Listening when others ‘talk back’

By Kay Lawrence

Kay Lawrence is a visual artist working in textiles and former Head of the South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia. Her work in community tapestry and as designer of the Parliament House Embroidery, installed in the Great Hall of Parliament House in 1988, activated her interest in how communities express their relationship to place through story and art making. A continuing thread in her practice as an artist and writer on contemporary Australian textiles practice has been the ‘unsettling’ legacy of white settlement on Indigenous Australians and their land.

Abstract: This paper addresses the ethics of inter-cultural collaborative art practice from an Australian perspective, through examining aspects of the project, *Weaving the Murray*. Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose in her recent book, *Reports from a Wild Country; ethics for decolonisation* (2005) notes the legacy of white settler society in Australia, claiming that ‘We cannot help knowing that we are here through dispossession and death’ (Rose 2005, p.6). This is a shocking proposition and an uncomfortable position for white Australians. Yet to ignore this reality is to concede to the continuation of a present violence against Indigenous Australians. This is perhaps not now enacted through dispossession and death, but through another type of violence that sets the past aside and ignores the ‘vulnerability of others.’ (Roth 1999, p.5)

Rose suggests an ethical position that ‘would replace (this) violence with responsive attentiveness’, an attentiveness to place and people, located in the here and now, that takes account of the past, and is based on listening to Indigenous Australians talking back ‘in their own terms’ (Rose 2005, p.5). When listening however, it is also necessary to pay attention to ‘silence’ to consider why words fail and how not-speaking can be used as a strategy of resistance. This paper reflects upon the ideas that underpin Rose’s ethical position as they were played out with varying degrees of success, in the inter-cultural collaborative project, *Weaving the Murray*.

The project *Weaving the Murray* brought together three Indigenous artists (Rhonda Agius, Nici Cumpston and Chrissie Houston) and four non-Indigenous Australian artists (Kirsty Darlaston, Sandy Elverd, Kay Lawrence and Karen Russell) in 2001, to design and make a collaborative art work to celebrate the Centenary of the Federation of Australia in 1901. As part of the celebrations the three south eastern states of Australia, New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia conceived a project that would symbolise the ideals of Federation. The project would focus on the role of the Murray River connecting the three states and their communities along its 2570 kilometre length. It was conceived as ‘a celebration of democracy’ through; ‘The artists (working) with communities

along the river to weave a cultural map of the river from source to sea which will be given to the people of Australia as a lasting reminder of the Centenary of Federation' (Centenary of Federation 2001).

Fig. 1. 2001. The artists (left to right) - Sandy Elverd, Kirsty Darlaston, Rhonda Agius, Chrissie Houston, Karen Russell, Nici Cumpston, Kay Lawrence.

Photograph Nici Cumpston.

The *Weaving the Murray* installation and exhibition, shown at the Art Gallery of South Australia and exhibited during the 2002 Adelaide Festival, was a great public success. However, the success of a collaborative project can also be measured by how the difficulties and tensions that inevitably arise during the designing and making processes are negotiated and resolved.

In discussing these issues this paper draws on material from a previous paper (Lawrence 2005) and interviews that I conducted with the artists three years after the project was completed, where they talk candidly about the success and failure of the collaborative process. With the permission of the artists, excerpts from the interviews are included in this discussion. The paper concludes by reflecting on the importance of understanding each other's terms of reference and listening respectfully, as well as talking, in order to develop an ethical practice of inter-cultural collaboration.

What does it mean to listen to people in their own terms, to understand their terms of reference? For this to happen, three conditions need to be met;

1. Understanding the reality of another's experience. This includes both empathetic listening and knowledge of what has happened in the past.
2. Understanding their social and cultural protocols.
3. An awareness of how your own terms of reference (that are often quite unconscious) may shape how information is received and understood.

Yet for many white Australians living in cities in southern Australia, contact with Indigenous Australians, where these processes can take place, is not part of daily life.

In South Eastern Australia, the focus of this project, Indigenous Australians make up less than 4 % of the population (Arthur and Morphy 2005, p.70). It has been the norm for white Australians to know little about the rich complexity of Indigenous society and culture, other than sensational reports in the media that highlight shocking conditions and dysfunctional communities. Such reports run the risk of reinforcing negative stereotypes without addressing the painful history of dispossession and death that lie behind the present problems experienced by Indigenous Australian communities.

Rose's suggestion of 'responsive attentiveness' indicates the importance of open engagement with history, with the present and with people. Yet one of the impediments to this process is the unconscious power and privilege conferred by being white. Indigenous feminist scholar, Aileen Moreton-Robinson has argued that the first step in this process of engagement must be the interrogation by white people themselves of these 'taken for granted' certainties of privilege and power (Moreton Robinson 2000). Only then can we understand our own unconscious terms of reference and be better able to understand the views of others.

