

**NOONGAR DANDJOO:
A Cross-Cultural Collaborative Approach
to Aboriginal Community Television
Production.**



Coming Together by Dale Tilbrook

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor Philosophy of
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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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ABSTRACT

Prior to commencing this PhD project, my research into community media revealed that Aboriginal people were mostly absent from Perth community television. In spite of participating in a consortium to establish community television in Perth, the Aboriginal community had not broadcast a single program by 2006 when this PhD project commenced. In this same year, the only Aboriginal community radio station in the south-west lost its licence and the local Noongar community were working towards re-establishing their radio presence. Thus, while Aboriginal community media in other parts of Australia were experiencing considerable success, Perth Aboriginal media appeared to be struggling. This prompted a series of questions that this research set out to investigate. How did the Perth Aboriginal community feel about community media? How strongly if at all did they want their voices to be part of the public sphere? Were there circumstances, particular to Perth, that were impeding the establishment of Aboriginal community media? What were the ingredients needed to establish successful Aboriginal community media in an urban environment like Perth?

The answers to these questions were sought through the production of an Aboriginal magazine-style television program series called *Noongar Dandjoo*, named after the Noongar tribal group who are the traditional custodians of the land in the south-west of Western Australia. *Dandjoo* is the Noongar word for 'gathering'.

This project used an action research approach to investigate not only the creative outcome, *Noongar Dandjoo*, but also the all-important process of its production. The broadcast content provides evidence of the power of community media to support culture, contribute to a sense of community identity, and challenge mainstream media stereotypes and misrepresentation. The participatory process of production enables Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants to create a 'third space' which delivers benefits for all, and which emerges as a model for cross-cultural

collaboration. For Indigenous participants, the program contributes to a sense of empowerment as well as developing communication and production skills. Non-Indigenous media students participating in the program develop their cultural awareness and empathy for Indigenous issues, which in turn impacts on mainstream media representation as these same students are employed as media professionals.

The *Noongar Dandjoo* project is described within the context of Noongar history and culture, and community media theory and practice. The action research method is adapted to align with Indigenous ethical protocols and third space theory.

This thesis is accompanied by DVD copies of three series of *Noongar Dandjoo* which illustrate the action research process.

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ACRONYMS

ABC – Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABA – Australian Broadcasting Authority
ACDP – Aboriginal Communities Development Program
ACMA – Australian Communications and Media Authority
ADS – Aboriginal Alcohol and Drug Service
AFC – Australian Film Commission
AMC – Alternative Media Centre
ANU – Australian National University
APC – Australian Press Council
ARC – Australian Research Council
ATSIC – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee
BRACS – Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme
CAAMA – Central Australia Aboriginal Media Association
CAS – Curtin Centre for Aboriginal Studies
CBAA – Community Broadcasting Association of Australia
DAA – Department of Aboriginal Affairs
DCITA – Department of Communication Information Technology
and the Arts
DEIR – Department of Employment and Industrial Relations
ICTV – Indigenous Community Television
MCCA – Media Culture and Creative Arts (Curtin University)
MEAA – Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance
MoU – Memorandum of Understanding
NAIDOC – National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee
NGO – Non-Government Organisation
NHMRC – National Health and Medical Research Council
NITV – National Indigenous Television
NNMA – Noongar Nation Media Association
RCIADIC – Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody
RMIT – Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

SBS – Special Broadcasting Services

SWALSC – South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council

UNESCO – United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural
Organisation

VAST – Viewer Access Satellite Television

WAALS – Western Australian Aboriginal Legal Service

WAAMA – Western Australian Aboriginal Media Association

WAARA – Western Australian Aboriginal Radio Association

WACC – World Association of Christian Communicators (WACC)

WAIT – Western Australian Institute of Technology

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At the very heart of the *Noongar Dandjoo* television program is its host, Dennis Simmons. He has volunteered his time and energy to my students, to me, and to the program since its inception in 2007. Dennis has been the cultural bridge that brings us all together in a space filled with music, humour and friendship. Without Dennis the experience of creating our program could possibly have been a less positive one and certainly a less enjoyable one. My heart-felt thanks go to him and his beautiful family.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the Aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so (Stanner 1968, 25).

