

Nyikina Collaborative Filmmaking in the Kimberley: ‘Learning to Listen with Your Eyes, and See with Your Ears’¹

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Long before it has even been thought about consciously, a film idea starts deep within country—*Booroo*,² with Nyikina custodians, and *liyan*. *Liyan* is a Nyikina word, which can be translated as ‘feeling, emotion, spirit’.³ Some also refer to it as ‘intuition’. *Liyan* is the ‘life force of place’, it enables people to ‘feel’ their environment.⁴ Physical boundaries of country are not to be found on maps, but within oneself, as Paddy Roe explained to Frans Hoogland in 1992:

Frans: This whole country is mapped out. Now each area is like a human being, got feeling, got the liyan, that’s the liyan of the place. The liyan is like the life force, it’s like your spirit, like your essence. Now the only way to make contact to those locations, to those sites, is through our liyan.

To Paddy: How do I make that liyan work for me?

Paddy (laughs): I know. Because that’s the hard one. That’s the hard one. My people straight away when we go from camp, we start from the camp. We think about there—which way we got to go? All right, we go this way. When we get half way, something make me feel liyan wrong

too. We better go this way. Might be somebody over there waiting with spear or something.

Frans: so when you go country you feel?

Paddy: We feel it

Frans: and how can we learn that one?

Paddy: We got to teach you. We feel him. (...)

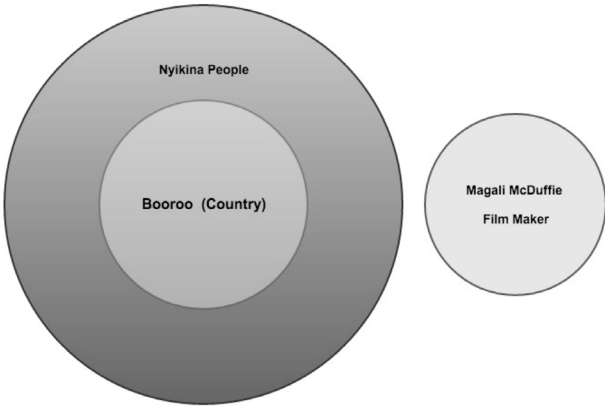
Frans: for the traditional people, that *liyan*, maybe same place as our intuition comes from, that never gets pushed away, that's the first and last voice.⁵

One gets a 'feeling' for country, one knows if a boundary is being trespassed. This feeling comes with recognising the relationship is mutually rewarding: we learn as human beings how to read the country, but we also acknowledge the country is reading us.⁶ Film is a contemporaneous way to tell stories and build memories and strengthen relationships of and on country, a creative way to bring the audience into country and show the positive and negative issues which impact on our *liyan* and wellbeing.

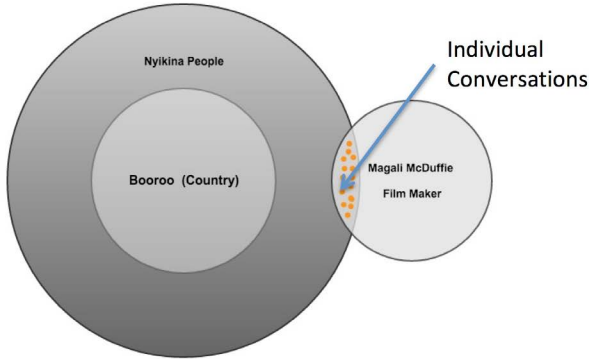
A film concept is both proactive and reactive. At the start, there is a will to create, to educate, to pass on stories to young generations, to mediate the impacts of colonisation, and to share culture, anchored in a belief that country must be protected, important stories retold, ceremonies performed.

