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‘Don’t let the Sport and Rec. officer get hold of it’: Indigenous festivals, big aspirations and local knowledge

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Key words

Indigenous, cultural festivals, Australia, wellbeing, festival management and funding.

Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a three-year study that examined the role and significance of Australian Indigenous cultural festivals on community and youth wellbeing. The study found that Indigenous organisations and communities, funded by government and philanthropic agencies, are increasingly using festivals as vehicles to strengthen social connections, intergenerational knowledge transmission and wellbeing (Phipps & Slater 2010). However, at both a state and national level, Indigenous affairs routinely continue to assert social norms based upon non-Indigenous national ideals of experience and wellbeing. On the basis of the empirical findings, it becomes clear that there is a need to promote and support public spaces, such as Indigenous cultural festivals, that foster culturally appropriate, localised and stable Indigenous control, voices and values. This paper focuses on two distinctly different festivals, both with the express aim of celebrating Indigenous culture: Croc Fest and the Dreaming Festival.

Biography

Dr Lisa Slater is a Research Fellow at the Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia. Her research seeks to understand and define the processes of neo-colonialism, the conditions of production of contemporary ‘Indigeneity’ and settler-colonial belonging with a particular focus on the role of cultural events – especially Indigenous festivals – as sites for the expression of Indigenous sovereignty and ethical inter-cultural engagement.

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Introduction

In her opening address at the 2008 Telstra Art Awards, senior Yolngu woman and artist Bunduk Marika stated, 'Before colonization Yolngu never had to justify their existence. Since then it is what we do on a daily basis'. Lying back on a picnic blanket, sipping champagne with friends, I sat up and pulled out my notebook. I was at the tail end of several weeks of fieldwork on a research project that examined the impact of Indigenous festivals on the health and wellbeing of community (see Phipps & Slater 2010). Scribbling in the dim light, I wrote, how do people have wellbeing if they have to justify their existence? I begin here because after more than five years of conducting research on Indigenous cultural festivals, I have come to understand, as much as they are vehicles for celebrating culture, festivals are fundamentally about the fight for existence. Or to put it another way, if wellbeing is about 'beingness', then it is reliant upon the nourishing of life worlds that sustain peoples (see Slater 2010). There is a need to forge avenues for greater Indigenous participation in and access to the high standards of living that is afforded most in a prosperous western country. But there is a need also for creating social spaces where Indigenous people's experiences are respected and valued and can be asserted over mainstream reality, and most importantly state power.

This is a very dour introduction. But I start here because I think it exemplifies a conflict that is not only apparent in service delivery in Indigenous Australia but in the burgeoning arena of Indigenous cultural festivals. Increasingly government and non-government agencies are supporting cultural events as vehicles for fostering social cohesion (see Gibson & Connell 2011; Mulligan 2006). Notably, Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations, communities or individuals run a diversity of cultural festivals right across Australia. Over the years when I've asked Indigenous people to explain why festivals are worth having I hear very similar responses: to celebrate, share and most importantly maintain and strengthen culture. Concurrently, governments and the media, and as a consequence much of mainstream Australia, routinely identify Indigenous culture (or more accurately what is broadly conceived as such) as a major impediment to Indigenous socio-economic 'development' (see Hinkson 2010b; Martin, 2006). In the recent edited collection examining anthropology and politics in Aboriginal Australia, *Culture Crisis*, Melinda Hinkson (2010, p. xiv), notes that Indigenous 'culture' has become an object of critical attention: a 'site of intense, future focused contestation'. Our study found that Indigenous organisations and communities, funded by government and philanthropic agencies, are increasingly using cultural festivals as vehicles to strengthen social connections, intergenerational knowledge transmission and wellbeing (Phipps & Slater 2010). Yet it has become commonplace for media, public intellectuals and politicians alike at the very least to worry about Indigenous culture, if not diagnose 'it' as the problem. Despite this governments are funding Indigenous cultural events. This may mean that within the bureaucracy there are huge inconsistencies or that there is an identification of good and bad Indigenous culture, and government agencies are determined to fund the former and discourage the latter. To do so, necessitates the creation of false binaries and (de)valuing Indigenous life worlds according to mainstream principles.