These are the words of anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner, taken from his 1968 Boyer lecture¹ entitled *The Great Australian Silence*. Stanner's criticism of Australia's blindness and indifference to its Indigenous people can be extended to the nation's media who have been complicit in that silence. Indigenous academic Marcia Langton echoes Stanner's criticism with her own observations of the media: "The easiest and most natural form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible" (1993, 24).

Until recently, Aboriginal voices have been not only absent from Australia's history books but also from our television screens, our newspapers and our radios. Indigenous academic Colin Bourke argues that Aboriginal people "are hostage" (2003, 1) to images created by non-Indigenous Australians because in the past white experts controlled the lives of Aboriginal people and spoke in the media on their behalf. For much of white Australia, the media are the main channels of knowledge

¹ The Boyer Lectures are named after Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Board member Sir Richard Boyer. He first suggested the annual lecture series that features prominent Australians chosen by the ABC board.

about Aboriginal people and audiences became familiar with two common media representations – the Aborigine as the subject of protection, and the Aborigine as the subject of correction. The first was the romantic image of the noble savage, the primitive, traditional Aborigine who lived in the bush and was in need of our protection; the second was the “synthetic, town-dwelling half-cast” who was to be feared and was the subject of correction (Mickler 1998, 100; Hartley and McKee 2000, 84). The good news is media representation of Aboriginal people is changing and Aboriginal people themselves can be credited for much of that change. Today there are Indigenous filmmakers, journalists and writers who are creating their own images of Aboriginality and ensuring their voices are heard. Recent cinema success stories such as *The Sapphires* (Blair 2012) and *Samson and Delilah* (Thornton 2009) are evidence of mainstream audiences engaging with Indigenous media. There is still work to be done, however, in repairing the damage done to Indigenous cultures and communities. If reconciliation is the objective, then the media play an important role and all Australians must participate in that work – not just as media producers, but also as audiences who can choose to listen to Aboriginal voices.

Culture and Community Media

At the time of white settlement Australia’s Aboriginal people were comprised of more than 250 language groups. Today, colonisation and forced assimilation have reduced that number to fewer than half of these language groups and many of those languages are in danger of extinction. While the federal government has abandoned assimilation policies to promote an agenda of self-determination for Aboriginal people, it is now the mass media that pose one of the biggest threats to traditional Aboriginal language and culture. In the words of one Torres Strait Islander man, in 1988, when television was introduced to the islands:

I feel they’re going to destroy the culture ... if the commercial TV goes non-stop, then we’ll find that the younger people will lose the

culture that's been given to us from generation to generation (Meadows 1995, 184).

In 1985 the launch of the AUSSAT satellite would deliver, for the first time, a television service to central Australia. For the large population of Aboriginal people who lived in central Australia there were mixed sentiments about the new technology. Many saw it as a threat to traditional language and culture – as a “cultural nerve gas” or a “neutron bomb that kills the people but leaves the buildings standing” (Meadows and Molnar 2001, 48). The Warlpiri Media Association, fearing the consequences that television would have on their remote community, chose to “fight fire with fire” (Meadows and Molnar 2001, 49), and on 1 April, 1985 they commenced a pirate broadcast of their own locally-produced television programs. Australian community television was born, and since then it has been in remote and regional Australian communities such as Yuendumu, where Warlpiri media are located, that Indigenous community media have been most successful and highly valued.