Fig. 2. Map showing the Murray River in south eastern Australia

In some ways the collaborative focus of *Weaving the Murray* provided a perfect opportunity for engaging with Indigenous Australians. Not only were three of the artists Indigenous, but in order to understand the meaning of the River for the Indigenous and settler communities living on its banks, we undertook a process of community consultation. We conducted library research into the past history of the Murray River and its symbolic role in the process of Federation, as well as making two trips along the length of the river, visiting local museums and meeting with community groups, and collecting stories and artefacts that told the official and unofficial histories of the river. We interviewed people from Indigenous and settler communities ranging from the Country Women's Association (CWA) to Indigenous elders. We listened to the stories that people told about their lives, their feelings about the river, and how it has changed over time. Listening to people was central to the project. Their stories were incorporated into both the sound-scape and the final installation. However we needed to be alert to gaps and absences in the stories we were told.

At our first meeting with the local CWA in Corryong, at the very source of the River, Rhonda and Chrissie, two of the Indigenous artists decided not to come, as Nici noted in her interview.

'A couple of the Indigenous people weren't keen on contacting CWA groups due to past bad experiences. This was alleviated by them choosing not to attend our meeting with the CWA in Corryong. I thought that it was interesting in this meeting when someone asked about the local Indigenous people and we were told that, 'there weren't any local Indigenous people living here, they just came and went'. (Cumpston 2004)

Fig. 3. 2001. The artists and CWA members, Corryong NSW.

Photograph Nici Cumpston.

None of the Indigenous artists are shown in this photograph taken by Nici of the artists with members of the Corryong CWA. But their absence in the photo symbolises a more significant absence of Indigenous people in the stories we heard in Corryong.

In their stories of the river, people talked about the first settlers, the first white baby born in the district, clearing the tea tree and planting willows, as well as the farming practices, the floods, the wayward nature of the river. Corryong resident Len Hogg told us 'The River in those days really wandered about. It cut into the bank and black dirt, six or eight feet just goes.' (Hogg 2001) The local Indigenous people were described in the same terms as the river as wandering, as not settled 'there weren't any local Indigenous people living here, they just came and went.' This implied that Indigenous people did not belong to the area, and reflects a misunderstanding about the nature of Indigenous Australian people's connection to country. This connection is forged, not through settling in one place, but through moving across the land and conducting ceremonies to care for the country. Diane Witney, Administrator of the

Winal-Gidyal Aboriginal Education Centre in Albury told us that in fact Corryong was on an Indigenous trade route from Tumut to the mountains. So for the local Indigenous people, close relationship to country was always characterised by coming and going.

During the process of community consultation we noted that this absence of Indigenous people in the local histories often went unnoticed and un-remarked, their absence a sort of 'natural' phenomena like the river that did not need investigating, and the role of the settlers in their displacement, erased from memory and not interrogated. This was particularly disheartening for the Indigenous artists as Nici mentioned in her interview.

'Instead of going to local museums it was preferred to try and find the local Indigenous people and to visit them and talk about things. As we didn't have a lot of time this could prove to be problematic. We also found ourselves just spending time by the river, talking and sharing our own stories of family. It was difficult also because of a lack of information about Indigenous people in most museums. It was hard to get enthusiastic when none of the information was about our own Indigenous culture'. (Cumpston 2004)

It became important for us to breach this silence, to seek out the stories and the artefacts of local Indigenous people and make reference to Indigenous culture and knowledge of the River in the installation, *Weaving the Murray*. This knowledge could then be inserted into the public domain through the exhibition and publication.

Fig. 4. 2001. Rhonda Agius and Doug Nicholls in the Nyah Vinifera Forest, Victoria.

Photograph Nici Cumpston.

I will just mention one example of Indigenous knowledge communicated to us by Doug Nicholls from Swan Hill who showed us ancient forests of river red gums, the Barmah Forest and the Nyah Vinifera forest, under threat through logging, cattle- grazing and the regulation of the flow of water in the Murray. As Nici noted;

‘Doug explained that the Indigenous people would have travelled along these backwaters in dug out canoes. The ring trees were very obvious from their position on the water, but to us on foot they were not so obvious. Opposite each ring tree was a Barri ground, a midden representing years of occupation on the land. There were old bones, charcoal, shells, and many very long beautiful rushes growing from the fertile remains of the Barri ground. The ring trees were used as a sign, they were a pointer to an area of abundance. People knew they could find shelter, food and protection there.’ (Cumpston and Lawrence 2006).

Doug told us about the ring trees along the banks of the backwaters of the Murray, where branches of a river red gum have been formed into ring shapes as a sign of proximity to a Barri ground, a fertile area able to sustain large groups of people meeting to conduct trade and ceremony.

Fig. 5. 2001. Nici Cumpston Ring Trees. (silver gelatine prints, hand colouring).
Dimensions variable.

For Doug, the ring tree symbolises the importance of Indigenous knowledge in maintaining the health of the River, knowledge that until recent times has been largely ignored. It is perhaps apt considering the current state of the River, that a dead rather than a living ring tree, is included in the Swan Hill Museum.

