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'Play Ground'

An Art Approach to Working in an Aboriginal Community School

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Abstract

This article reflects on an art approach referred to as 'Play Ground' that evolved over six years in four Aboriginal pre-schools in regional NSW, Australia. It focuses on one of the pre-schools and proposes a culturally sensitive, collaborative play space that allows for individual and group expression within the safety of the art therapy setting, reaching beyond the work with the children, including teachers, families, and Community.

Art therapy theory and processes, my art practice, and a reflective psychodynamic orientation guided my thinking and helped in navigating uncertain terrain and in understanding the continuing traumatic social framework of this school and community in the aftermath of colonisation. Western psychological knowledges offer a way of understanding the work, however, the author embarks on an ongoing search for a meeting place and point of exchange and learning in the intercultural space, within the socio-historical context of this Aboriginal Community School. Winnicott's idea of 'potential space' (1971), as an intermediate area of experiencing, is embedded in Play Ground but also brought alive in the encounters and knowledge sharing between cultures - in the classroom, the staffroom, 'under a tree' - and may offer a between-worlds area of reverie and place of meeting.

Keywords: Aboriginal, intercultural, trauma, clay, play, uncertainty

Introduction

I was not prepared for the experience of working in Aboriginal schools that brought me into direct contact with the far-reaching consequences of colonisation and pervasive assimilative practices of this nation, painfully present in the community discussed in this paper. Like many, I did not learn of this nation's true history and am ashamed of my ignorance of our 'falsely paraded' (Birch 2003, p.152) version.

While I grew up elsewhere, I have First Fleet ancestry¹: my ancestors include a female convict dispossessed of her mother country, England, and transported to Australia - and later - Irish convicts and free settlers in the region in which I now work with the descendants of those dispossessed and removed. Working in this school, I recognize for the first time, my whiteness, the privileges I have gained from practices that displaced Aboriginal peoples, as well as the structural inequalities of this nation. I meet with, and face, my guilt, sorrow, and the racial anxieties that emerge in the context of the work, and while I am not directly responsible, I cannot pretend that our nation's history does not concern me.

The trauma, evident in many Aboriginal communities due to the impact of colonisation, is discussed broadly and in the context of the school described in this paper. Personal notes, interwoven throughout the text, share encounters in the school and more privately felt experiences; these are at times intensely visceral responses and dreaming images that move towards symbolising these experiences. An early playground encounter throws up tensions around the impact of one's gaze, highlighting how easily one can turn difference into 'Other'. I contemplate some of the ethical concerns and challenges of a white professional working in a regional Aboriginal Community pre-school and the integration of my personal experience and identity as an art therapist in the intercultural space. The paper explores the fit of art therapy in this setting, and art therapy processes in addressing intergenerational trauma. Reflections on the Play Ground approach and discussion of the material of clay, are followed by vignettes that gather in the shape of Play Ground for the reader. The vignettes speak to the therapeutic and healing potential of art therapy processes that allow room for the essential spirit and voice of the child to make sense of their world in a way that is uniquely theirs.

The author acknowledges the traditional owners of the Country this paper emerged from and pays respect to them, to the land, the water, the skies, and to Elders past, present, and future.

1. The First Fleet comprised 11 ships that departed from Portsmouth, England on 13 May 1787 to New South Wales, the penal colony that became the first European settlement in Australia.

Impact of Australia's colonial history

Many Aboriginal communities were severely disrupted by the European colonisation of Australia in the late 1700s and onwards. The predictability of knowledges, the cultural practices of Aboriginal people that nurtured spirit and identity, and the natural supports and caring relationships of many Aboriginal families and communities were ruptured, negatively reverberating down through the generations. Significant numbers of Aboriginal people continue to suffer the extremes of dispossession of their lands, loss of kin, community, culture, and languages (Bessarab & Crawford 2012). Hampshire quotes an Aboriginal woman who talks of 'passed-on' grief that is a direct impact of the many losses that lie at the heart of complicated grief and loss issues among Aboriginal people today (Hampshire 2011, p.125). The roles and responsibilities attached to the Dreaming², or the Lore/Law, cultivated over thousands of years, gave life shape and meaning, buffering uncertainty and the unknown (Bessarab & Crawford 2012). Singer/songwriter Bob Randall says: 'You separate me from that [the Dreaming] and already you've made me weak' (San Roque 2006, p.152).

Knowledge gathering, sharing, remembering, and a sense of continuity or 'going on being' (Winnicott), was lost to many; the psychological space and capacity for reverie held in the Dreaming was obliterated.