Community media in Australia, prior to the 1990's, were largely ignored by academics and maligned by Australian audiences. This marginal and amateur status was an indication that Australians did not recognize the potential for community media to be a tool for social justice, to contribute to a democratic media and a healthy public sphere. However, in the last two decades the sector has grown in status as government legislation has acknowledged the important role community media play, particularly for marginalised and disenfranchised communities that are frequently ignored or stereotyped by mainstream media. Growth of the community media sector has also been aided by increasing academic research that has helped define the sector and contributed to a better understanding and appreciation of the role it plays. This research has revealed that community media is highly valued by Australian Indigenous and ethnic communities in particular and that these communities in fact represent the very reason community media was established in Australia (see Forde and colleagues 2009). Indigenous and ethnic community media demonstrate

how community media contribute to the maintenance of language and culture, and to creating a sense of identity and community.

Unlike the mass media that represent Aboriginal people as one national homogenous culture, community media recognise the diversity of Aboriginal culture. They are ideally suited to traditional Aboriginal culture because, as anthropologist Eric Michaels suggests, the “mass media is the inverse of the traditional and personal [Aboriginal] information exchange system” (1986, 3). By producing their own media, Aboriginal people can ensure that programs are produced and broadcast in culturally appropriate ways. Aboriginal community media organisations such as the Central Australia Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) in Alice Springs and Goolari Media in Broome have an impressive track record of production and community support. These community media organisations are contributing to the maintenance of Aboriginal language and culture, and to a sense of identity for their respective communities. These are organisations where production and broadcast outcomes are wholly controlled by Aboriginal people.

While the aim for Indigenous controlled and produced media continues to be a priority for Indigenous people, it is inevitable that Aboriginal people will continue to be the subject of media produced by non-Indigenous people. With growing awareness of how the media have contributed negatively to racist attitudes and hampered the progress of reconciliation, there is also recognition of the potential for a positive media that can promote issues of social justice and be a tool for social change. Non-Indigenous program producers and broadcasters, especially the public broadcasters, are turning their attention to Aboriginal issues and employing industry protocols that attempt to ensure culturally sensitive representations of Aboriginal people and their stories. Unfortunately this is not the case for all genres of media, and the news media continue to be regarded with suspicion and hostility by the majority of Aboriginal people. It is commercial imperatives that now dictate the news cycle and professional journalists do not have the time or the resources that are

needed to seek out alternative and less accessible voices (see Davies, 2008). Even the public broadcasters with their limited funding must do more with less. This in turn impacts on the representation of Aboriginal voices and stories by the news media. An absence of Aboriginal voices in the news media is problematic because news and current affairs programs contribute significantly to the mainstream public consciousness, to political processes, and to public debate (Langton 1993, 5).

This thesis will argue that community media has an important role to play in addressing the absence of Aboriginal voices from the Australian public sphere. It will demonstrate how community media can be a vehicle for cultural maintenance and identity-building for Aboriginal people. It will also show, in terms of community impact, that the process of making the program is as important as the program itself.

Noongar Dandjoo

The traditional custodians of the land on which Perth is located are the Noongar people and it is home to a relatively large Aboriginal community. In 2006, when I commenced this PhD project, Perth was also home to a number of successful community radio stations and one community television station, Access 31. At that time, the Perth Aboriginal community rarely participated in community media. There had been an Aboriginal radio station, but this had recently shut down after twelve years of broadcasting. Access 31 had not broadcast a single Aboriginal program since its inception. Aboriginal community media in regional Western Australia was experiencing significant success, so what was happening in Perth that prevented the Aboriginal community from creating their own media? Did the Perth community want to create their own media? If so, what were the ingredients that would contribute to the successful creation and maintenance of Aboriginal community media in Perth? These questions became the subject of my PhD research.

The answers to these questions were explored over six years through a series of television programs called *Noongar Dandjoo* that I produced with my media students at Curtin University in collaboration with the Perth Aboriginal community. The decision to produce a cross-cultural collaborative program such as this raised new questions for my research and a new focus for this project. What approach to production can be employed that will contribute to a successful cross-cultural collaborative project such as *Noongar Dandjoo*? How can non-Indigenous students work with the Aboriginal community to produce a program with positive outcomes for all participants?