At both a state and national level Indigenous affairs routinely continue to assert social norms based upon non-Indigenous national ideals of experience and wellbeing. In another article, I critique the current damaging determinations made of Indigenous 'culture', however here I wish to draw readers' attention to ways in which mainstreaming – that is the assertion of non-Indigenous values, aspirations and notions of wellbeing over that of Indigenous peoples – plays out in the production of Indigenous festivals, and the complications and conflicts that arise (Slater 2012). At a local level, the frustration is often palpable. Producing a festival needs forms of professional input and funding, but in many cases this can result in Indigenous values and aspirations being sidelined. Given that most arts workers – in this case festival directors and managers – are non-Indigenous (as I am) and also, like most Australians, have little experience of and in Indigenous Australia, how then do or should arts managers

respond to this disjuncture? There is no generic answer, however, I think it is a serious issue worthy of consideration for those working, or intending to, in Indigenous Australia. To that end, this paper will provide reflections upon some of the research findings of two very different professionally produced festivals – Croc and the Dreaming festivals – which both have the express aim of celebrating Indigenous culture. On the basis of my empirical findings, it becomes clear that to improve Indigenous wellbeing there is a need to promote and support public spaces, such as Indigenous cultural festivals, that foster culturally appropriate, localised and stable Indigenous control and ‘authorship’. These cultural spaces are only one element in a rich and complex mosaic, but they are important and even more so they need to be driven by Indigenous visions and voices.

With the support of the Telstra Foundation from 2007 (and from 2008 supplemented by the Australian Research Council¹) myself and former RMIT University colleagues worked on a three year research project that investigated the role and significance of Indigenous cultural festivals in wellbeing outcomes for Indigenous communities and their young people (Phipps & Slater 2010). At the initial request of the Telstra Foundation we studied festivals and activities supported under their triennial funding strategy: Crocfests in Shepparton (Victoria), Thursday Island (Torres Strait) and Derby (Western Australia), and the linked youth media project in Aurukun (Cape York, Queensland); Garma in Arnhem Land, and The Dreaming Festival in South East Queensland. We conducted over one hundred structured and informal interviews, made observations and analysis through more than twenty festival and field site visits, analysed relevant public statements, policy documents, reports and media representations, and extensively reviewed relevant Australian and international literature. We undertook lengthy strategic interviews with festival organisers and participants and photo-narrative method for exploring less easily articulated experiences of festivalgoers, and constructed detailed profiles relating to the history and character of the communities in which the research was conducted (Phipps 2010, p. 16-17).

Australian Indigenous Festivals

Across Australia, and globally, Indigenous cultural festivals are growing in number and influence, ranging from small community events to those of national and international reach and significance (Phipps & Slater 2010). There are literally hundreds of Indigenous festivals and celebrations, most of which are local events driven by community organisations and individuals, with very little funding or outside support, with a focus on contemporary cultural practices: sport, music, art or ‘traditional’ culture. The driving force of these events is often, in ‘mainstream speak’, community wellbeing: gathering people to celebrate, share and remember, and clear a public space that is dedicated to the values and aspirations of the people and place. Notably, as Michelle Duffy (2005) suggests, because festivals are structured events they bring groups and communities together to mark out particular socio-political, historical and cultural affiliations. Like mainstream festivals, Indigenous festivals are deployed as a means to enhance community creativity, belonging, and wellbeing and thus nourish community resilience. Both the energy and the vulnerability of the cultural field are comparable with Gibson and Stewart’s (2009), research findings on Australian rural festivals. However, Indigenous communities and festivals are also highly distinctive (Phipps 2010). Scholars have recognized festivals and community celebrations as important events that provide both material and symbolic means of responding to and coping with change (Gibson & Connell 2010; Gibson & Stewart 2009; Mulligan 2006). And in Indigenous Australia there is a lot of change.