Winnicott's idea of 'going on being'

Donald Winnicott writes of the child's sense of 'going on being' (Winnicott 1956, p.303 in Ogden 2004, p.32), by which he meant the uninterrupted flow of authentic self that is held in the play of the child or reverie of the adult. It is in play that the child or adult can be creative (Winnicott 1971). If the play space is continually broken up by alerting stimuli, or if there is too much to deal with, the child is forced into reactive modes. Unable to focus inwards on the important task of play, the child becomes vigilant to negative stimuli in their outer environment (Meares & Coombes 1994). The feelings of safety a child needs to enter the

2. The Dreaming is the Aboriginal understanding of the world, of its creations, and its stories. It is the beginning of knowledge from which came the laws of existence. Creative Spirits <https://www.creativespirits.info>.

play space are slowly corroded. This can remove them from their own experience and cut across their sense of, and capacity, to 'go on being'.

Cumulative traumatic stress and oppressive government policies have contributed to internalised family and community violence that is part of many Aboriginal communities today (Atkinson 2002). Stan Grant talks of a fury born of powerlessness that 'to outside eyes is a failure of the people themselves' (2017, p.185). He says, 'What we do to ourselves comes from something missing or damaged in ourselves' (2017:189). Contemplative and healing practices were lost to many, and traumatised individuals and communities had nowhere to turn (Atkinson 2002). Individuals, overwhelmed by massive psychic trauma, must protect themselves from intense feelings of shame, fear, and rage by not knowing them consciously. Often one cannot articulate or make sense of one's experience and it becomes disconnected and forgotten (Laub & Auerhahn 1993). The emotional pain lives on inside and continues to shape lives in ways not always recognized. Selma Fraiberg writes about unspeakable traumas, unnamed and unprocessed such that mourning is foreclosed (Fraiberg et al. 1975 in O'Loughlin 2015, p.144). 'This lack of knowledge prevents the revival of despair that would accompany memory' (Laub & Auerhahn 1993, p.291).

The pre-school

The pre-school, once the site of an old mission³ has been established for more than fifty years and prides itself as a place of cultural learning where Aboriginal knowledge and identity are strongly held.

Sadly, there are many challenges facing the school. Most striking to me is the absence of the middle generation, that is, the parents of the children at the pre-school. Many of the children are either in kinship care arrangements with their 'Nans' and 'Pops' (Grandparents) or other family members. Traditionally, and today, children are raised by many members of

3. Missions, reserves, and stations were reserves of land to which Aboriginal people were forcibly relocated. Missions were in control of churches and missionaries with little or no government involvement.

their community (McMahon 2017; Minmia 2007) and this is not out of character, except that the family and community context has been warped out of shape through ongoing interventions, such as the forced removal of children⁴. Many of these grandparents were removed from their families as children and brought up on Missions or in foster care. However, studies show the generation not directly removed are experiencing more of the negative and mental health-related impacts than the previous generations (Westerman & Meyer 2016). Substance abuse and violence have become part of a community that cannot recognize its pain.

The singer/songwriter Randall, quoted above, was removed by police at the age of six, never to see his parents again, and speaks of the harrowing impact of the removals of children from their families and place of belonging.

“Children were ripped away from family, trees, rocks, plants, and animals...and the spirit of the place... everything who had the responsibility of being their caretaker...that break away would affect every child who had that experience...and would go on to affect their children’s lives, their grandchildren’s lives, their great grandchildren’s lives”. (Randall in Mellor & Haebich 2002, p.39).

As Randall forecast, many in this community are unconsciously replaying the forgotten and dissociated traumas their parents and grandparents faced but were unable to process. The forgotten traumas are evident in classrooms overburdened with children with Autism, ODD, ADHD - all of which share similar features with Developmental Trauma - these diagnoses attract much-needed funding but locate the problem with the child – another turning away by a dominant system that cannot or will not recognize the underlying problems in this school and Community.

4. The Stolen Generations - From the early 1900’s up until the 1970’s, Governments, churches and welfare bodies forcibly removed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities to be brought up in institutions (missions) or fostered into white families with the aim of assimilation into white society and under the guise of protection. (Mellor & Haebich, 2002)

The following draws from personal notes made at the time and provides some context to the work.

June 2015

I travel by plane and car with two art therapy students to a country pre-school in regional NSW with the brief to provide art therapy sessions and seminars on trauma for the teachers. The students are already working with some of the children individually and in small groups. I speak with the Director and teachers about what I might offer.

I have a strong sense of not wanting to push my way in and that something might take shape if I can just wait. It needs to come from the teachers...their needs...not mine...or a meeting in the middle?