Fig. 6. April 2001. Doug Nicholls with ring tree, Swan Hill Museum.
Photograph Nici Cumpston.

The community consultation process undertaken as part of the research for the project enabled us to meet Indigenous people along the River and listen to their stories and in so doing, fulfil the first part of Rose's suggestion for an ethical approach to collaboration. As we noted in the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, our intention was to; 'Re-present to the river communities, their stories, their daily experiences, their hope and concerns for the health of the river. Textile processes provide the means to speak the unspoken, to tell previously disregarded stories. The artwork acknowledges difference while symbolising the connections between communities' (Russell 2002).

While there is not space in this paper to present further details of the consultation process, it did enable us to be attentive to people and place, to take into account stories of the present and the past, and connect Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories in the final installation.

So we could give something back to the communities who had been so generous in sharing their stories with us, on our second trip we conducted informal weaving workshops to share our skills with people from the towns. We also ensured that the catalogue of the final exhibition was sent back to the communities and the final artwork itself was toured to key river towns after the launch in Adelaide.

Fig. 7. January 2002. Sandy Elverd, Kirsty Darlaston, Rhonda Agius, Chrissie Houston, Karen Russell Nici Cumpston, Kay Lawrence, Weaving the Murray Art Gallery of South Australia.

Photograph Michal Klivanek. Collection South Australian Museum.

I would like to briefly describe the work itself, as it was seen by viewers in the first showing of the installation in the Art Gallery of South Australia in January 2002. The central focus of the installation is the Ngarrindjeri story of the creation of the Murray River, told here by Rhonda.

'Long ago in the dreaming an earthquake shook the land forming a long trench. Then came a second tremor, upheaving rocks and soil. From the centre of the earth emerged Pondi the mighty Murray Cod. He was far too large for the trench, so thrashing and weaving his way across the land, he formed the Murray River and all of its tributaries. As he moved along it filled with waters, all the way from where he emerged at the foot of the snowy mountains in the east, to as far as Lake Alexandrina to the west.'
(Russell 2002, p.10).

The river is formed by Pondi the giant Murray cod whose journey across the land formed the river channel and whose death created all the fish in the River.

Fig. 8. 2001. Sandy Elverd, Kirsty Darlaston, Rhonda Agius, Chrissie Houston, Karen Russell Nici Cumpston, Kay Lawrence Pondi. (Coiled rush). 50 x 125 x 30 cm.

Photograph Michal Kluvanek. Collection South Australian Museum.

Fig. 9. 2002. Sandy Elverd, Kirsty Darlaston, Rhonda Agius, Chrissie Houston, Karen Russell Nici Cumpston, Kay Lawrence, *Flooded Gums*: (Eucalyptus wood, salt, stainless steel wire, clips, height variable). 300 x 200 cm.

Photograph Michal Kluvanek. Collection of South Australian Museum.

The grid of hanging, salt-ringed sticks and branches surrounded by a sound-scape of voices from Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities describing how the river has changed, tells a different story, one of environmental degradation rather than creation.

Fig. 10. 2002. Sandy Elverd, Kirsty Darlaston, Rhonda Agius, Chrissie Houston, Karen Russell Nici Cumpston, Kay Lawrence, *The Long Community*: (Plant fibre string stitched and coiled). 50 x 100 cm.

Photograph Michal Kluvanek. Collection of South Australian Museum.

'We belong to a long community of the river. It's the same body of water if it flows past Corryong, down the Condamine.' (Tuckwell 2001)

Photograph Michal Kluvanek. Collection of South Australian Museum.

Photograph Michal Kluvanek. Collection of South Australian Museum.

On the wall facing *The Long Community*, another grid, *The Mapped Landscape* brings into order a disparate collection of vernacular textile objects that reference the domestic and rural labour that supported the trade, fishing and farming practices that formed the economy of the River. While referencing the mapping and naming practices of the settlers as they sought to control their environment, the grid also alludes to the anxiety underpinning the process of colonisation, as noted by Sydney Moko Mead 'Without the fixed grid of named features we would be total strangers on the land – lost souls with nowhere to attach ourselves.' (Mead 1984)

One of the aims of the Federation was to unify the states and resolve disputes over resources of national importance like the Murray River. Yet the following texts reveal that little has changed during the first 100 years of Federation.

'The river in fact belongs to three colonies.....Broad principles and not narrow jealousies or pettifogging quibbles, should rule in this matter–the Murray ought to be the great agent of Federation.' *The Melbourne Age*, (31 May, 1889) 'One of the great hopes for the future, rather than thinking like South Australians, Victorians we're starting to think like Australians.... that the great river will be placed under the control of a national body' (Tuckwell 2001)

Fig. 13. 2001. Detail from the Mapped Landscape, string bag and salt bag. (Netted plant fibre and cotton string, salt).

Photograph Michal Kluvanek.

