

"It's only been a couple of generations since my Ancestors made those hands on the caves. Those places are our libraries & the works within them are our literature."
Peta Wanjunagalin

Several years ago I met Robyn Thompson, an Australian artist who had worked as an art teacher in the Origine community. During the pandemic she contacted me after seeing that I was giving an online workshop on mark-making and introduced me to Peta Wanjunagalin. Peta, a Mariku Woman, is an artist and a great storyteller. She explained to me that the creation of marks in her culture is deeply connected with storytelling and literature, she told me stories, she talked about Dreamtime and totemism ... I was mesmerized.

After several online meetings, and with the desire to support each other, Peta and Robyn accepted an interview that I'd like to share, along with a link to their project on the Yubbi Yarning Circle Model (YYCM).

Monica (M): Could you, Peta and Robyn introduce yourself?

Robyn (R): In Australia it has become both the political & social norm that before any important events, gatherings & meetings a formal recognition of the local First Nation's Elders & their ancestral lands takes place. This ceremony is known as "Acknowledgement to Country". As this interview is being conducted across two continents, we respectfully give acknowledgment to Yorta Yorta Country, their Elders past, present & emerging and extend this respect not only to Elders of Arezzo but to their Ancients & and their ancestral lands upon which this interview has been conducted.

Peta (P): *Yaamagirri, Ngatiwa Peta Gabitja Gamilroiku Wanjunagalin.*

(Greetings, I am Peta, a Gabitja of the Dilbaay moiety & a woman of the Wanjuna clan of Gamilroi country)

My nationality is Mariku. Our people have many endonyms or names we call ourselves as there are over 500 linguistic groups.

The term Aborigine along with Aboriginal, Indigenous, Native, First Nation etc., are all exonyms or names that others call us. These names were/are systemically used by successive British, Australian governments, their citizens & other polities in the world to generically identify us. Consequently, such usage denies our nationality. Other settler/colonizer governments & citizens use these terms, for instance Canadians uses the term "Aboriginal" regarding the First Nation populations there. The name that is used for the nation "Australia" is also an exonym for our continent. I see the term "Australian" in the same context as someone from Ethiopia sees the term "African".

The exonyms have roots in Latin & are native to the Italian tongue for instance the noun "Aborigine" one of the Latin tribes of ancient Rome. We are not Latin. Due to the infamy & subsequent repeal of Australia's racist Aborigine Protection Acts, the term Aborigine has politically & socially fallen out of use in Australia. In the utmost respect for your language, I prefer to use the term Origine which translates simply to "original person/people", "origin", "one's extraction" etc. in the form of an adjective (origine) or an exonym (Origine) depending on context. It's also free of social & political baggage.

R: My name is Robyn Thompson. I am a Printmaker, Art Teacher and Community Cultural Development Practitioner, based in regional Victoria, Australia. I am an Irish – Australian

woman and my work with the local community in Victoria and particularly with Origine and migrant women, has influenced my own storytelling, printmaking practice, how I make marks and carry out participatory research in Visual Art and narrative. I know Peta, as I was her teacher in Visual Arts and Monica has been one of my teachers in Book Arts and Calligraphy.

M: Peta, in our conversations you have been writing Artist with a capital A. You also explained to me that 'art' was not a concept in your tribe. The idea of art is new to you, the creation of marks is an integral part of your culture, of your way of telling. Today it is still like this, together with the art for sale, which is an adaptation to a foreign concept. Can you say something about your being an Artist, what does it mean for you?

P: Art is both a foreign & modern construct for my people. We were introduced to the western concept of art & it's individualism through assimilation primarily by the influence of missionaries, educators & curators in different regions at different times. In general, telling a story is not a prerequisite for the creation of art. Artists are often conduits for the creation of art & such art may or may not bear a message.

However, our people readily adopted the culture of art because of its ability to convey our stories. Today we have a multitude of Artists practicing many different disciplines, there is also an "Aboriginal arts industry".

The distinguishing feature of our art is that its roots spawn from our storytelling and literature no matter what discipline the Artist practices, for instance, in the 1930's one of our esteemed Artist's, Albert Namatjira painted landscapes in watercolour. From the western perspective Mr. Namatjira painted art because he used a western medium & discipline to execute his work though from our perspective Mr. Namatjira painted his country & by default his Dreaming which tells a story to his people. Yes Mr. Namatjira was an Artist though he was an Author first & foremost.

Western curators originally perceived our "writing" as art & unfortunately still do. There is a stereotypical assumption that "authentic Aboriginal art must contain a story & dots". The fact is that our people write & express stories through the medium of art ...