The answer for a cross-cultural collaborative project such as this is participatory action research. Employing an action research approach to the production of *Noongar Dandjoo* ensured that all participants, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, community and students, would benefit from the production. Action research allowed us to accommodate and respect cultural protocols and ensure that the program was truly representative of the Aboriginal people who chose to participate. There was no precedent that I was aware of for an action research approach to television production. Professional television production is a hierarchical and non-democratic process. Professional production techniques are employed to ensure the efficient use of time and resources to produce a television program that meets industry standards and audience expectations. How would participatory production techniques impact on our production processes?

An action research participatory process for our television production did evolve successfully and eventually proved to be as important, if not more important, than the program artifact itself. Furthermore the program's process of production created what Homi Bhabha (1994) describes as a 'third space' whereby two different cultures come together, learn from each other, and both are changed by the experience. Students' personal interaction with the community resulted in a significant change in their attitudes towards Aboriginal people, and this was illustrated by feedback

recorded over the course of the program's production. Over time it would become apparent that this experience was not only contributing to the process of reconciliation for the participating students, but also for the wider community. As graduating students took up professional employment in mainstream media newsrooms their *Noongar Dandjoo* experience would start to impact on the mainstream representation of Aboriginal people, and therefore, on mainstream audiences. There is evidence that *Noongar Dandjoo* had not only achieved its objective of giving a community media voice to the Perth Aboriginal community, it was also working as what Tanja Dreher (2010) describes as a community media intervention. The program was not only speaking to a marginalised community media audience, it was also impacting on a larger mainstream audience.

A Personal Journey

This thesis and the accompanying DVDs represent an important personal journey for me. At the start of the project, when I recognised the absence of Perth's Aboriginal community from the media, I was naïve about Aboriginal people and culture and had no idea where to begin to address the problem. I was advised by friends and colleagues to rethink my plans and I was warned of the pitfalls others had experienced when attempting Indigenous projects. However, it seemed to me that therein lay the problem: if issues of Indigenous disadvantage and social justice are ignored because they are 'too hard' or 'too complex' then how will the problems ever be resolved? I wanted at least to try.

The negative representation of young Aboriginal people is one of the biggest issues in the Perth media and so as a first step I volunteered to work with teenagers at Clontarf Aboriginal College. The college is located in Perth and attracts senior high school Aboriginal students from all over Western Australia. For two years I taught them filmmaking skills and helped them tell their own stories with video. Over this time it became clear that Clontarf did not really connect with the Perth Aboriginal

community. It could not, therefore, facilitate the connections needed to enable a community television production, and so did not fit with the objectives of my PhD project. How could I bring together the people, the equipment and the budget needed to produce a TV program? It was then that I decided to explore the idea of pursuing this as a University teaching project. I would then have the necessary equipment and technical infrastructure at my disposal, along with trainee journalists and crews who would themselves be able to benefit from a cross-cultural collaboration. While the program would not be made *by* Aboriginal people as I had originally intended, I could at least explore a production process *with* Aboriginal people. This process is described in the chapters that follow.

Thesis Structure

The structure and content of this thesis is informed by action research that requires the researcher to work with community participants to produce practical solutions to a problem. All participants contribute to the research process and solutions are found through action, although action is not the only outcome of an action research project. Self-reflection and reporting are equally important, because the sharing of knowledge and processes is what defines a successful action research project. Furthermore, the researcher informs his/her action research process by exploring and understanding the literature relevant to the issue, and by learning as much as possible about the community – the stakeholders – with whom he/she is collaborating. Action research is a constant cycle of look, think, and act, and so the structure of this thesis has been guided by these three stages (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998; Stringer, 2008; Tacchi, 2003). The early chapters of the thesis represent the ‘looking’ stage and provide the background, history and theory that are essential to a successful action research project. The final chapter and the DVDs represent the ‘think’ and ‘act’ stages, encompassing the production of the *Noongar Dandjoo* television program, as well as the thinking and reflection that resulted from that action.