The consequences of this failure to unite the three states in the management of the Murray is signalled by two string bags that mark how the introduction of crops like cotton and irrigation practices, have damaged the health of the river. A traditional Indigenous netted bag made from plant fibre string is hung alongside its counterpart, netted with salt-encrusted, cotton rags and hung with a tag that links clearing the country to the rise of salt levels: 'Settler Australians dreamed of greening the inland, but the salt rose, the white death, turning the dream into a nightmare.' (Wahlquist 2000) These tags, rather than identifying each object with date and provenance, provide images and texts that suggest alternative readings, unsettling the fixity of the grid.

Fig. 14. 2001. Detail from the Mapped landscape, coiled mat. (Plant fibre and cotton tea towels)

Photograph Michal Klivanek.

Within the grid, European and Indigenous cultural practices are sometimes combined to form hybrid objects that refer to stories of connection between communities as well as stories of displacement. A mat coiled with plant fibre and a tea towel suggests the possibility of entwining Indigenous and settler knowledge to tell a new, more positive story of recognition and cooperation between black and white in managing the River.

'A story is like a river. And like a river it trickles from the source until it flows, flows, flows. Down mountains of the mountains. Branching onto the land the land the land. Flowing. Spiralling. Flowing towards the sea.'
(Figiel 1999, p11)

Like the river described in the tag attached to the coiled mat, this new story (should it eventuate) has the potential to grow and spread its meaning far from its source.

Fig. 15. Jan, 2002. Launch of *Weaving the Murray* at the Art gallery of South Australia.

Photograph Trevor Cumpston.

While *Weaving the Murray* critiques the dream of Federation, a unified nation symbolised by the Murray River, it also suggests through its imagery and through the way it was designed and made as a collaborative process, the possibility of connection and reparation. It suggests that Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities *can* work together to acknowledge and repair some of the mistakes of the past.

The collaborative process

The collaborative process, through which we undertook the project, working closely together for over a year, offered an ideal opportunity for us to exchange views, to talk and to listen to each other. This was largely a successful process but as is often the case in large projects needing to be completed in an unrealistically tight time frame, we came unstuck at times. The interviews that I conducted with the artists revealed that the most intractable of our problems arose from unspoken assumptions and un- interrogated differences in our motivations and terms of reference, resulting in things that were either not said or were not easily heard. It is this that I would like to discuss now.

Motivation

We came into the project with different motivations, different backgrounds and different world views. Not all of these differences were acknowledged or even conscious at the time, but they profoundly affected the collaborative process and persisted in people's interpretation of events as is evident in the interview material presented in this paper.

The main focus of the project, as noted in official publications was to create an artwork that would remain as a legacy of the Centenary of Federation celebrations; *Weaving the Murray* was commissioned by the Centenary of Federation, South Australia to be a lasting legacy of the 2001 Centenary of Federation celebrations in Australia. (Centenary of Federation 2001) However while there was an assumption that we were all working towards the same goal, an examination of the motivations of the Indigenous artists, revealed in their artist's statements and interviews, shows that, rather than being interested in creating a legacy for the Centenary of Federation, it was the process of creating the work, of keeping the 'story alive' that interested them.

Nici 'There is a spiritual connection between the river and the communities who live alongside it (I) feel compelled to share this knowledge in order to raise awareness of culturally significant sites.' (Russell 2002, p21)

Rhonda 'The various stories of Pondi join the Indigenous people across the country. It is important to keep the story alive. The once mighty Murray will never be the same, but (I) hope it won't be just another muddy creek in another hundred years.' (Russell 2002, p.20)

Chrissie 'I had a head think about it and the Indigenous aspect of Federation was a bit of an affront, but I thought if we don't say what we think, people will never know.... its better to do something than to sit around moaning.'(Houston 2004)

Making physical connection with country and other Indigenous communities along the length of the river through the community consultation process was not just a form of research but integral to the maintenance of their culture and the health of the river. For them, the Federation of Australia in 1901 signified loss of culture rather than connection, and the opportunity to re-create these connections was finally more important than the production of a lasting legacy for the nation.

Fig. 16. 2001, Chrissie in the Nyah Vinifera forest.

Photograph Nici Cumpston.

Terms of Reference

Like our motivations, the terms of reference of each of the members of the group, our socially and culturally constructed ways of thinking and working, as well as our expectations were largely un-stated. In fact they were mostly unconscious when we began the project. It was only later, during the interview process when the participants reflected on their experience that these differences began to be articulated. Differences in education and ethnicity were particularly important in shaping how we approached the project and each other. They shaped our attitudes to leadership and ownership and were cited by most participants in the interviews as contributing to the tensions we experienced. I will discuss each in turn.

Ethnicity

In each of our entries for the catalogue, written as the project was being completed, the Indigenous artists highlighted their ethnicity and language group affiliations, indicating the importance of 'race' to their identity.