My view of my 'importance' in the first week is quickly lost. No room is made to accommodate me or the students...the teachers can't seem to find the time for us...perhaps they don't want to. The students are jostled from room to room....at times, not even a room...a kitchen...under an awning...anywhere they can find a space...the teachers seem surprised to see us when we arrive...forgetting we travel here weekly.

The waiting is excruciating. Doing something relieves the anxiety and helps me feel 'important.' Here I am, supposedly a 'professional'. I feel useless and ashamed that I cannot mobilize myself to get something off the ground...there is nothing I can offer.

June 2015

I find it distressing watching the children in the pre-school run wildly about the playground with nowhere to land emotionally when upset or anxious. The teachers, most of whom are related to or have kinship ties with the children, do not appear to be present, in fact, they are largely absent and emotionally unavailable to them. The children seem very independent and do not share their distresses with the teachers.

It is freezing and I worry the children are not dressed warmly enough. I watch as some of them shove sandwiches into their mouths at lunchtime. I feel guilty about my privileged layers of clothing and the food in my belly.

I sit at the sandpit. A little girl takes several weeks to move close to me; each week inching ever so slightly closer till finally she reveals to me a precious scratch on her knee.

Meeting my white self

Over time I came to hear the teacher's stories of loss within their own families and the larger community. There is no doubting the love, hope, and dreams the teachers have for the children but it is not hard to imagine how their own traumatic histories might impede their capacity to be emotionally available to the needs of the children in their care.

I found the playground experience intensely unsettling and may have been picking up on this community's deep distress; perhaps also, it touched on my own primitive anxieties. Upon reflection, I realised I had read the behaviours of the children and teachers through a Western attachment lens, ignoring cultural differences - a lens that can at times fail to recognize Aboriginal knowledge systems. Linked to this, and cycling down more deeply, another rupture was occurring – that of a growing awareness of my whiteness and the impact of my 'white' gaze – a long-held gaze through which many Aboriginal people have come to know themselves.

One Elder⁵, Kelly, speaking about the feelings of despair in his community, says 'We believed what white people believed of us' (Kijas 2005, p.16). How painful to see oneself only through the eyes of others. The example above shows how quickly and unthinkingly one can move to the place of 'Othering' and how the views of our dominant culture can negatively impact individual and community narratives that are linked to serious health consequences in Aboriginal communities (Atkinson 2009).

I noticed at times, an internal pull to suppress issues around difference and power to avoid feelings of discomfort. I thought of omitting my observations of the teachers' 'absence' in the playground in my notes above, but realized I was looking to rid myself of the guilt of

5. Elders are highly respected Aboriginal people held in esteem by their communities, for their wisdom, cultural knowledge and community service. They have gained recognition as a custodian of knowledge and lore. Aboriginal people often refer to Elders as Aunty or Uncle. Creative Spirits <https://www.creativespirits.info>.

making such an assumption. This speaks to the difficult and conflicted terrain one inhabits - and must inhabit - in this space. Di Angelo (2018) talks about 'discomfort' as a way in, rather than a way out. Is it from within this difficult and conflicted terrain, this place of vulnerability, that one might find a place of connection? Challenged to consider my prejudices and the Western theories that inform my practice, I began to shake off the 'knowing' that protected me and allowed - I hope - a more receptive presence and capacity to stay in a place of great uncertainty and to meet what was in front of me. I chose not to omit my words but to keep them in view and to recognize and face my unease and the reality of cultural differences. I am also aware that the knowledge and practices I bring are part of who I am and recognize the need to keep these in view. Miriam Rose Ungunmerr says:

"Our shared experiences are different, but in the deep listening to, and quiet, still awareness of each other, we learn and grow together. In this we create community and our shared knowledge(s) and wisdom are expanded from our communication with each other" (Ungunmerr 1993a, p.36 in Atkinson 2002, p.17).

My art practice also guided my thinking and understanding in the intercultural space. For me, the shapes or forms in-between things are as important as, and inseparable from, the shape of the thing where each is held in view as a work develops, opening up to other possibilities and meanings.

Art Therapy in the context of an Aboriginal Community school

Art is a vital part of Aboriginal life and culture, connecting past, present, and future, encompassing communities, Ancestors, and country. Questions emerged for me around the fit of Western arts psychotherapy theories in the context of an Aboriginal Community pre-school and for a people who have sung, storied, painted, and danced this land for more than 60,000 years.