Our Artists are usually confined to the label of "Aboriginal Artists" & unfortunately the Aboriginal art industry has a glass ceiling in Australia. Consequently, there are very few of our Artist's that are recognized internationally that don't practice Dot Art. This is not through lack of trying to achieve such attainment but through the systemic prejudice that exists in the arts industry. The Artist, Richard Bell's satirical pieces "Scientia E Metaphysica" (Bell's Theorem) & "Aboriginal Art it's a White Thing" reflect upon this.

I present the word Artist as a proper noun & I prefer to be viewed simply as an Artist.

M: Peta, you told me that marks and mark-making are stories, they are your literature. Can you tell us more about this wonderful connection, how you see it, how you live it as an Artist?

P: What people both label & mistake as "cave/rock art" may often be an ancient literary piece that chronicles history or even a sacred scripture that is executed with reverence by those who have earned the right to do so for those who also have earned the right to see them.

Our people possess a pictographic writing system which is conveyed by both symbol & glyph. Some writing is reserved for private & ceremonial purposes though writing is also executed for domestic purposes for proprietary & identification usage.

Customarily our people write through the mediums of painting with pigments or carving executed upon stone in nature (petroglyphs), trees (dendroglyphs), wood, leather, shell, the human body & on sand. Dot painting is born out of sand writing. When it comes to who can write stories the author is truly the “authority” of the knowledge.

I am an Author & Artist. I am perpetually empowered by the spirit of stories that I am a part of. As an Artist I express this either mindlessly or mindfully, with or without focus as an Artist I feel the innate marks flow through me, it is so natural for me to do them, I am like a channel for those marks. Sometimes it is a mystery what I will do, sometimes I have a structure of what I should do in my work, sometimes not.

M: Peta you said that rock paintings from around the world speak to us, that they have been protected by the Earth, and that they connect us to our ancestors. Can you say something more about this?

P: Story & literature speaks to us no matter where it is written. Our Ancestors were the Authors of such works that were written in the sacred places that can be seen as the Earth’s temples. These Ancestors were the principals of ancient schools that much of humanity is not enrolled in today. The oldest known stories of Creation to those Ancestors were written so that their progeny would not forget. Looking globally their descendants are still upon the Earth, some close to their Ancestors either knowingly or unknowingly & then there are the multitudes who are scattered to the winds that have forgotten them. No matter which category the descendant fits into they are all still walking the Earth in the steps of their Ancestors. The Earth that was there when those Ancestors walked, though transformed, is still there today under the feet of the descendant. When they re-spect (look again) to the Earth perhaps they may learn about their ancient & inherent legacies.

By default, these places were always protected, they were hidden, not easy to access & only for the few to do so. Ancestral societies all over the world respected & enforced the boundaries of such places. In my observation today I see that mining interests are often found within the vicinity of such places. Unfortunately, the mining industry “manages to stumble upon” our holy places in Australia & there are many stands taken to protect against desecration. When I see that places like the Chauvet Cave in Southern France is protected it tells me that once again the Earth knows best.

M: Peta, I read that the Mariku believe that the Dreamtime is the time before time - the time outside of time - the time of creation. Can you explain to us more about this concept?

P: The Dreamtime is all of the above. It is the past, present & future entwined, the spirit of time itself. Creation is the Mother of Life & her road is a thread throughout time that we are all connected to. The Dreamtime is without & within. It is ever present & it is the abode of both our Ancestors & progeny. Today we may be the progeny but one day we will be the Ancestor. As a future Ancestor what story will you give? The answer to this question may help one to touch base with their own Ancestors.

M: Peta, can you tell us the relation that the Mariku have with the Earth?

P: The Earth is a Creatrix & an Ancestress to us all. She provides all that we need to survive within her realm.

M: Peta can you talk about the connection that the Mariku have with the natural world via totems?

P: Our totemic connections are of an ancient & spiritual nature that also provide an identifying factor. From the latter perspective humans are not the only ones to have totemic identity as the environment also does, for instance Dharug Country (my birthplace) has a “crow” sky. The crow totem sits at the top of the totemic hierarchy in that place. We as humans inherit the totems from the environment.

Totems can come from the animal, plant & celestial realms, the elements or natural phenomena. The Tambaa, our totemic system & the foundation of our traditional social organization is one of the ancient pillars of our society.

M: Robyn, you and Peta are working on a project to record Origine stories relating to Australian Apartheid aka “Aboriginal Exemption” policies. Why are you doing this and how is mark making related to this project.

R: Mark-making is at the core of the visual arts narrative model we are using in this project called the “Yubbi Yarning Circle Model” (YYCM).