'Rhonda Agius born at Raukkan, Point McLeay, an elder of the Ngarrindjeri community, is the founding member of the South Australian Aboriginal Language Centre, Vice Chair of the Ngarrindjeri Native Title Committee, the State delegate for the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

people and a member of 'Mildrin', an Indigenous consultative team that negotiates River Murray management with government.' (Russell 2002, p.20)

'Nici Cumpston, born in Australia of Aboriginal, Afghan, Irish and English descent.' (Russell 2002, p.21)

Chrissie Houston, 'Pitjantatjara (Western Desert Region) is her cultural language group.' (Russell 2002, p.22)

But 'race' or ethnicity was not mentioned in the biographies of the Australian artists. Their 'whiteness' was taken for granted and ethnicity unexamined. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Moreton-Robinson has defined 'whiteness' as a culturally based system of preference and privilege that is largely unconscious and taken for granted as 'normal' by white people. She notes that unsettling the 'taken for granted' certainties of whiteness is most likely to occur in close social and working relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people where differences cannot be sidestepped but must be addressed. (Moreton Robinson 1999, p.28) This certainly happened in our collaboration. Differences in our terms of reference sometimes collided, sparking flare-ups and resulting in tensions, unexplainable at the time but on reflection, understandable.

'(White) people don't know some things and if they were more aware they might behave differently, they were coming from a white perspective. Rhonda and I talked about it a lot. All the decision making was coming from a white point of view. I had a conversation with Rhonda. We felt we were only here for (token) Indigenous reasons.' (Houston 2004)

As Chrissie suggests here, 'white' views often dominated the decision making process, in an unspoken assumption of power by the white artists that made her and Rhonda feel marginalised. The silence around this issue, the lack of awareness amongst the white artists that the dominance of their white perspective was an issue, and the unwillingness of the Indigenous artists to speak about their concerns, undermined the open and frank communication so important in collaboration.

Education

As 'white perspectives' shaped the way decisions were made, differences in education shaped our approaches to art practice. Kirsty, Karen and Nici and Kay were professionally educated in the visual arts at university art schools. Rhonda, an Ngarrindjeri language specialist learnt weaving at the age of eight from her grandmother, as part of her cultural heritage rather than as an 'art' practice. Chrissie specialised in ceramics, learning her craft in an Indigenous context at the Taoundi Aboriginal Community College, and Sandy completed a Bachelor of Arts and a Graduate Diploma in Community Cultural Development.

While, between us we had a rich range of professional experience in varied disciplines, the nature of the project ensured that we drew heavily on our experience in community art practice and textile skills. But underpinning our approach as well were the unspoken codes of the art school, with an emphasis on producing conceptually developed, sophisticated, and innovative works of art.

An academic approach to art practice

These codes surfaced in the interviews when a number of the artists noted that an 'academic' approach to the creation of the work was undertaken without interrogation. As Kirsty noted, this attitude excluded other areas of experience and skill;

'We all came from different levels in our practice. In the project art experience and weaving skills were important. We didn't recognise the richness of Rhonda's experience...you and I and Karen came from a University background, came from an academic approach. This in itself excluded others (who) didn't read the work on the same number of levels. The university itself is an institution with unspoken codes of behaviour, ways of doing things.' (Darlaston 2004)

One of the unspoken codes of an 'Art School' approach to art-making is the emphasis on the conceptual underpinning of the work, considering the 'meanings' to be conveyed, an intellectual rather than intuitive approach. The emphasis on the conceptual basis of the work did not carry the same weight for all of the artists.

'Don't be offended but I have this idea of academics and laypersons. Academics come to things in a cold-hearted, factual way.....Now when I'm doing art myself, its more of a feeling thing, the love of doing a thing, compared to the education side of doing things. I feel a thing more than I theorise it.'(Houston 2004)

As Chrissie noted, 'making from the heart' was not openly discussed. Had it been, we may have been able to recognise our own emotional investment in the work, and been able to acknowledge our own use of and the value of intuitive ways of working. Another of the codes of the art school is the emphasis on the product, the art-work itself. While the process of developing the work is regarded as important, ultimately the significance of an art-work is judged by the quality and eloquence of the work itself. This is different to the significance of cultural objects for Indigenous Australians, where it is the association of an object with a place and its associated spiritual forces invoked through ceremony that is important. As Chrissie indicated, it is the collecting and making processes accompanied by song and story and their value in binding the community that is deemed important rather the object alone. 'Meeting the old people on the trips and the stories they told, sitting and listening to all the information (was the most important aspect).' (Houston 2004)

Community cultural practice

There are analogous practices in community art that also focus on the importance of process in creating a sense of community; working together to share ideas and skills; giving space to people to tell their stories; respecting and acknowledging people's contribution to the project. As Sandy made clear, these practices were well understood and used in the project.