The notion of 'therapy' itself may carry the implicit assumption that there is a lack or deficit among Aboriginal people and their long-held traditions of healing that have been disrupted by colonisation. A therapeutic stance located too keenly in fixing or managing things helps to avoid one's feelings of guilt and powerlessness, a turning away that seals off

understanding. Wolfson (2017p.166) suggests we need to change our thinking from, 'You are broken, I can fix you', to, 'I can see you'. Aboriginal academic Marcia Langton says that "'Aboriginality' only has meaning when understood in terms of intersubjectivity, a place of mutual comprehension where both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal subjects are not objects" (2003 p.118). As part of the system that oppresses, one can never fully understand the complexities of Aboriginal experience. Embedded in this system are the power imbalances that make thinking and working in the intercultural space ever conflicted and always in flux. McKenna and Woods (2012) propose that mark-making, music, and performance, and the lived, practiced, and relational aspects of the arts psychotherapies, may share some affinity with Aboriginal arts and healing practices. Meares & Coombes (1994) write of an evolutionary and inherent drive to play and healing, and an inner striving for a 'continuity of being' (p.65) that speaks to our shared humanness.

The contemplative and creative practices of the storying, song, and dance of Aboriginal people, held in a ritual space may resonate for art therapists in the psychodynamic qualities of the holding environment of the art therapy group. Play Ground proposes an environment where two worlds might meet; a potential space or intermediate area of experiencing (Winnicott 1971) where the material of clay invites relationship, play, and story and where a deep listening and witnessing of meanings, often implicit, unknowable, or inexpressible may be gestured towards, and held in an ongoing process. A non-directive approach tunes into the children's internal worlds, making room for memory and dreams and their own stories to develop, knitting together a sense of being in this group that becomes a central meeting place for children and teachers. Play Ground offers space for individual and group expression of generational wisdoms and traumas, where movement towards symbolization and healing becomes possible through relationship, and the sensory process and touch of clay. Time is given to create and build relationships, to listen deeply and respectfully to one another, and to a witnessing or 'accompaniment' (Wolfson 2017 p.166) that aims to address some of the ongoing impacts of trauma evident in this Community.

The following comes from notes made at the time (July 2015)

In thinking about it, this little school has crept up on me, seeping into my body a little more each week.

Since I began visiting this school, I have had trouble taking things in. I strain to listen, let alone understand. I struggle with words. I cannot find them...they get lost in my head and I can't seem to bring them forward when I need them. I am immobilized. I carry around with me, a hugely bloated belly full of shit. I feel useless. I am not good enough for this work.

Witnessing the children in the playground disturbed my being at a deep level and a troubling image of children endlessly orbiting a chaotic universe with nowhere to land caught on a snag in my mind and continued to haunt me.

These overwhelming, crushing feelings have faded with each visit but I try not to let them go entirely...I hold them in mind as forgetting could mean I become numb to what is in front of me.

An image comes to me in a dream; a plate of glass thickly layered with paint; a mix of ochre and green. A tiny crack appears, and a splinter of light breaks through.

Another dream - of a door opening into a darkened room - a thin wedge of light breaks across the floor.

What is the meaning of the cracks in the glass – or the door opening into a darkened room – both of which reveal light? I am reminded of the little girl who approached me in the playground to reveal the precious scratch on her knee. Is my bloated belly a somatic response to unprocessed, undigested trauma in the Community? An enormous pain for which no words can be found. And my feelings of failure - from where do they come? Are they a reaction to feelings of failure in the Community?

Psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden (2004) says somatic experiences such as stomach pains, feelings of bloating, and other bodily sensations are not uncommon countertransference responses and Wolfson (ibid) writes about how personal problems, body symptoms, and behaviours may be 'mirrors for a part of the community not yet claimed' (2017, p.93). In her analytic work with mothers and babies, Houzel (1999) talks of tolerating intensely overwhelming experiences, without understanding them, till some meaning begins to emerge. The theoretical frame of these thinkers helped in making sense of the intense

feelings and bodily sensations evoked in me and aided in steering a way through the often disturbing feelings and uncertainties thrown up in this work.

While I did not know it at the time, the sense I had of *'not wanting to push my way in'* and *'that something might take shape if I could just wait'* during early visits to the school, was a step toward finding a meeting place.

It was from this place of uncertainty that Play Ground emerged. Initially an intuited response, the thinking around Play Ground within the cultural matrix of the school community developed over time. It laid the foundation for work in other regional schools and continues to grow and ripple outwards into new projects through ongoing relationships and a process of shared knowledges between therapists, teachers, and communities, and suggests Play Ground might be deemed a 'good enough fit' (Winnicott 1971) for the school communities we work alongside.