Non-Indigenous festivals and community celebrations are also burgeoning. In recent

¹The project was further funded by Australian Research Council under the Linkage grants scheme for an expanded project making some international comparison with the Australian material, ‘Globalising Indigeneity: Indigenous cultural festivals and wellbeing in Australia and the Asia-Pacific’ (LP0882877, 2008-10).

years there has been an increasing academic, government and philanthropic interest in community celebrations, and in particular the relationship between community art and wellbeing (see Mulligan 2006; Phipps & Slater 2010). As the three-year research project that this article grew out of is testament to, Rosita Henry (2008) argues Indigenous festivals have grown in tandem with state policies that foster the celebration of culture as a further means to govern people. For all the positive aspects of Indigenous festivals, like all arenas of Indigenous lives, they operate within a web of government and not-governmental agencies and corporate agendas, values and power relations. Indeed, funding and supporting such events could be regarded as cunning forms of 'governmentality'. As Henry writes:

the state deceptively asserts its presence within the festivals. Indeed, agents and agencies of the state colonize the festivals, so that the festivals become prime sights for recognition of the "effects" of the state (2008, p. 53).

This can be observed most readily in what events and programs are funded. For example at the Barunga Festival the Department of Lands and Planning, Road Safety Branch, sponsors the 'Road Safety Song Competition'. Local bands become the medium to deliver government directives 'about safe and appropriate behavior for drivers, passengers and pedestrians' (Barunga Festival 2010). Thus they perform their usual repertoire with the addition of lyrics such as, 'don't drink and drive', 'wear your seatbelt'.... For all the import of road safety awareness, the means of delivery are paternalistic and it is assumed the problem is one of 'education and promotion' and people only need to learn 'proper' conduct and they will adjust their behavior (Notably, the competition is popular but that might have little to do with the 'awareness' campaign and much more to do with the opportunity it affords to perform in front of countrymen). However, partaking in such events should not simply be interpreted as submitting to the process of assimilation or naivety. Indigenous festivals and public performances have long been creative means to negotiate and intervene in forms of state power, to mark out a continuing presence and legitimacy, and to assert some agency in a rapidly changing world dominated by mainstream values (Henry 2008, p. 54).

In turn, philanthropic and government agencies are increasingly receiving applications for funding for Indigenous festivals. Notably, the Australian Council of the Arts' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Arts Board (ATSIAB 2008) as a part of its Industry development strategy is supporting festival events in recognition of their artistic, cultural and economic benefits for Indigenous peoples. Telstra Foundation initiated the three-year research project I was involved in, after identifying a need for evidence-based research. They were receiving numerous funding applications that relied upon anecdotal evidence to demonstrate the connection between Indigenous celebrations and strengthening social wellbeing (Phipps & Slater 2010). What became clear to me during the research was the number of government and non-government bodies that were initiating, or responding to the thirst for, Indigenous community celebrations and events. However, funding agencies and Indigenous communities are often driven by differing ambitions. Add to this, festivals are run by diverse and divergent bodies – be they community agencies, such as sport and recreational or arts workers, Indigenous organisations/councils, professional events managers or energised and passionate individuals – all with varied capacities and resources. All events, no matter how big or small, rely on volunteers, be they local or from elsewhere, the goodwill of community – individual and organisations – Elders and traditional owners approval and support, compliance with council regulations and some form of sponsorship, even if it is the local shop. Not to mention, as any arts/community sector worker knows, the relentless demands of applying for funds, reporting and acquittal. And here lies the challenge; to listen and respond to Indigenous voices, visions and values over and above all the noise of mainstream agendas, aspirations, fears and bureaucracy, and the relentless demands of producing a professional event in a highly intercultural space. With this in mind, I will present my findings, with the express aim of providing evidence to

demonstrate that if festivals are to positively impact upon social and cultural wellbeing, it is vital that event managers and stakeholders attend to and respect the social-cultural worlds of the people they serve.

