188.

hundred years of white settlement, and now the repressed is coming back to haunt us”³. Tacey’s assertion was that ‘white’ Australians needed to ‘embrace deeper connections to place in order to grow socially and culturally. The acceptance of Australia’s Black history, he claims, was “the urgent and demanding psychological present” and integral to the healing of ‘white guilt’⁴.

On February 13, 2008 the newly elected Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made history by saying ‘Sorry’ to the Aboriginal people of Australia. People throughout the nation shed tears of joy, sadness, pain and relief. It was as if a great sigh moved through our nation. ‘Sorry’ does not provide an immediate panacea for past pain and atrocity it merely opens the gate for discourse – it acknowledges a past that requires amends. A healing can begin.

Julie Gough is one Tasmanian artist opening old wounds for healing. Julie diligently researches our Tasmanian histories and, through her work brings ‘real’ stories to light. Her works convey an evocative account of human injustice, disparity and misconception – of personal stories untold. These stories integrate Tasmania’s Aboriginal and Colonial histories provoking deeper consideration of a memory that aches silently in our landscape.

Lola Greeno, Dulcie Greeno, Vicki West, and Colleen Mundy are four Tasmanian Aboriginal artists bringing practice of basket and shell necklace making to the contemporary foreground enlightening us to the continuing richness of a culture and providing evidence to tradition that both existed and exists. Together with Julie, they command attention and respect to a history that has not laid down and died but is being resurrected and celebrated through its people, their stories, and their craft.

In exploring my own identity and relationship to ancestors I find comprehension in the land. I do not ‘see’ a landscape; I am a ‘part of’ the landscape. Connection to place forms the base of my practice and research. Through intimate observation of the language of the land, the gathering of materials I seek to gain knowledge and understanding of me, and, my place. The resulting works are both distillation of place and suggestion of journeys. The three panels in this exhibition were created as an installation of nine panels forming a continuum in an enclosed space designed for quiet and contemplative engagement. My intent is to take what appears as an incidental and insignificant material (the algae) to create work in a manner, and within a context that charges a space with not only an aesthetic transformation but an ethical, cultural or social comment.

Yi-Fu Tuan Lopez writes: “It is easy to underestimate the power of a long-term association with the land... For some people, what they are is not finished at the skin, but continues with the reach of the senses out into the land....such people are attached to the land as if by luminous fibres....to cut these fibres causes not only pain but a sense of dislocation.”⁵ If we are to understand, accept and celebrate our Aboriginal people, respecting the deep wisdom, knowledge and value they afford our society reconciliation must include deeper awareness, engagement and respect for the land and subsequent relationship to ‘place’. The land is to most, if not all indigenous people the way of life. One does not live ‘on’ the land but ‘with’ the land. It is a deeply rooted spiritual relationship of reciprocity.

³ D. J. Tacey, *Edge of The Sacred: Transformation in Australia*. Harper Collins. 1995. p61.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Quoted in Lopez, pp278-279

Interviews in *Being Aboriginal; comments, observations and stories from Aboriginal Australians*:

Chapter 5: “*The spirit of Musgrave Park*”

“Europeans and their perception of land is based on the materialistic. They look upon the land as ‘my land, I own that land’. It is a commodity. Aborigines look at something as a part of the whole, a part of themselves, and they are part of that – the land. The land and they are one”⁶.

Chapter 10: “*Paddy Roe*”

*Paddy took me out to the land of his birth to show me the importance of its features – hills, trees, springs. Although he doesn’t read or write he reads the landscape like a map, charting its special features. “That’s where I come from, my spirit place. My mother and father used to live in that country.” We walked towards the special spring that Paddy had told me about, special because it was here where he was born. “This is my country, I was born here and the springs belong to me now”.... You come to visit this spring, is that important to the spring Paddy? “Yes, they can smell you – they know my smell”.... If this spring disappears, Paddy – what happens? “It closes up, but if the real country man comes back [the springs] they can open up too”.... As long as people like you come around? “Like me yes. But I’m only one man left now for these springs and if I go I don’t know what’s going to happen.”*⁷

Paddy’s story is indicative of the deep belief of reciprocity between land and Aborigine. A language exists beyond words – a relationship of reverent exchange. To divide or exploit this relationship causes great suffering for land and individual.

Barry Lopez summarizes his understanding of the relationship between Aboriginal people and the land as follows: “The aspiration of Aboriginal people throughout the world has been to achieve a congruent relationship with the land...to achieve harmony or reverberation....in which a mutual regard was understood to prevail; but it also meant a conservation of the stories that bind people into the land”⁸.

This loss of stories and congruent relationship with land, and the resulting lack of harmony underpin the demise of many indigenous cultures throughout the world. Scars from wounds inflicted over two hundred years ago have left a deep ache in Australia. Healing can only occur when the depth of our indigenous culture and significance of ‘place’ is fully integrated into the Australian understanding.

Tasmanian artist Martin Walch, whilst retracing the path of his pioneering great grandfather into remote regions of Tasmania’s central plateau uncovered traditional Aboriginal tools and sites of past occupation. Martin’s deep reverence for the land affords him an affiliation with Aboriginal contemporaries. Working together they now research and document these lands to reveal new and greater understanding of a place, its people and the relationships between.

⁶ R. Bowden, & B. Bunbury, *Being Aboriginal: comments, observations and stories from Aboriginal Australians*, ABC Publishing, 2001. Pp44-56 NB: The publication does not provide the name of the first speaker.

⁷ Ibid. pp95-104

⁸ Lopez, p297.

In *Treading Lightly; the hidden wisdom of the world's oldest people* authors Sveiby and Skuthorpe refer to 'spiritual principles of the *interconnectedness* of all and everything'⁹ as one of the main ingredients of the Nhunggabarra society's philosophy of sustainability. The collaborative documentation of the Nhunggabarra practices is a tool towards sustaining tradition of 'conveying knowledge from one generation to another'¹⁰ and a story of further healing through cultural connections that share, inform, and heal.

In accordance with this principle of '*interconnectedness* of all and everything' the resurrection and healing of the Tasmanian Aboriginal culture is one fragment in the healing of a national wound. The courage of one community claiming ground in this complex cultural history encourages another - the healing will continue.

Julie, Lola, Dulcie, Vicki, Martin and other artists world wide provide inspiration and affirmation that mending of histories, healing of culture is possible through our art making. Their presence in a universal community working together towards a greater understanding of people, place and spirit provide small but integral sutures in a global recovery of cultures tattered, now healing.

Thank you.

⁹ K. E. Sveiby & T. Skuthorpe, *Treading Lightly: The hidden wisdom of the world's oldest people*, Allen & Unwin, 2006, Introduction, pxviii.

¹⁰ Ibid.