Thoughts begin to gather - a meeting place (from notes July 2015)

Little openings have begun to come about in the waiting. The teachers invite me to play; to read a story to the children. I am offered a 'cup'. It does not seem like much, but it feels like a tender beginning of something. An invitation. A welcome. The teachers begin to tell me about the children and share their thoughts with me. I am invited in little by little...a meeting place.

I scrap the intended work brief and consider the idea of setting up an art table in the playground, intuited from my experiences described above. I check with the Director and teachers. They like the idea. Maybe it feels safer for the teachers if the focus is not on them, although I invite them to join in with the children.

My bloated belly eases after several months as I slowly digest the experience of working in this Community and begin to make sense of the interweaving of the social, historical, and traumatic fabric of this place. It does not make the work easier, but it does help me stay with the discomfort and uncertainty that crowds in on me, rather than turn away.

Play Ground



(Fig.1)

Play

'It is play that is the universal, and that belongs to health: playing facilitates growth and therefore health...' (Winnicott 1971, p.41)

Ground

'A place or area on the earth's surface devoted to and equipped for some special purpose'
Webster Dictionary.

I set up a couple of tables under a gum tree in the playground, a place for children to 'land' if they should need or want; it was also a place for me to 'land' to steady myself.

The children quickly became aware of this place to land; a place found as well as created. The seeming simplicity of Play Ground belied its complexity and it soon became apparent that there was an innate understanding on the part of the children, no matter their age or developmental level and/or traumatic complexities (and I believe also, for some of the teachers), that this was a place with 'particular qualities that were needed' (Safier 2000, p.130), where the children could have an experience of being held in the mind of another. Clay wrapped in damp cloth to keep it soft and pliable was offered, and children as young as two, and up to age five, sat for an hour or more playing with the clay in the presence of the art therapist and teachers. The depth of the work generated from many shared moments seemed to 'grow' in the children's minds (and my own). This was made evident in their presence and connection to me, their teachers, and their peers. It also became apparent in the children's haptic sensing (or feeling knowledge) of the clay, in their play and stories - both verbal and non-verbal - that were elaborated on and developed in complexity over time.

A potential and containing space (Winnicott 1971), brought alive in many shared moments, Play Ground unfolded as '...a sense of place where one's experience occurs' (Ogden 2004, p.81), giving an opportunity for the 'elaboration of self' (Meares & Coombes 1994). In Aboriginal ontology, it is believed that 'through the child's own dreams, memories and intuitions', Ancestors will guide and raise the child (McMahon 2017, p.152).

A poignant moment, which speaks to the unfolding of the playground experience, was that of a highly distractable child who could only sit for a few minutes at a time at the Play Ground table. On one occasion she sat long enough to create a 'baby' from the clay which she rocked gently in her arms. The elemental structure and regularity of Play Ground created a space where this child's clay baby could come into being. Even if she could only attend for a few minutes every week, something could arrive and be experienced by this child as meaningful (Winnicott, 1971).

Significant moments such as these, and in the vignettes described below, may suggest the benefits of the Play Ground approach, as well as its challenges in this school Community.



(Fig.2)

The material of clay

I was mindful of introducing clay as a material because each Aboriginal nation possesses distinct cultural expression and the use of certain materials is bound to, and by, the land⁶. This was brought home to me one day in Play Ground when the teachers talked of being 'spooked' when a visitor brought river stones to the school that did not belong to their Country⁶ (personal conversation Sept. 2019). 'Country' is the 'life source' or 'spirit centre' (Stanner 1979:230) of Aboriginal identity providing a guide for human interaction and a sense of wellness (Atkinson 2002, p.30). Randall (Mellor & Haebich 2002, p.39) talks of the trees, rocks, and animals, and the many spirits or Ancestors of the place that had the responsibility of being his caretaker and he, the caretaker of his Country (San Roque 2006). Much has been taken, but for many Aboriginal people, Country is deeply held. The clay was

6. Country is self. Aboriginal people have profound spiritual connection to land. Aboriginal law and spirituality are intertwined with the land, the people and creation, and this forms their culture and sovereignty. Land is their mother, is steeped in their culture, but also gives them responsibility to care for the land. Creative spirits <https://www.creativespirits.info>.

deemed the 'good stuff' by an Elder at the school (personal conversation, Sept. 2015) and with this permission, clay was introduced and became a life-force of the Play Ground work. An original material of the earth, the sensory material of clay involves intense tactile experience and endless opportunities for children to touch, feel, sense, shape, and form; to stab or scratch, to pound, gouge, poke, to caress.. Sometimes smooth (or the often favoured, wet and sloppy) sometimes gritty clay bodies, 'smelling of earth, mould, and fecundity' (Ward 1999, p.107) provide potential to create, destroy and re-create; to meet love, hate, and rage that can be safely absorbed in the clay within the containment of the art therapy setting. Art therapy can be a place for communication of conscious and unconscious material spontaneously generated from within the child in relation to their environment; and in response to the properties of the medium driven by the child's personal communications and 'idiom of need' (Bollas 1989).