Croc Fest was a performing arts and educational festival for school students in region and remote communities around Australia, which ran for ten years from 1998 to 2007. Over those years, the event grew in size and number and by 2007 fifty festivals had been staged in remote and rural Australia. In 2007 there were seven sites around the country with an estimated 19,000 students projected to attend from 475 primary and high schools (Parbury 2007). Unlike the other festivals studied, Croc had an exclusive youth and educational emphasis and a more generic mode of delivery across communities and regions. Croc was a sister event of the Rock Eisteddfod Challenge, and was produced by Indigenous Festivals Australia – managed from the head office in Chatswood, Sydney – but despite the title it did not have Indigenous management. The primary target audience was Indigenous students (although not exclusively), and the festivals were held over three days and visiting schools camp on site. The highlight was the non-competitive evening performances in which participating schools' perform a five to eight minute devised piece chosen by the students. During the day there were a range of activities, which at each site included a careers expo, 'I want to be' workshop, in which students chose a desired career, health expo, sports clinic, a disco and workshops – many initiatives of local and state government agencies. Notably, Croc festival was a platform for state and federal government initiatives and processes and attracted significant funding from an array of government and non-governmental partners, which included the Federal Department of Education, State Education and Health Departments.

The Dreaming Festival, held over the June long weekend near Woodford in southeast Queensland, began in 2005. Running over three days and four nights, the program features multi-art forms, including film and literature components, performing arts, new media and digital technologies, comedy, ceremony, exhibitions, visual arts, craft workshops, music program and forums. While the impact of the Dreaming on the Murri host community of Jinibara land is important to understand, the emphasis of this festival is not specifically local, and involves participation on a much larger scale (Phipps & Slater 2010). Participants and performers are drawn from more than eighty clans and sixty Indigenous nations: international guests are primarily from the Pacific and the Americas. The festival is of international standing and a specific objective is to support, and develop, Indigenous Australian performers, artists, musicians and works to gain exposure and to grow touring opportunities (Interview Rhoda Roberts 2007). The Dreaming has an Indigenous Artistic Director, who over the duration of my research was Rhoda Roberts (who initiated and developed the festival), and is produced by the Queensland Folk Federation. The aim of the festival is to showcase local, national and international Indigenous artists in a contemporary celebration of culture and Indigenous excellence.

Croc Fest

At the 1996 Rock Eisteddfod Challenge held in Cairns, Normington State School performance was of a Friday night in their community. The setting was the 'Purple Club' and the story they told was of drinking and violence. In the crowd was the then Minister for Health, Mike Horan, and according to Peter Sjoquist (Interview 2007), the Minister was deeply moved and concerned by the performance. In acknowledging that the young performers were Indigenous, he asked Peter Sjoquist, producer of the Rock Eisteddfod Challenge, if there was a way to involve Indigenous students from 'remote areas of Queensland in a performing arts event which would promote important education and health messages' (Croc Festival). This was the beginning of what was to become Croc Festival, which promoted itself as an innovative performing arts and educational program for primary and high school students in regional and remote

communities around Australia. It aimed to inspire and encourage Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and communities to celebrate youth and Indigenous culture (Croc Festival). According to Executive Producer, Peter Sjoquist (Interview 2007), when they were setting up Croc Festival they asked, 'How can we be the catalyst for the creation of an environment that is fun and exciting, which helps the school system attract the students to come to school more often?'. Over the ten years the aims developed into encouraging students to engage in education; improve school attendance, literacy, numeracy and oracy; build self-esteem, social skills, goal setting and teamwork; promote and develop healthy life styles; expose students to wider career options and pathways; promote Indigenous culture, multiculturalism, reconciliation and respect; develop creative skills; and have access to performing and visual arts (Parbury 2007). Notably these are wide ranging and ambitious aims, and for all the benefits afforded by Croc Fest, arguably the focus on 'educational' outcomes masks not only what such events can achieve, but also local ambitions and knowledge.