The film concept is also born out of an external threat (intensive development, mining) to the country (*Mardoowarra*, Fitzroy River Country⁷) and therefore to people's *liyan*. It often occurs within a conflict paradigm (hurried processes, lack of consultation, community divisions), in which traditional custodians are protectors, not protesters.⁸

Throw in a French-Australian filmmaker interested in the camera as an emancipatory tool for the storytelling of others, a catalyst, an 'accelerator', a witness and an instrument for change.⁹ Not to tell her story, but theirs—she does not know what the story is to start with, but simply wants to connect,



19.1 Chronology of a dialogue — stage 1¹⁰



19.2 Chronology of a dialogue — stage 2¹¹

like many others have done in the past and many will do in the future. In order to understand the story, she will have to listen deeply, to ‘listen with her eyes and see with her ears’.¹²

This is the start of a conversation—one among many to come. A dialogic approach centred on country around its people’s feelings and intents. A listening approach based on open-ended interactions, a process in which the filmmaker becomes strongly influenced by the participants’ perception of reality.¹³

What takes place then is a transcendence of the status of ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups, of perceived difference, to ultimately reveal a convergence of goals: that in spite of our cultural differences, we have a common vision for humanity; that we can focus on our commonalities rather than differences, on our shared, greater humanness and cultural and social endeavours, rather than on the economic rationale our governments would have us believe is the basis of our wellbeing.¹⁴

After these multiple conversations on country, much feedback, much consultation, we have our first cut, our first film. The year is 2007, the film is called *The Nyikina Cultural Centre*, which aims at explaining to potential funding bodies and other supporting organisations why it is important for Nyikina people to build a Nyikina Cultural Centre in Derby.¹⁵

The filmmaker knew nothing of the Nyikina context then, and did not fully understand the stories she recorded, although she knew they were significant—and she knows very little now. But this first film started the dialogue. She went back for more conversations—back to square one.

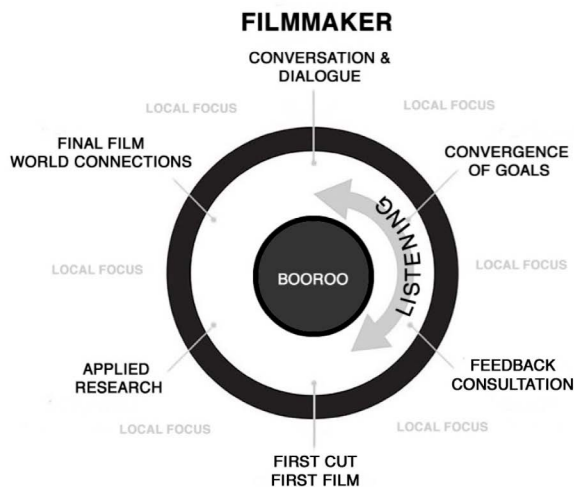
Conversations on country, transcendence, feedback, convergence of goals ... More films emerge, following an iterative process in which excerpts of our first films, first conversations, are selected as the basis for new ones, in a continuous re-actualisation, and a visual representation of an on-going dialogue—a talking circle. Interviews are revisited years later, understood better and reused in new contexts for new purposes.

Film starts to reveal itself as a technology not used in the sense of modern technology, for an all-encompassing ‘outcome’, ‘enframing’ for a purpose of using and producing, as just another resource, but rather as ‘poiesis’, crafted and

recrafted, time after time, for a slow ‘revealing’ of truth—going back to technology in its original state.¹⁶

Another ingredient comes in at this stage: research. The filmmaker has become a PhD researcher. The year is 2010. Hours spent in libraries’ entrails, digging in boxes, spooling through newsreels, archives, leafing through old court documents, anthropological reports, glued to computer screens. Her focus naturally directed towards unearthing information potentially useful for the communities and people she works with, and their families: people’s stories, anthropological texts, archival photographs, visual footage ... Anything of potential interest goes back to country to start the conversation again, triggering more stories, more telling, more knowledge ... and more listening.¹⁸

It has taken her seven long years, and more than twenty films, to understand the whole story of the creation of the *Mardoowarra*, Fitzroy River, and the essence of the *Warloongarriy* Ceremony,¹⁹ the ceremony for the river. It was only then that she was able to edit the different tellings of this story together, as one continuous talking circle, at the beginning of *Three Sisters, Women of High Degree*.²⁰