Hosea (2006) draws from authors Redfearn and Anzieu who say that our early sense of self is bodily based (Redfearn 1998), built up from physical sensations which begin with the skin as a primary area of communication between mother and baby (Anzieu 1989 in Hosea 2006). Somatosensory qualities inherent in clay can reach early wordless experience (Sholt & Gavron 2006) shaped by the aesthetic and handling gestures of the child's caregiver/s and environment (Bollas 1989), evoking traces of a 'significant other' (Ward 1999:108) the echo of which may be repeated, re-enacted, or embodied in the child's use of the clay. In an Aboriginal context 'significant other' could be one of several close relationships or kinship ties the child may have. It could also be said to be embedded in one's 'Country' where children] are 'taught the shape of their Country...its pulse, the manner of its breathing, its moods, rewards, and dangers...' (Hillman 2015, p.154).

Art therapists write about the potential of art materials to communicate trauma, including relational trauma, deprivation, and abuses (Case 2003, 2005; Elbrecht 2013; Elbrecht & Antcliff 2014; O'Brien 2004; Waldman 1999). Elbrecht & Antcliff (2014) describe the importance of haptic perception and the tactility of clay. They discuss the benefits of clay for children with developmental challenges and trauma and cite neurological research that explores the place of touch in shaping the brain. In her work at the 'Clay Field', Elbrecht (2013) says, 'Our life movements are mirrored by every imprint the hands leave in the clay. These life movements tell our story' (p.16). '...to touch the clay...reconnects us with our learned ways of understanding and dealing with the world, but also with our instincts and

our ability to heal' (p.17). Hosea (Ibid) says that 'art materials such as paint and clay can affirm the existence of our bodies and of the self' (p.72).

Trauma can foreclose the place of dreaming (Bollas 1989), constraining the imaginative processes that must be used if one is to know trauma (Laub & Auerhahn 1993). Psychoanalyst and artist Bassin (2017) uses art to explore the creative edge of collective loss, grief, mourning, and transformation; she speaks of the 'relational and re-integrative functions of art for those whose traumatic memory fragments cannot be known or located in words' (2017, p.133) and 'the unique capacities of art-making to capture, re-possess and re-integrate forgotten, dissociated memories so that experiences of trauma may become known' (p.136). Dissociation or 'not knowing' can be a necessary defense against overwhelming affect (Laub & Auerhahn 1993). Art making and process allows titration of intensely affective experiences so that they may gradually become known without overwhelming their maker.

Play Ground takes on a life of its own and becomes a central meeting place for both children and teachers who come and go as they need; the clay inviting play and stories, a 'communal container' (San Roque 2006, p.163) or shared sense of place focussed on the children's experience. In rare quiet moments, teachers share their own memories and stories; narratives spirited and joyful but also stories of loss, expressions of grief, despair, and rage; 'powerful bearers of individual and community feeling' (Kelly in Kijas 2005, p. xvii). Fraiberg talks about the baby in the room communicating the wounds of their caregiver in mother-child therapy (Fraiberg in Safier 2000). I wonder how much of what the children bring to Play Ground belongs to the collective wounds (and wisdoms) of the Community? While trauma, loss, and grief are uniquely and individually experienced within the collective, the facilitating environment (Winnicott 1971) of Play Ground may offer a place for both individuals and the group to find their own wisdoms in facing pain and uncertainty.

Stories of snakes, frogs, nests and eggs, potatoes and snowmen arrive; the 'flying sparks' of art and group, generative (McNiff 2004, p.21) and chaotic with possibility. Teachers sit alongside, tracing kinship ties and talking about 'wrong-way' marriages⁷ and how they must

⁷ Wrong-way or wrong-skin marriage refers to the laws of marriage in Aboriginal Communities whereby marriage between certain categories of persons was refined by reference to actual kin, Country, ritual, and historical relations. Marriage was also restricted to protect bloodlines. www.alrc.gov.au

marry white because not everyone knows where they come from anymore; what nation or Country they belong to - their own version of 'white-washing'⁸. One of the teachers moves closer to look at the gum nuts I picked up on the way to school in the morning. She had never seen them before and asks if I can bring some more for her classroom display. This seemed a disconnect from the land that provides such vital nourishment to Aboriginal people, but perhaps this land is not her Country?