Indigenous youth's high level of social and educational disengagement from the education process, Jerry Schwab (2006) writes, is a looming crisis for many remote Indigenous (and regional and urban) communities. Arguably Croc festival was a response to the impending crisis and also a reflection of mainstream Australia's culture of intervention in what is perceived to be 'Indigenous problems'. From my research, and that of earlier evaluations by CIRCA (2005 2004) there is some evidence that if attending Croc was used as an incentive than it did have positive effects on school attendance in the lead up to the festival. However, although some teachers noted that a few students who were irregular attendees became more regular after Croc, there is little evidence to suggest the event had significant impacts on school attendance. School principals, although supportive of Croc, were quick to remind me that educational achievements are based, amongst other things, on a good curriculum and quality teachers. It has been demonstrated that the social and emotional wellbeing of students improves when formal schooling experiences are connected in some way to the knowledge they bring from home, and to not do so has negative disempowering consequences, which can impact upon culture or social cohesion (Cummins, cited in Dunbar 2007). Making education locally and culturally relevant is one of the key challenges for the future of Indigenous education (Schwab 2006; Dunbar 2007; Sarra 2003). If a key to improving education is making it more locally and culturally orientated than events that aim to improve attendance and engagement must also do so. During the research, it became very clear that community members understood the importance and value of events being locally orientated. Yet, there were concerns that as Croc grew it became less locally aligned.

Croc Fest offered students from rural and remote communities performance opportunities. The arts are a fundamental component of education: they empower self and communal expression, allow reflections upon, and the preservation of, history and heritage and can create visions for the future. In an increasingly complex and multicultural world creativity is and will continue to be a key element in us living in an equitable and sustainable world. Yet many schools in rural and remote Australia do not have the resources to implement an arts program. Croc Fest performances allowed schools without a consistent arts curriculum an avenue to do so and a professional, local or regional, showcase. Watching Croc performances, the students' and community enjoyment and pride was very obvious. As many reflected, the performances gave the students an opportunity to shine, which has significant impacts upon self-esteem and confidence. The students experience success and recognition, and during my fieldwork I consistently heard that the positive benefits this offered were immeasurable and 'beyond words'. The process of working on their performances, as teachers and parents commented, encouraged teamwork, time management skills, commitment and the surmounting of obstacles and fears.

An important element of schooling, as Indigenous educationalist Chris Sarra (2003), notes, is to build confidence. What became very clear during the research was, as the former Aurukun School Principal, Liz Mackie (Interview 2008) said, the real benefits of Croc are social and emotional development: students gain life skills and build their confidence. The students not only have fun mixing with other children from across their region but in so doing, acquire important social skills and are proud of gaining new friends. She noted that for students living in remote areas, Croc offers them the opportunity to experience surmounting obstacles and challenges, such as flying on a plane or being away from family for the first time. As the students learn to negotiate the bigger world they grow in confidence and later teachers and family can use these experiences to remind children of what they achieved and that they can face and overcome challenges. For many students in remote or small communities they have limited opportunities to see the world beyond their own townships and to mix with children from outside their family and community. Croc Fest afforded students exposure to a bigger world – be it career options, activities or mixing with sport stars or people from their region or Australia. The kids from Aurukun (and no doubt other communities) were thrilled by the variety of shops and ‘bustling’ street life of Thursday Island. To many young people living in urban areas, or whose lives offer them many opportunities, this might appear to be of limited value. However, Croc allowed children to grow in confidence not only through their performances but also by engaging in activities and developing social skills by mixing with bigger groups of people or strangers. Many people commented that the government’s focus should not necessarily be on using Croc to improve school attendance but on more intrinsic values such as emotional and social development. As teachers and parents enthusiastically noted, they witnessed their students being engaged, having fun and rapidly growing in self-esteem. Notably self-esteem, confidence and flexibility are important elements of resilience, which is a known protective factor (Grunstein, 2002).