'We worked as a team at Underdale...we helped Rhonda to be involved by picking her up and taking her home after meetings. It was very inclusive. We were open to each others thoughts and ideas. On the whole it was an open environment and as a group we were considerate of our different backgrounds, experiences and skill bases.'(Elverd 2004)

Yet while at the time we may have thought we were being open and inclusive, the later interviews reveal unspoken tensions. Perhaps our attempts to be helpful could have been seen as patronising? The Indigenous artists did not always reveal their views, let alone feel like equal partners in the project. Nici mentioned that 'feelings weren't always out in the open,' (Cumpston 2004) while Chrissie noted that 'All the decision making was coming from a white point of view.' (Houston 2004) The silence

around these issues meant that they weren't addressed and persisted. Later, Kirsty reflected on the difficulty created by these unspoken differences; 'We think we're coming from (their) point of view, we think were being open. You can try and have an open dialogue, but there's personality conflict, not everyone is open and willing to say what they think in a situation.'(Darlaston 2004)

When we *were* able to discuss our differences, the problems were usually resolved and we were able to work as a team. In fact, during the interviews, as the participants noted and Chrissie stated, our capacity to work through problems was one of the strengths of the project.

'Working as a group was successful even if we didn't always agree. On the second trip Kirsty and I had a no-speak time in Albury. I thought she was taking over, but we got through it, we worked it out. Working out problems, realising we were a team and not individuals. We had to work as a team to do the job.' (Houston 2004)

However as well as having a community focus, *Weaving the Murray* was also a public commission with the expectation that we would produce a museum quality artwork. There were times when the necessity to produce a well-made product in a short time frame, undermined the effectiveness of the collaborative process. Negotiating these tensions without fully understanding the differences in our motivations and terms of reference proved difficult.

Cultural protocols: leadership and seniority

In any collaboration participants take on different responsibilities. Rather than discussing how we would negotiate our roles at the beginning of the collaborative process, responsibilities were often just assumed without discussion, thereby thwarting expectations about the roles and responsibilities of members of the group. All the artists noted this problem in the interviews, succinctly summarised here by Kirsty. 'Rhonda was used to being deferred to as a senior indigenous woman whereas I, as the youngest, thought that it was a six way dialogue, that we all had an equal say.'(Darlaston 2004)

Leadership roles were just assumed rather than negotiated. According to Indigenous cultural protocols, Rhonda's seniority as an Indigenous woman was recognised but only in relation to the parts of the project that drew on Ngarrindjeri stories and skills leaving her in an anomalous position. While Kirsty had expectations that we would all work as equals, she noted in the following exchange that equality in decision making was difficult to achieve when there was an established teacher/student relationship between some of the artists.

Kirsty

'Leadership (was another issue). Who runs the project, who is the dominant personality, how do others react to this'?

Kay

'I know that I was bossy and took over'.

Kirsty

'You took on the leadership but it could have been more democratically done... For Karen and I, we came out of a mentoring relationship with you, yet in the project we were supposed to have equal status.'(Darlaston 2004)

Lack of clarity or discussion of our expectations about the roles we would take on in such a large and diverse group, contributed to small on-going tensions that were mostly resolved day to day but sometimes festered, undermining trust between the artists.

Cultural protocols: Ownership

However it was in relation to questions about 'ownership' that we came unstuck. Working collaboratively always raises questions about acknowledging and valuing the contribution of all the participants. In our case our collaboration was made more complex as we tried to reconcile Indigenous protocols about cultural responsibility with group 'ownership' of the work.

'In a collaborative project, how do you decide who owns what part? I never thought of the grid as being the white part of the project. (Making) all

the objects gave us a way of coming together. I didn't feel that I owned any part of the project, that any part belonged to me... The grid was meant to be about different crafts (from) culturally diverse backgrounds, how white 'grid' mapping took over... this became to be seen as the 'white' section of the project and Pondi as the Indigenous (section)... Rhonda felt that the Indigenous parts belonged to her... I always think of Rhonda saying 'just let us have Pondi.' She was quite passionate.' (Darlaston 2004)

While the overall design was developed by the group as a whole, in accordance with Indigenous protocols of 'ownership,' Rhonda as a senior Ngarrindjeri elder took responsibility for designing and supervising the making of those parts of the design that referred to Indigenous stories and artefacts and used Indigenous textile processes. However, as Kirsty noted in her interview, this led in a subtle way to some parts of the work being perceived as Indigenous, and others as white, although this was never openly discussed.

While Rhonda took responsibility for the design and making of Pondi, as the work developed it became evident that Rhonda had less experience than some of the other artists in coiling a form of that size. In order to support her and get the work done, everyone contributed through coiling the body and the fins and making spots, with half the group meeting three times a week to complete Pondi at Nici's house as she notes below.

'We decided to come together to work on Pondi as there were problems with us all working independently and time wasn't on our side. We worked together at my place to weave parts of Pondi and to listen and edit the recordings. We shared many hot dinners and had long conversations about our journeys along the river.' (Cumpston and Lawrence 2006).

Sandy mentioned that working at home rather than in the institutional context of the art school enabled the Indigenous artists to feel comfortable and get the work done.