(Fig 3)

I am conscious of the loss which pushes through the cracks of these conversations and the metaphor of the snowman a reminder of the white invasion of black hearts and minds, that finds its way into the children's imagination in this hot, dry landscape.

Grief around loss is often stowed away, held deeply in one's muscle and bones, unknown. A space for play, reverie, and dreaming is needed that taps into and receives communications of the individual and group, both conscious and unconscious where split-off and dissociated elements can begin to gather and take shape, where '... elements previously not linked, or that have been unlinked may begin to become linked' (Houzel 1999,

⁸ White washing - Refers to the policies of Aboriginal Affairs that involved the removal of Aboriginal children from their families and Communities (Stolen Generations) from the early 1900's up until the 1970's with the aim of assimilation into white society and ultimately to breed out the black. In a political context, it refers to our nation's 'white-washing' of history.

p.51). Pivnick (2011) says ‘...the traumatized have great difficulty with grieving’ and ‘that intersubjective experiences are necessary to create the conditions essential for the work of creative repair’ (p.8). She continues ‘...something new must emerge that symbolizes what or who has been lost as well as the experience of being at a loss (Pivnick 2011, p.8). Forgotten, dissociated memory traces speak through the handling of the clay and the stories that emerge in the potential space of Play Ground, making links toward meaning. After a Play Ground session, the children roll up the clay and wrap it in cloth ready for the next session. The unwrapping and wrapping of the clay marks the beginning and ending of the group – the wrapping at the end caring for children’s process till the next session.

From notes (August 2015)

I often walk away from Play Ground and this school feeling wrecked, full of doubt, confusion, and despair; my own early anxieties thrown up at me. The pull to turn away rather than sit with these feelings flies in from everywhere and nowhere. Sometimes the thought of Play Ground being meaningless haunts me - do I push for it to be meaningful because I cannot bear the thought of it being otherwise?

Vignettes

I have been privileged to witness the art processes and stories shared during Play Ground, but I am an outsider and these are not my stories; they are stories that live on the edge of incomprehensible complexity, and I am aware the telling is my take only, imbued by my own history and theoretical lens. When I speak of ‘stories’, I refer also to the stories embodied in the art process that come to life in the relational setting of Play Ground.

Kirra

Five-year-old Kirra joins me at the clay table with a friend. Her teachers are struggling with her aggressive outbursts and tell me she is having a hard time at home. Kirra decides she needs to wet her clay “to make it soft.” She and her friend wet their clay and spend a long and very messy time playing together, enjoying the squishy, wet clay. Kirra’s anger subsides. The sensory experience of working the wet clay helps her settle. Her tightly wound and protective self, relaxes. Elbrecht (2013) writes about the ancient memory bank of touch and the feeling knowledge of our hands and how our hands know what to do to negotiate their needs (2013 p.35).

Kirra's friend runs off to play elsewhere and Kirra, who does not usually stay at any task for long, continues working the clay. She pounds it with her fists now, growling. An Aunty⁹ joins us. She tells me quietly "She's so full of anger that one...listen...you can hear her anger coming out." Together we watch and listen to Kirra pounding the clay. Aunty continues, "This is good for her...she needs it." A somatic memory held in her body and released through her engagement with clay and water and the physical act of movement, witnessed by both Aunty and me, becomes part of a shared narrative (Case 2005). Qualities inherent in clay can create feelings of being "inside a substance", that may recreate [or locate] bodily experiences (Waldman 1999, p.12). Waldman suggests clay may enable a bridge between sensory experiences imprinted in the body and conscious awareness of these. Kirra's anger, expressed through her actions, are held both in the clay and in our minds providing a containing presence for her strong emotions. Left unattended, anger can become a rage that is hard to reach and contain and can destroy the emotional links to one's inner world where actions are separated from thought or feeling (Case 2003). Play Ground offers a space where Kirra's emotions can be held, shared, and transformed.



(Fig 4)

⁹ Aboriginal people often refer to Elders as 'Aunty' or 'Uncle.' Creative Spirits <https://www.creativespirits.info>. In some Aboriginal schools, teachers (Aboriginal and sometimes non-Aboriginal - as in this school) are referred to as 'Aunty' or 'Uncle.'

Later, Aunty struggles to bring forward words in her language¹⁰ that are closer to the meaning of what she thinks might be happening for Kirra. She tells me that when she herself was a kid, everyone was “thrown together”; all the Countries (or tribal groups) were mixed up and they were not allowed to speak their own language. Language is fundamental to Aboriginal psyche and identity; it is story, spirituality, lore/law, and culture, connecting family and community to their Country or place of belonging. How profound this loss of language for Aunty, for all of us.