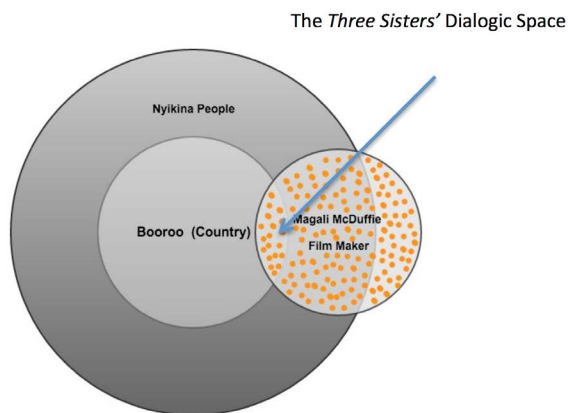
19.3 The filmmaking process¹⁷

This filmic dialogue becomes an interesting multilayered process in which people speak—reaffirming their Nyikina identity, knowledge of country, empowering themselves and others, telling stories to their families, future generations, interested strangers and, ultimately, the world.²¹ The dialogue is individual, interpersonal, intergenerational, multifocal—and like *Bookarrakarra* (Nyikina Beginning of Time, not to be confused with Dreamtime²²), unites past, present and future in one fleeting moment in time—the film itself.

It is a timeless dialogue that goes backward and forward in time—featuring statements from past Elders in dialogic history, for the purposes of dialogic futures not yet materialised but certainly envisaged—dreaming your reality forward, creating your path.²³

Through this process, a counter discourse is created, through film, which challenges the dominant discourses of history, historiography, anthropology, development, governance and more.²⁴ The films themselves are cultural actions, answering back to the dominant culture—thus completing the act of listening, and speaking back.²⁵

For the filmmaker, in all this, the dialogue is also internal—reflecting on her role. She is not as invisible as she thought. In fact, she has a fundamental role in the shaping of the overall story, made up of individual stories and lived experiences, whether she likes it or not. This is the turning point—being asked to be in the film, to ‘speak’ in the film, of the role of film and the filmmaker. At the same time, being on country for so long, every year for seven consecutive years, she has come closer to *booroo* and *liyan*. The conversations with Nyikina people on Nyikina country have brought her closer to the essence of what being Nyikina means. She is aware she is only scratching the surface—but in the process of ‘becoming’, or ‘inter-textuality’, she has learned, not only to listen, but also to ‘start seeing’.²⁶ This is the space where *Three Sisters, Women of High Degree* is born. The space where she edits the river, unconsciously, into the film so much that it becomes its main character, its storyline, its underlying structure, without her even being aware of it, until Jeannie Warbie’s comment after seeing the completed film for the first time: “*proper water this one. Proper water.*”²⁷ Country knows you, country teaches you—country reads you.²⁸



19.4 Chronology of a dialogue — stage 3²⁹

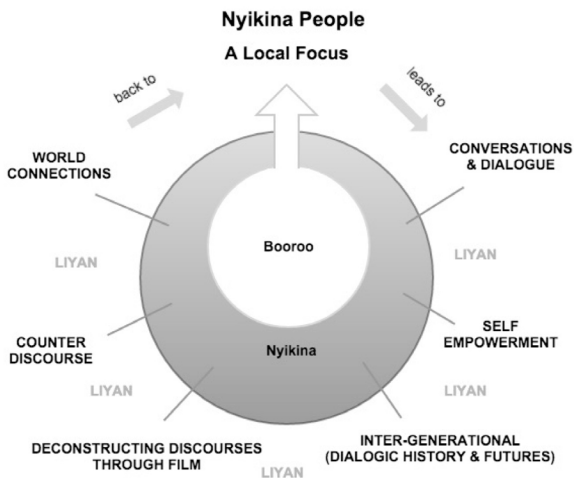
But what of the films' purpose? To talk back, to tell story, is to create connections, to foster the coming together of diverse people³⁰—to tell the story of a songline that has gone from a local to an international context, such as the *Mardoowarra* Songline:

So the final message that I would like to leave the world is a Songline that has been sung for many many generations, from the beginning of time, from Bookarrakarra, and Jabo Darby used to say: come in, Jabirr-Jabirr, come in, Nyul-Nyul, come in, all the different people, come in Mangala people, come to the river, let it feed you, let it soothe your spirit, and then go back to where you came from, and tell your people out there, how important the river is ... And in more recent times, before Jabo passed away, he was singing a song, come in Japanese people, come in Chinaman people, come in English people, come in French people, come to the river of life, the Mardoowarra, come and show the world that this is important for all of us, for our humanity. So the song cycle now is to go forward ... So all you people out there, come and hear the call from Jabo,

come to the Kimberley, come and support us, because we are standing up for humanity.³¹

Our films are shown at conferences and festivals nationally and internationally, triggering more dialogue, creating many connections in France, the filmmaker's country of origin, and other places, in a rhizomatic effect described by Deleuze and Guattari (1972–1980).³² The film becomes a performance in itself,³³ brought from the inside to the outside, *Jimbinkaboo*, and shared with the universe, with no financial, academic or professional expectations—just a gentle nudge for people to listen.

Those who are interested, wherever they are from, are invited to country to come and 'learn to see, and think' for themselves, and they do. This immersion into *Booroo*, and *Bookarrakarra*, the circular storytelling, connects the past, present and future into this moment now, the moment in which we must all act ethically and responsibly. It also connects humans and non-humans, in *sympoesis*, transcending spatial and temporal boundaries³⁴—the river itself can talk for



19.5 The Nyikina film process

its rights now, as the *Mardoowarra* did for its case presented at the Tribunal on the Rights of Nature.³⁵

Leaving behind the Anthropocene, new and ever-evolving multi-species alliances³⁶ forge a cycle which begins and ends in *Booroo*... With other connectors, other actors, all simultaneously connecting to each other, and to their respective worlds, and back to their own world again, in constant flux, ensuring the story keeps being told — ensuring the story never ends.

Notes

- 1 Colleen Hattersley, cited in Lucy Marshall and Colleen Hattersley, *Reflections of a Kimberley Woman*, Madjulla Inc, Broome, 2004, preface.
- 2 Colleen Hattersley, *Birr Nganka Nyikina: The Source of Nyikina Language*, with reference to *Lower Nyikina*, Madjulla Inc, Broome, 2014, p. 46.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 4 Frans Hoogland in David Maybury-Lewis, *Millenium: Tribal Wisdom and The Modern World*, Biniman Productions Ltd, Adrian Malone Productions Ltd, KCET, BBC TV, The Global Television Network, Rogers Telefund & Telefilm Canada, 1992.
- 5 Frans Hoogland and Paddy Roe in Maybury-Lewis, *Millenium*.
- 6 Anne Poelina, personal communication, 2015.
- 7 Hattersley, p. 100.
- 8 Marie McInerney, 'Climate Justice: A Call to Broaden Science with Indigenous Knowledge', 4 March 2017, <<https://croakey.org/climate-justice-a-call-to-broaden-science-with-indigenous-knowledge/>>; Magali McDuffie, *Walmadany Corroboree*, Online Video, Madjulla Inc, Australia, <<http://www.magalimcduffie.com/films/2015/9/25/walmadany-corroboree-2011>>.
- 9 Jean Rouch, cited in Mike Eaton (ed.), *Anthropology, Reality, Cinema: The Films of Jean Rouch*, British Film Institute, London, 1979, pp. 12–14.
- 10 Magali McDuffie, *Chronology of A Dialogue — Stage 1*, Figshare, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.1579425.v1>.
- 11 Magali McDuffie, *Chronology of a Dialogue — Stage 2*, Figshare, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.1579431.v1>.
- 12 Colleen Hattersley, cited in Marshall and Hattersley, p. v.
- 13 Marc Piault, cited in Anne Mette Jorgensen, 'Filmmaking as Ethnographic Dialogues: Rouch's Family of "Scoundrels" in Niger', *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 20, no. 1, February 2007, pp. 57–73, p. 64.
- 14 Paul Falzone, *Transcendent Ethnography: Designing an Action Research Approach to Ethnographic Film within Cultures of Conflicts*, Sage Publications, London, 2004, pp. 330–1: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750304045946>; Terence Turner, 'The Social Dynamics of Video Media in an Indigenous Society: The Cultural Meaning and the Personal Politics of Video Making in Kayapo Communities', *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, Fall 1991, pp. 68–76, pp. 71–2. Anne Poelina, personal communication, 2011.
- 15 Magali McDuffie, Anne Poelina and Ian Perdrisat, *The Nyikina Cultural Centre*, DVD, March 2007, Madjulla Inc, Broome, <<http://www.magalimcduffie.com/films/2017/12/9/the-nyikina-cultural-centre>>.
- 16 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Garland