'While we worked on different elements people supported each other. Nothing could have just been done individually, but in a group we were able to make it successful and find solutions to problems. I felt I was living at Nici's for a couple of months making Pondi and working on the sound'! (Elverd 2004)

Rhonda finally completed Pondi at home. However when she brought in the completed form of Pondi, just before the installation of the work none of the artists felt able to mention their reservations about the final form. Later when we were installing the work in the gallery (with Rhonda unable to attend), everyone agreed that the final form was not quite right especially the way the head of the fish related to the body. As the key focus of the installation we wanted Pondi to be 'right', but our silence about our reservations about the final form when Rhonda presented Pondi to us, revealed our anxiety about critiquing her work and offending her, both as the custodian of the story and as a maker.

On reflection we did not handle this issue well, giving precedence to an idea of 'quality' rather than Rhonda's cultural authority and responsibilities. I rang Rhonda from the Art Gallery during the installation process and asked if she minded if we inserted a bit of weaving between the head of Pondi and the body. She was clearly surprised but agreed. However later, having had a chance to think about it, she rang back and said she was not happy with others doing it and we should return Pondi to

her, so she could do it herself. By then it was too late, we had cut the head from the body and were busily coiling the insert. Our regret at the way we handled this issue was evident in the interviews.

'Working in such an intense (environment) sometimes you have to let go and say there's no resolution... In relation to reweaving the section of Pondi, I think it was very negative thing and I think we couldn't have done anything else!' (Darlaston 2004)

'At the time we didn't know how to raise the problem without Rhonda thinking we were criticising her work, when she had greater ownership of Pondi because of her indigenous heritage and links to the river...The story of Pondi is part of her people.' (Elverd 2004)

The rushed decision to 'improve' the form of Pondi, and ensure the work was completed in time for the exhibition, forestalled a frank discussion with Rhonda about our reservations, and what could be done to make sure everyone felt happy with the result. As a result she did not attend the opening of the exhibition.

Conclusion

As Sandy reflects below, discussion at the beginning of the project about how we would manage and resolve issues could have helped us to avoid this quandary.

'In future, at the beginning the team should talk about how to take criticism so it's not taken personally... We never looked at conflict resolution as a group at the beginning. It would have been useful to do this as a group, to discuss resolving conflict or issues in a safe environment. Not to take criticism personally, respecting others ideas and opinions. This would have helped when we got to the issue of Pondi, and would have made it easier to bring up difficult issues.' (Elverd 2004)

Kirsty also pointed out in her interview, that at the beginning of the project, we missed the opportunity to talk about what we each wanted from the project, to discuss and negotiate our individual contributions.

'At the beginning we should have said what we wanted out of the project. There was a general discussion about this at the time (but we could have asked) what roles are needed, some leadership, some administration, some liaison, (these roles) needed to be clearly set out.' (Darlaston 2004)

Taking the time to talk to each other, listening attentively to pick up the undercurrents beneath what was being said (or not), would have enabled us to reflect upon and better understand the different practices and terms of reference that we each brought to the project. Interrogating the silences that marked lack of awareness, unspoken differences or resistance would have enabled us to bring problems to the surface for discussion and resolution. What I learnt from conducting the interviews was the importance of raising issues and the necessity for open and frank dialogue in collaborative practice. This of course cannot happen without trust and trust is hard to develop when you don't know where someone is coming from.

Rhonda declined to be interviewed about the process of making *Weaving the Murray*. Her silence is perhaps more eloquent than any statement.

The afternoon that I spent interviewing Chrissie, getting to know her in a way that had not happened during the project, talking about family, her life as well as the project, listening in a way that enabled her to be frank about our mistakes, made me profoundly aware of the importance of listening attentively when others 'talk back' and paying attention to silence. This is particularly important for non-Indigenous Australians whose taken-for-granted certainties resulting from positions of privilege and power can deafen their ability to hear and understand another's point of view. As Deborah Bird Rose suggests, and I have tried to show through reflecting upon some of the issues that arose in *Weaving the Murray*, an attitude of 'responsive attentiveness' is key to the development of an ethical practice of inter-cultural collaboration.

Illustrations

Figure 1: 2001. The artists (left to right) - Sandy Elverd, Kirsty Darlaston, Rhonda Agius, Chrissie Houston, Karen Russell, Nici Cumpston, Kay Lawrence. Photograph Nici Cumpston

Figure 2: Map showing the Murray River in south eastern Australia

Figure 3: 2001. The artists and CWA members, Corryong NSW. Photograph Nici Cumpston.

Figure 4: 2001. Rhonda Agius and Doug Nicholls in the Nyah Vinifera Forest, Victoria. Photograph Nici Cumpston.

Figure 5: 2001. Nici Cumpston Ring Trees. (silver gelatine prints, hand colouring). Dimensions variable.

Figure 6: April 2001. Doug Nicholls with ring tree, Swan Hill Museum. Photograph Nici Cumpston.

Figure 7: January 2002. Sandy Elverd, Kirsty Darlaston, Rhonda Agius, Chrissie Houston, Karen Russell Nici Cumpston, Kay Lawrence, Weaving the Murray Art Gallery of South Australia. Photograph Michal Kluvanek. Collection South Australian Museum.