Working alongside the teachers evolves organically and becomes part of the culture of Play Ground; a mutual web of support between teachers and therapists inviting a sharing of knowledge and learning from each other and a vital space for thinking about the children together. The vignettes speak to the importance of the ongoing relationships and trust built up over time and the potency and containment of art therapy processes.

Lumeah

Three-year-old Lumeah joins the Play Ground group with her sister-cousin Marri. Lumeah sits quietly and watches Marri and her peers for several months before she touches the clay. One day Lumeah begins to caress the clay with her finger, then her palm in a gently sweeping movement. Lumeah continues with this sweeping caress, now with both hands and a graduating potency over many months, not a word spoken.

Lumeah is away from school for some time. On her return, she joins us at the clay table and picks up where she left off, gently sweeping her clay.

Absences are not uncommon for many of the children who come and go in this transient community. If, and when children return, like Lumeah, they often return to their unique process that speaks to the powerful and inherent ‘drive to play and growth’ (Meares 1994) and to Play Ground as a placeholder for children’s ongoing processes and gestures contained in hope (Winnicott 1971).

¹⁰ There are more than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, including 800 dialects across the continent of Australia. Only 120 first languages are still spoken today with many at risk of being lost forever. Languages are living things that connect people to Country, culture, and Ancestors. Commonground.org.au

One day, Lumeah looks up at me and tells me “A road”. We look at Lumeah’s “road”. Surprise and delight bubble up from the children, teachers, and me.



(Fig 5)

Months go by and Lumeah continues working on her “road”, re-forming it every week with the same gently sweeping touch. We watch as the shape of her “road” gradually changes, till one day – out of nowhere - it becomes a “mountain”. Excitement bubbles up around the table again. Lumeah points to the mountain range toward the West and traces the arc of the range with her finger. I marvel at the arrival of her “mountain” (and her voice) and imagine the ‘Country’ that lives within her being, encoded through thousands of years of touch, movement, and Ancestral Dreaming.

Conclusion

We live on contested ground in Australia, overshadowed by a history that has largely silenced the experiences of Aboriginal people. While this school community is a deeply traumatized one, I meet also, the resilience, wisdom, and dreams of those who have been shaped by their history and who are re-shaping their present and future.

This paper is the beginning of a journey that shares my experiences and learning in an Aboriginal community pre-school. I am humbled and changed by these experiences personally and professionally. While I am informed by western art therapy and psychodynamic theories, I learn there can be no prescriptive practices in the intercultural space and insights garnered from working interculturally have influenced and guided my way of working.

I learn to wait and allow time for things to emerge rather than rushing in with white, or particular ways of knowing. To stay with discomfort and uncertainty in the waiting, as well as when wrecked with feelings of doubt and confusion. Working interculturally will perhaps always, and necessarily, be conflicted and perhaps in this may lie the potential for integration of intercultural sensibilities. Most importantly, I believe that relationships are central, and offer containment for healing to occur.

Having reflected on the children's engagement, growth and development, and responses of the teachers and wider Community for six years now, I would suggest Play Ground is a good fit for this school in addressing the impact of historical and ongoing trauma. Its approach allows room for the unique and expressive qualities and healing potential of the child and group that does not take away or diminish Aboriginal ways of knowing, understanding, and expression as the stories in this paper show. The work is never a fixed and permanent thing, however, and is continually developing with the needs of the school and Community in mind.

The contemplative and healing practices of art, story, song, and dance in Aboriginal ceremony is a space where feelings are held and articulated into creative action providing a sense of meaning and well-being (Atkinson 2002). Colonisation ruptured the psychological spaces of reverie and the Dreaming. Ceremonial and other healing practices were disallowed by repressive government interventions and lost to many communities, disrupting the psychic sense of 'going-on-being.'

Wirradjirri Lore woman, Minmia makes a call to 'bring back the thinking places.' (2007, p.9)
Spaces are needed for play, dreaming, feeling, thinking, and mourning.

The meeting place of Play Ground may offer such a space, where unprocessed emotional experience may find expression within the safety of the group. Held in the art materials and processes, painful and overwhelming experiences may begin to gather, moving toward symbolization and thinking where this has been compromised. The work of creative repair in the play, dreams, metaphors, and stories allows more active and alive parts of the self to come forward and the possibility for something new to emerge (Pivnick 2011). Play Ground offers room for intergenerational repair and intergenerational wisdoms (Atkinson 2016) to breathe into the spaces.

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