Chapter One discusses the theoretical elements of the project that have informed many of the choices made about the *Noongar Dandjoo* production. The chapter explores the issues of media representation of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal identity in the context of community media which has demonstrated its ability to contribute to community and cultural identity. The theory of 'third space' is also discussed. Traditionally associated with post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha it is an abstract concept that is not easily defined and has been adopted by diverse disciplines as a way of explaining a meeting point in which difference is negotiated, power is challenged, and new concepts are born. Some of these alternative definitions of third space are also discussed in this chapter, but of particular importance to this thesis is the Ganma Metaphor, an Aboriginal concept of third space which describes the coming together of salt water and fresh water. It will be argued that community media in general, Indigenous community media, and *Noongar Dandjoo* in particular, offer a third space experience for participants where two cultures meet, difference is explored and understood, and people experience change.

As an academic research project as well as a television production it was essential that *Noongar Dandjoo* adhere to the cultural protocols that govern both domains. Chapter Two outlines the protocols for working with Indigenous people published by the Australian film and television industry, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), and the Media and Entertainment Arts Alliance (MEAA). These are important and useful guidelines for any non-Indigenous person undertaking a cross-cultural production or research project. However, the protocols are frequently problematic and do not ensure smooth sailing even for those who have apparently followed them to the letter. This chapter explores some of the issues that have emerged in relation to the published protocols, drawing on personal interviews with Aboriginal people as well as the accounts of Australian filmmakers who have worked with Indigenous people.

Chapter Three focuses on the methodology for the *Noongar Dandjoo* project, arguing that an action research approach may help to overcome some of the problems people have encountered when working with the established protocols. While the protocols are a useful starting point, participatory action research suggests a way of working that allows all participants to recognise and adapt to the specific circumstances of an individual project. Each community and each project is unique, and action research recognises this diversity and offers a way of working that is customised to each individual project. It recognises the frequently messy nature of life and of our communities. It recognises that mistakes are inevitable but that we learn from those mistakes and therefore improve our practice. The action research cycle demands reflection and reporting, and so this chapter outlines some of the essential aspects of an action research report. There are also important connections between action research, Ganma, and third space that are explored here.

Since *Noongar Dandjoo* was conceived and produced as a community media project, Chapter Four explores and defines community media with a particular emphasis on television and on Indigenous community media. Community media takes on diverse forms, but news media and journalistic practice are a focus in this chapter because the commercial imperatives of mainstream media are having a detrimental impact on news and information programs (see Davies 2008). The chapter shows how community media are well placed to provide an independent and alternative voice to mainstream journalism.

Chapter Five introduces the concept of three different Indigenous media models as articulated by the anthropologist Eric Michaels. In response to the federal government's proposed launch of a satellite that would introduce television into central Australia, Michaels identified assimilation, pan-Aboriginalisation and cultural maintenance as three distinct types of Indigenous media, each supporting a different social model and contributing to a different public sphere. Michaels favoured the community media model because it was most suited to traditional Aboriginal culture,

but this thesis argues that all three Indigenous media models are essential, especially for an urban Aboriginal community like the Noongar community in Perth. Government funding initiatives and policies have demonstrated a lack of understanding of these different media models and the essential role each of them plays in contemporary Aboriginal Australia. Attempts to bundle all Indigenous media into one basket have been problematic. This chapter uses the Indigenous media organisations in central Australia as an example of the different models and discusses the launch of National Indigenous Television (NITV) and the consequences of the launch for Indigenous Community Television (ICTV).