Figure 8: 2001. Sandy Elverd, Kirsty Darlaston, Rhonda Agius, Chrissie Houston, Karen Russell Nici Cumpston, Kay Lawrence Pondi. (Coiled rush). 50 x 125 x 30 cm. Photograph Michal Kluvanek. Collection South Australian Museum.

Figure 9: 2002. Sandy Elverd, Kirsty Darlaston, Rhonda Agius, Chrissie Houston, Karen Russell Nici Cumpston, Kay Lawrence, Flooded Gums: (Eucalyptus wood, salt, stainless steel wire, clips, height variable). 300 x 200 cm. Photograph Michal Kluvanek. Collection of South Australian Museum

Figure 10: 2002. Sandy Elverd, Kirsty Darlaston, Rhonda Agius, Chrissie Houston, Karen Russell Nici Cumpston, Kay Lawrence, The Long Community: (Plant fibre string stitched and coiled). 50 x 100 cm. Photograph Michal Kluvanek. Collection of South Australian Museum.

Figure 11: 2001. Nici Cumpston, Flooded Gums at Berri. (Silver gelatine print). 120 x 210 cm. Photograph Michal Kluvanek. Collection of South Australian Museum

Figure 12: 2001. Sandy Elverd, Kirsty Darlaston, Rhonda Agius, Chrissie Houston, Karen Russell Nici Cumpston, Kay Lawrence, The Mapped Landscape. (Mixed media). 150 x 400cm. Photograph Michal Kluvanek. Collection of South Australian Museum

Figure 13: 2001. Detail from the Mapped landscape, string bag and salt bag. (Netted plant fibre and cotton string, salt). Photograph Michal Kluvanek

Figure 14: 2001. Detail from the Mapped landscape, coiled mat. (Plant fibre and cotton tea towels) Photograph Michal Kluvanek.

Figure 15: Jan, 2002. Launch of Weaving the Murray at the Art gallery of South Australia. Photograph Trevor Cumpston.

Figure 16: 2001, Chrissie in the Nyah Vinifera forest. Photograph Nici Cumpston.

Bibliography

Arthur, B, & Morphy, F, (eds) 2005, *Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia*, The Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, NSW, Australia.

Centenary of Federation, 2001, *Centenary of Federation, South Australians celebrating 1901 – 2001*,

Department of Premier and Cabinet, Government of South Australia, Adelaide, SA.

- Cumpston, N, July 26, 2004, Interview with the author, Adelaide, SA Darlaston, K, August 13, 2004, Interview with the author, Adelaide, SA Elverd, S, July 1, 2004, Interview with the author, Adelaide, SA
- Figiel, S, 1999, *They Who Do Not Grieve*, Vintage, Auckland, NZ Hogg, L, April 18, 2001, Interview with author, Corryong, NSW. Houston, C, July 25, 2004, Interview with the author, Nairne, SA.
- Kleinert, S, and Neale, M, 2000, *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, Australia.
- Lawrence, K, 2005, 'Weaving the Murray: Mapping Connection and Loss', *Textile, the Journal of Cloth and Culture*, vol. 3, Issue 2 pp. 130 – 139.
- Lawrence, K, and Cumpston, N, 2006 'A Story is like a River' presented at *Selling Yarns: Australian Indigenous textiles and good business in the 21st Century*, August 13, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin.
- McCracken, G, & Pennay, B 2001, *Federation! But who makes the nation*, Museums and Galleries Foundation of NSW, p.11.
- Mead, S. M, 1984, *Te Maori: Maori Art from New Zealand Collections*, Heinemann, Auckland.
- Moreton Robinson, A, 1999, 'Unmasking Whiteness: A Goori Jondal's look at some Duggai Business' in *Unmasking Whiteness: Race Relations and Reconciliation*, ed. Belinda McKay, Queensland Studies Centre, Griffith University.
- Moreton-Robinson, A, 2000, *Talkin' up to the white woman*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.
- Rose, D. Bird, 2005, *Reports from a wild country*, Uni of NSW Press Ltd, Sydney, NSW.
- Russell, K, ed, *Weaving the Murray*, 2002 Prospect Gallery & Centenary of Federation, South Australia, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Adelaide.
- Russell, K, August 9, 2004, Interview with the author, Adelaide.
- The Melbourne Age, May 31, 1889.
- Tuckwell, F, April 26, 2001, Interview with the author, Goolwa, SA.
- Source to Sea, 2001, 'Community Weaving Project, Creating a cultural map of the River Murray' Design Brief, Centenary of Federation, South Australia.
- Source to Sea, South Australian Program, 7 Sept to 1 Oct 2001, South Australian Centenary of Federation Committee.
- Wahlquist, 2000 'Sold down the River' *The Australian*, 18 March, p25.
- Weaving the Murray* 2001 Design Submission, R. Agius, N. Cumpston, K. Darlaston, S. Elverd, C. Houston, K. Lawrence, K. Russell.