- Publishing Inc., New York and London, 1977 [1954].
- 17 Magali McDuffie, *The Filmmaking Process*, Figshare, 2015.
<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.1579419.v1>
- 18 Sarah Pink (ed.), *Visual Interventions: Applied Visual Anthropology*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2007, p. 1.
- 19 Hattersley, p. 130.
- 20 Magali McDuffie, *Three Sisters, Women of High Degree*, Madjulla Inc, Broome, 2015, <<http://www.magalimcduffie.com/films/2015/9/19/three-sisters-women-of-high-degree-2015>> (Password: Kimberley).
- 21 Magali McDuffie, Anne Poelina, *Anne Poelina: My Story*, 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MO2--PZh9Hw>>; Madjulla Inc., Rosie Mulligan and Magali McDuffie, *Warlangkooroo-Kandarra: Stories of Noonkanbah Country*, 2014.
- 22 Hattersley, p. 44.
- 23 Jessica De Lary Healy, 'The Genealogy of Dialogue: Fieldwork Stories from Arnhem Land', in *The Challenges of Indigenous Peoples: Spectacle or Politics?*, ed. Barbara Glowczewski and Rosita Henry, Bardwell Press, Oxford, 2011; Frans Hoogland and Paddy Roe, in Maybury-Lewis, 1992.
- 24 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey, Penguin Books London, 2003.
- 25 Anne Poelina, 'Action Research to Build the Capacity of Nyikina Indigenous Australians', PhD thesis, University of New England, Armidale NSW, 2009; D. Landry and G. MacLean (eds), *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996.
- 26 Stephen Muecke, 'Narrative and Intervention in Aboriginal Filmmaking Policy', *Continuum*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1994, p. 248; Marcia Langton, *Well, I Heard it on the Radio and Saw it on the Television*, Australian Film Commission, Sydney, 1993, p. 35.
- 27 Jeannie Warbie, personal communication, October 2014
- 28 Anne Poelina, presentation at *Reading the Country Festival*, 2014.
- 29 Magali McDuffie, *Chronology of a Dialogue—Stage 3*, Figshare, 2015.
<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.1579432.v1>
- 30 Anne Poelina, personal communication, 2014.
- 31 Poelina, *Three Sisters, Women of High Degree*, 2015.
- 32 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus [1972-1980]*, Vol. 2, trans Brian Massumi, Continuum, London and New York, 2004.
- 33 Barbara Glowczewski, 'Between Spectacle and Politics: Indigenous Singularities', in *The Challenges of Indigenous Peoples: Spectacle or Politics?*, ed. Barbara Glowczewski and Rosita Henry, Bardwell Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 2.
- 34 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina and London, 2016, pp. 49-50.
- 35 Alexander Hayes, 'Tribunal on the Rights of Nature, Australia, 1 June 2016', <<http://majala.com.au/news/2016-rights-of-nature-tribunal-australia>>; Magali McDuffie, Anne Poelina, *Mardoowarra's Right To Life*, Madjulla Inc; Magali McDuffie Films, Australia, <<http://www.magalimcduffie.com/films/2017/12/2/mardoowarras-right-to-life>> (Password: Kimberley).
- 36 Haraway, pp. 49-50.