As mentioned previously, action research requires the researcher to explore and understand the history and culture of a community in order to better understand the context of the problem his/her research will address. Chapters Six and Seven therefore provide the history of the Perth Aboriginal community and their media. These chapters attempt to explain the complexity of the Perth Aboriginal community and how their history has contributed to issues of identity and a struggle to maintain their own community media. When this PhD project commenced in 2006, Aboriginal community radio, established by the WA Aboriginal Media Association (WAAMA), had recently stopped broadcasting in Perth. The failure of WAAMA provides some valuable lessons for the future of Perth's Aboriginal community media as well as other Indigenous community media organisations. In the absence of any other comprehensive overview, WAAMA's history has been pieced together here with reference to government documentation, media reports, and personal interviews with the Aboriginal people who participated. It tells the story of how a strong cultural and community identity is essential to the success of Indigenous community media. This chapter proposes that it is this ingredient that has been most elusive for the Perth Aboriginal community and it is this ingredient that is contributing now to the success of a new Noongar radio station.

Chapter Eight is written in the form of an action research report that describes the production of *Noongar Dandjoo*, presents the feedback from the students and Aboriginal participants of the program, and reflects on the lessons learnt from the process of production. DVD copies of the three series of the *Noongar Dandjoo* program accompany this thesis and it is suggested that these are sampled before reading the chapter, then viewed more closely after reading. If the program is viewed and assessed purely on its production values, or on its appeal to a mainstream audience, then that assessment may fail to acknowledge the importance of the process of its production. The program was produced by undergraduate students at Curtin University, and broadcast on Perth community television and then on NITV with the primary objective of giving a media voice to the Perth Noongar community. *Noongar Dandjoo* was not produced for a mainstream broadcaster, and therefore, like any community media program, should not be judged by the same standards as a mainstream program. Its process of production is not evident on a simple viewing, hence this chapter – in reality an action research report – is essential to understanding its achievements and value. Interviews with students and Aboriginal participants are introduced as evidence of the program's success and confirm its function as a third space that contributes to reconciliation.

The thesis concludes by arguing that the *Noongar Dandjoo* project offers a potential model for other cross-cultural media projects. The participatory action research process can be adapted to many other community or cross-cultural situations. The essential ingredient for success here is a desire by all participants to achieve a common goal. At the start of the project I had not anticipated how many wonderful Aboriginal people I would meet along the way, how much I would learn about Aboriginal people and culture, and how much I would be changed by this journey. My hope, therefore, is that others will be encouraged by my experience and accept the challenge of undertaking research and work that contributes to Indigenous social justice. There are rewards and benefits

for all who participate in such ventures – for the Indigenous participants, the non-Indigenous researcher, for the whole community.

On a final note, the words *Aboriginal* and *Indigenous* are, of course, used throughout the thesis. I have heard people, on many occasions, take offence at being described as either one or the other – *Indigenous* or *Aboriginal*. A person may object by saying, for example, “I am Noongar” or “I am Koori”. Many others don’t object to either term. Both words, *Indigenous* and *Aboriginal*, are controversial in their use and emotionally loaded and so I wish to explain my use of the two terms and the Western Australian context in which I use them. I use the word *Indigenous*, and always with a capital ‘I’, to refer to the many individual and diverse first-people cultures in Australia and in other countries. Mostly the term *Indigenous* is used in a national context. Some Australian writers do not use the term *Indigenous* and prefer instead always to describe Australia’s first people as *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders*. Western Australia does not have a large Torres Strait Islander population as most Islanders live on the east coast of Australia, especially in Queensland, hence my preference for the word *Indigenous*. Western Australia is home to a large number of Aboriginal cultures and *Noongar* is the name of the Aboriginal people whose traditional land is the south-west corner of Western Australia, including Perth. I use the term *Aboriginal* when referring to more than one of these diverse West Australian cultures. I do not use the term *Noongar* when referring to the Perth Aboriginal community in general because, in spite of living in Noongar country, there are many Aboriginal people living in Perth who are not Noongar. They come from other regions of Western Australia and therefore identify with a different culture. Whenever possible, if someone identifies with a particular Aboriginal culture, such as *Noongar*, then I have used that word to describe them (for a map of Australian Indigenous language groups see <http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/map/>).