P: The YYCM is a type of Yarning Circle. A story is known as a “yarn”, the act of telling stories is “yarning” & yarns are told in a Yarning Circle. A Yarning Circle is an ancient customary meeting that can take place anywhere that is often used for the purpose of sharing & exchanging stories thus it is oral in nature. In short, the Yarning Circle is a place where stories breathe. The YYCM however is a marriage of oral storytelling, mark making & scribing that runs together simultaneously. The flow of energy feeding the YYCM is the input of telling the story whilst the flow of energy going into the mark making/scribing executed in real time is the output of the story & it’s manifestation visually. Once the stories are viewed, they are instantly validated by those that told & see the story.

The nature of the project is to document often traumatic inter-generational stories that had been suppressed for decades regarding the era of Aboriginal Exemption whilst using a culturally appropriate method in which to capture those stories. We developed & used the YYCM for this purpose. Yarning & the Yarning Circle is the ancient fabric of Mariku society thus the development of the YYCM is built upon a powerful foundation, we have found that the YYCM is a strong healing tool for the people.

R: For Origine artists of the present & future generations the YYCM offers both a culturally innovative & invigorating participatory based teaching model that enables the artist to assist their communities on the journey of healing inter-generational trauma through the facilitation of their stories about Aboriginal Exemption. My connection to this process, is two-fold: in my participatory research skills, working as a non-Origine person assisting the community in facilitating their stories and upon personal reflection, relating this to my family’s own inter-generational trauma from their experience of “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland, its impact upon me as a second-generation Australian and the valuable social research currently being done in Northern Ireland with children to support affected families.

M: Peta and Robyn, what do you think about the exploration of the idea that we all have a strong ancestral relation with mark making, that mark making is part of our being humans?

P: Your good work has arrived on time in the great scheme of things as we are in a time of revelation, people are now open to discovering their roots & Ancestors in different ways. With clarity you reveal the innate connection we all have with our ancient Ancestors through the act of mark making. The babies of the Ancients made the same marks & sounds as our babies of today. Both mark making and sound making are innate to the humans of yesterday, today & tomorrow. Mark made into writing & sound made into speech or song captures story. The story was/is all important to the Ancestors.

Most people only view their Ancestors as far as the mental image they can conjure through the written word, photograph, film, or art. Beyond that they are blind to the older Ancestors of their own lineages. They call their ancient Ancestors “Cavemen”. When I hear this, it tells me that they don’t have a clue who these people were & that they don’t have the slightest notion that those people are someone’s family. Such people have no active relationship or connection with their Ancestors. Such people are lost.

I think your work is a community service in that it provides an opportunity for your audience in a practical to feel their ancient roots, to realize that they can have a relationship with their long-lost Ancestors, that they can grow to understand them & to finally see those Ancestors not only as humans but as family.

R: The global pandemic had sought to isolate us from Country and kin, yet at the same time, encouraged some to ‘pick up the pencil’ and become creative in isolation. I do wonder what this says about us as humans? I am concerned about the way our modern life and contemporary ways, increasingly disconnects us from family, nature, animals, plants and Mother Earth. I realize this is in huge contrast to my ancestors in Ireland and Scotland, whose everyday living involved working with the elements of nature and building an understanding of it, only then to be subsequently removed from these lands. In seeing what remains of the graphic forms of the interlocking Celtic Knot on stone engravings, it reassures me that there was once a need for my ancestors to make these marks in the first place.

So, in exploring mark-making, using natural resources, as part of my day- to -day practice, I am making a statement about who I am and how I can create marks which have a connection with the Earth, for e.g. Cooking up Eucalypt dyes from local plants to make small dye and ink batches to use in my works on paper, provides me with immense satisfaction, because it is a ‘way of knowing” the source and an exploration of my materials (I started exploring and making ‘eco-dyes’ with my Visual Arts students, a group of Origine women, including Peta in 2018) Part of our being human, are activities like these which, I believe, brings me towards a greater level of respect for and into a deeper relationship with artists I work with, Origine people and the land of Australia.

Useful links

Yubbi Yarning Circle Model

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ajph.12905>

Origine definitions

<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/origine>

Mr. Albert Namatjira

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Namatjira

Mr. Richard Bell

<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html>

Scientia E Metaphysica” (Bell’s Theorem)

<https://www.visibleproject.org/blog/book/bells-theorem-aboriginal-art-its-a-white-thing/>

Yarning Circle

<https://www.newcastle.edu.au/campus-life/central-coast/ourimbah/spaces-and-places/yarning-circle>

Euroa Welcome Circle

<https://euroaarboretum.com.au/highlights/>

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