Collaboration and exchange with Indigenous communities by Tony Birch

In late 2000 I was asked if I would write a series of poems and story panels for an artist, Gordon Burnett, who was visiting Australia from Scotland for a residency at Monash University. In my first conversation with Gordon he told me that he was interested in addressing Australian colonial history in his work through ‘digitally crafted domestic objects’ that would use a ‘Fuse Deposition Modelling machine’ to create objects including icons of British colonial culture such as tea-pots and tea-cups.

Gordon assured me that the project would be able to also address the history and stories of the ‘Stolen Generations’ of Indigenous children in Australia. I was less confident in its expected outcome than he was. Our first meeting was not a good one. Gordon’s attempts to explain the intricacies of I.T. to my Luddite stubbornness were not successful. He was also very nervous, making the usual apologies on behalf of the entire history of the violence of the colonial state supplemented with his assurances that he did not want to impose his ‘western views’ on an Indigenous person.

I left the meeting with little interest in the project. I did not understand what it was about or what Gordon was trying to do. He rang me a week later and we decided to have coffee. We did not talk about the project at all. We talked instead about family. Gordon told me about his kids, where the family lived in northern Scotland and his love for making art. I talked about family as well and the writing that I did. I went to the meeting with the expectation that I would not see Gordon again so I gave him a couple of pieces of my published fiction as a gift to him, being a visitor to my country.

I told Gordon that I was not interested in the project but wished him ‘all the best’ (as you do). He contacted me within a day to tell me how much he enjoyed the stories. We met again. This time we talked about British football, ‘harsh northern winters’ and crime fiction. Toward the end of our conversation I asked him why he was interested in the Stolen Generations story. Gordon said that he wanted to use his art to find a way to
understand the silences that pervaded Australian government response to the history of removing Indigenous children from family and what he regarded as a cruel indifference toward Indigenous suffering. I decided then that I wanted to work with him.

I wrote two story panels for the exhibition, ‘Dispossessions’ and ‘Sorry’. Both outlined the history and political debate behind childhood removals in Australia. I also produced two companion poems, ‘Silence’ and ‘Speaking’, dealing with the absence of a constructive dialogue around the issue in Australia. I produced a third poem, ‘Away’. It was my attempt to create a space where we might think about both the tangible and emotional stains that were left behind in Indigenous homes when children had been taken from them by the State:

...finger prints marking time
on a kitchen table
a bicycle wheel turning
its windmill in the yard
playful hands swept through
locks of hair to untangle
away

My collaboration with Gordon Burnett was made possible through our ability to exchange ideas, emotions and thoughts together that were outside the parameters of the project that he had envisaged. Our opportunity to socially engage with each other was responsible for this. It was not simply that by talking about the history of Celtic/Rangers football rivalry that I discovered that Gordon was ‘a good bloke’. It was our initial mutual unease, slight suspicion and formality had inhibited our creative engagement.

As a writer who enjoys working collaboratively with other practitioners I never feel that I need to be in total agreement with those that I am working with. But I do need to respect both their craft and their creative ideas, which from my perspective also includes the political and social capital invested in the work. It was when I understood this about Gordon that I wanted to collaborate with him.

By giving Gordon two of my stories as a gift I was also (inadvertently) continuing a custom central to the way that the Indigenous owners of this area of Melbourne, the Woiworung people of the Wurundjeri language group, engaged with visitors to country. While being absolutely emphatic that this practice not be simply coopted as a neat (and potentially tokenistic) model for collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, I would like to offer a brief discussion of the relationship between Woiworung people and those they gave hospitality to as a way of thinking about such collaborations.

The Woiworung practice of Tandurrum is a ceremony that involves an exchange of gifts between host and visitor that offers the visitor temporary use of the land and resources of the host. It is an exchange where the visitor is also provided with sanctuary and protection. And when the visitor leaves the gift that they leave with the host indicates that visitor and host part on equal terms, with the expectation that both have gained from the experience of dialogue and socialisation. Historically, some visitors to Indigenous country in Australia have recognised this,
although most have not and have often abused the hospitality shown to them.

In 1835, when John Batman first arrived in what would become the Port Phillip district his first encounter was with a large group of Indigenous women. Batman, within the tradition of the ignorant imperial ‘explorer’ presented the women with examples of the ‘trinkets and beads’ that were of little material worth to Europeans themselves but potentially valuable items of exchange. In John Batman’s transaction he hoped that this exchange would provide him with control of 600,000 acres of Indigenous land at very little material cost.

But the women who Batman met refused to be part of what I regard as the first attempt at colonial welfare dependency in southern mainland Australia. After Batman’s presentation the women offered him items in return, recognising his status as visitor. These included spear throwers, a tarnook (a water bowl) and discarded European items that had been refashioned for local use and most likely traded amongst Indigenous groups. These were not items of material insignificance and despite Batman’s bemusement ensured that he left the women having gained materially through his encounter. Such was the generosity of the hosts.

I welcome the idea of collaborative work between craftspeople and Indigenous groups. The potential of such encounters excites both my creative instinct and my politics. To say this is in itself potentially patronising as I am sure that collaborations producing valuable outcomes for both host and visitor have already taken place and continue to evolve. It is not my place to instruct people as to how they should be going about this process when they are already doing it well enough themselves. I would though want to offer my support to them.

It is apparent that Indigenous culture offers much to non-Indigenous Australia. Some want to begin a dialogue with the potential for a productive exchange as one outcome but are not sure how to initiate a discussion as we all walk on the egg-shells of colonial memory (or suppression of it). One way to think about approaching this issue is to imagine a form of Tandurrum, where as a visitor you initiate a conversation with Indigenous people as an exchange of knowledge and creativity. Where you offer a gift that is not motivated by gaining something at the expense of the host. But where each party involved in the collaboration leaves both on equal terms and have gained something through the encounter.

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