Croc performances allow students to shine. They also provide a social space for children and young people to develop identities and life narratives from their own experiences and values, rather than what is reflected back at them from public discourse. Katrina Mohamed (Interview 2009), a key Indigenous co-coordinator for Shepparton Croc Festival, said the event was an opportunity for whole of community to learn about Yorta Yorta history and language and to appreciate and value local Indigenous people. When asked why he supported Croc, Indigenous leader Paul Briggs (Interview 2008) commented that he recognised the benefits that their Swan Hill brothers and sisters had gained from it. What it offers, he said, is a sharing and strengthening of identity and a place where Indigenous identity is valued, not for what they can give other people but Indigeneity itself is experienced as positive. His concern is that there is a ready available ‘corporate’ identity – an homogenised and static image of ‘real Indigenous people’, which has commercial and tourism appeal – but is not reflective of people’s lived experience. In so doing, it limits, denies and devalues the multiplicity and dynamism of contemporary Indigeneity. Many Indigenous people’s identity is challenge by non-Indigenous people because they do fit the stereotype of Indigeneity: often this is due to being light-skinned, living in urban or regional centres or working in mainstream professions. Intercultural celebrations hold the potential for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to see and acknowledge the heterogeneity of contemporary Indigeneity, which in turn potentially strengthens Indigenous youth identity by providing positive representations and recognition of diversity. Where heterogeneity and difference are valued, young people can feel their identity is safe and respected, which could lead them to be more inclined to participate, and feel more included, in mainstream society.

Croc Fest allowed school students in rural and remote Australia to participate in activities and workshops, have an avenue to careers markets and the arts that are usually only available to young people in more populated, urban or coastal regions. In the towns and regions where I undertook research, there was great support for their children and young people having access to what Croc had to offer, and praise for the

organisation's expertise in event management. People spoke of the planning as exceptional, and appreciated that only a professional organisation could delivery such a big event that involved so many people and students from across the region. Although it was a contentious issue that Croc Fest was run and organised from Sydney, many involved in the event thought there was adequate local ownership and control. It was clear that people felt that Croc helped to build community capacity by bringing people together and, as Ian Pressley (Interview 2008), CEO of Weipa Town Authority, commented, ownership comes through the 'challenge of community coming together and making it work'. Kristie Lynch (Interview 2009), from Shepparton Council, responded that nothing went wrong, which she put down to ownership and engagement. When asking people how they measured the success of Croc, the reply was often about engagement – the children engaged in activities and had fun and a broad cross section of the community attended the night performances. Notably, Croc contributed directly to forms of capacity building by providing Indigenous students and locals with an opportunity to be involved in organisational aspects and running activities². In Shepparton, young Indigenous students enrolled in sports courses at the Academy ran the Croc sports clinic, which allowed them to gain experience, build confidence and to establish networks, which in turn could provide a career path and opportunities for others to value their capabilities.

However, whether the Croc model provided for enough local control, capacity building and flexibility was the source of very differing opinions. There were concerns by some, and noted by the Federal Education Department, that as Croc Fest grew local capacity building and ownership were diminishing. It is a difficult balancing act – to create a big, professional event and to ensure that local people maintain control and the event serves their needs. Notably, a CIRCA Evaluation (2005) recommended that there were opportunities for more community ownership, which could develop local capacity. It was clear that many people were committed to Croc Fest, but also wanted the event to further contribute to Indigenous empowerment and not to diminish or replace local initiatives. There was a strong sense that big events need outside organisation because most regional and remote areas do not have the local resources. It must be noted, however, that this was not the view of some people we spoke to in the Northern Territory. Syd Stirling (Interview 2008), the former Deputy Chief Minister and member for Nhulunbuy, considered that they could not only run their own local events, but that there were also few educational outcomes from Croc festivals. However, as Paul Briggs (Interview 2008) said, Shepparton wants Croc or something like it, but they need longevity, and community control and ownership. There are risks, he went on to say, that big events like Croc could swamp smaller initiatives. It is necessary that the power doesn't lie with outside organisations because the communities are then held to ransom and when it is gone all is lost. As he and others made clear, Croc is not cost neutral. Even if it doesn't cost money, it is a huge investment in energy and self-esteem: energy that could go into other initiatives. Shepparton Indigenous leaders noted Croc Fest needed to be a part of a mosaic of local initiatives that recognise, acknowledge and celebrate Indigenous culture and heritage as a part of wider history of a prosperous community (Shepparton Croc festival opening address 16 October 2007). Reciprocity and cultural affirmation are fundamental elements for improving Indigenous wellbeing.

A deficiency model often fuels Indigenous affairs and non-government responses to Indigenous disadvantage (see Altman & Hinkson 2007; Martin 2006). There were concerns by some that Croc Fest was tied to a similar model: as I was told, 'send in the southern stars and artists, which ignores what is already there, and prevents a building of capacity'. Those who thought that the event could be improved to grow local potential highlighted the lack of flexibility in the 'road show' model, which resulted in lost opportunities. They believed that the energy and enthusiasm for Croc demonstrated that there were opportunities to generate greater community ownership, capacity and

²According to Vic Health, Capacity building is a new term 'for the familiar concepts of community and workforce development. Capacity building taps into existing abilities of individuals, communities, organisations or systems to increase involvement, decision-making and ownership of issues'. It is reliant upon partnerships and working across sectors and boundaries (n.d, 1).

career paths. It was also felt that local talent was under utilised, especially artists and leaders, and these people could be employed to run activities and workshops. Initially the workshops might not be as professional or run as smoothly as Croc events; however it would provide a space for capacity building, community showcasing and role modeling. Some people spoke of wanting a broad based model that is adaptable to local needs and in which the delivery organisation works with community leaders to further develop leadership and sustainability and provide a model or 'how to' manual, and mentor individuals and organisations to run their own events, albeit on a smaller scale. In all the regions in which we undertook research, there was a recognition and appreciation of the benefits that Croc brought; most notably that it allowed students to shine and brought people and organisations together. However, to contribute to sustainable positive change, to borrow the words of David Martin (2006, p. 13), 'the process must involve working with the strengths, capacities, passions and commitments which people themselves have'. Building upon local skills and competency can result in transformation and community development and also help ensure the event is sustainable.

The Dreaming Festival

The Croc and Dreaming Festivals lie in stark contrast: where Croc promotes pride in Indigenous identity as a means to engage children in mainstream education and career paths, the Dreaming is a creative site for the expression of dynamic contemporary cultures and connecting local and global Indigeneity. Arguably, one of the Dreaming's most important outcomes is to provide a public space in which heterogeneous 'performances' of Indigeneity are valued and co-present. Importantly, as I (Slater 2007), have written elsewhere, the festival does not privilege a particular representation of Indigeneity; rather it gathers a diverse range of performers and forum participants from vastly different places. The range of performances and divergent identities presented at the Dreaming defies anyone's ability to define and categorise Indigenous identity. In providing a social space for multiple and contradictory performances of Indigeneity the festival helps to destabilise the persistent image of the 'real', 'authentic', Indigenous person, which has both its noble and ignoble forms. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are surrounded by First Nations People who do not conform to 'pre-packaged', and indeed pre-colonial, images of Indigeneity. Not only are there performances by urban hip-hop artists, comedians, drag queens, and galleries which promote urban and regional based photography and art, but also those people and communities who would readily be considered 'traditional', and too often perceived as outside modern Australia (despite that they are living in the contemporary) are seen not only performing but also walking around the site, listening to bands and socialising. They are people going about and enjoying the festival. This is not to say that at the festival people are not exoticized or do not have their identity questioned, but rather that public spaces that enable representations of the multiplicity of contemporary Indigeneity play a vital role in challenging and disrupting the strangle hold of colonial representations of Indigeneity. To be an 'author' of civic life it is not only necessary to literally have a voice in public debate, but importantly for one's identity to be recognised as legitimate. Hence diverse and divergent representations of Indigeneity – across the multi-art forms – play a vital role in overturning stereotypes, which limit Indigenous people's role in contemporary Australian life. The Dreaming privileges competing identities, histories, perspectives and desires. In so doing, the festival creates a space for the many who are rendered voiceless by the cult of authenticity (Panagia 2006, p. 122; Slater 2007).

Phillips (cited in Maddison 2009, p. 183) asks, what does it mean to be black in a changing world. A question that could be posed to every one in some way: what does it mean to be a woman, a man, a white settler Australian? But it has particular weight for peoples who have been historically marginalised, colonised and categorised. Yin Paradies (2006 p. 356) argues that there is a need for a discursive space in which to

debate the meaning of Indigeneity in contemporary Australia. In our interview, Lydia Miller (2008), Director of ATSIAB, spoke of cultural festivals as sites where Indigenous people are actively engaged in the important work of questioning and challenging what is contemporary Indigeneity. The Melbourne based visual artist and Wemba Wemba woman, Paola Balla, said that the festival's greatest strength is in 'presenting Indigenous arts and culture in the form that it is in right now', especially the very new and cutting edge, and the 'modern and contemporary are presented as being as important and valid as the traditional forms' (Interview 2009). What is reflected very strongly in interviews is the Dreaming festival, to borrow Michael Dodson's (2003) words, is a socio-cultural space that allows Indigenous visions to create worlds of meaning in which people relate to one another and the wider world. People gather to not only celebrate Indigenous cultures but also to tend dynamic living cultures; in this sense the festival is a space for performing, discussing and negotiating contemporary culture and identity, and provides much needed social space for affirming Indigenous visions and aspirations.

Cultural festivals are social spaces in which innovation and creativity can occur, which is necessary for sustaining and renewing coherence between the past and present. Louise Partos and Reneta Glencross (Interview 2009), from Artback NT said that festivals are a platform for developing artists and cultural maintenance: 'dancers are knowledge and law keepers and need funds to do so'. They went on to say that the Dreaming gives performers the ability to be creative. The Tjunpi women's 2009 grass dance was experimental: the dancers changed routines and were playful with the audience. The Chooky dancers (from Elcho Island), they said, changed countrymen's views of dancing: they thought if they could be that playful then it allowed others to do so (Interview 2009). The festival is not only presenting Indigenous art and culture; it is actively engaged in developing work and professionalising emerging artists.

What often goes unrecognised is the role national or local festivals, and community cultural development programs play in sustaining Indigenous cultural expression: performing and visual arts largely come from people and communities being supported at a grassroots level. For example, traditional dance troupes are often developed from elders being taken out on country, with young people, and practicing ceremony, which is then adapted for public performance through intensive negotiations and performed at community or regional festivals or gatherings, which up-skills troupes in the chain of professional development toward larger festivals, such as the Dreaming. According to Louise Partos (Interview 2009), from Artback NT, the dancers who performed at the Dreaming have usually had two to three years' development in community, which is also important to intergenerational exchange. Artback have been doing this work for ten years and they argue festivals are a platform for the development of artists and an income base and are sites for cultural maintenance.

In public discourse it has become distressingly familiar to hear of intergenerational breakdown in Indigenous communities, and the associated social and cultural disintegration. On the contrary, one of the most familiar comments I heard from performers and festival attendees alike, was that attending the Dreaming Festival afforded people quality time with friends and family. Tom E. Lewis (Artistic Director, Djilpin dancers and Walking with Spirits festival, Beswick, NT) referred to festivals as 'medicines for families' (pers. comm. 2009). Many young people spoke fondly and appreciatively of sitting with elders, sharing stories, and how deeply connected they felt to both the person and, through them, Indigenous cultural identity. It is beyond the scope of the study to trace the influences or longevity of such social connections, however interviews, confirmed that the Dreaming festival is supporting or creating spaces for not only intergenerational connection but also translation, and thus supporting social connectedness and cultural maintenance.

Jeremy Gaia (Interview 2008) manages the Minh Pora Pormpuraaw dancers (and the former Laura Dance festival Director), and the troupe attended the Dreaming festival in 2007. He sees both Laura and the Dreaming as important vehicles to keep culture strong and strengthen individual and community life. Young people, he said, are swamped by mainstream culture and cannot see a place for their own culture in the dominant world and this has severe impacts on their self-esteem. Preparation for festival performances plays an important role in reconnecting young people to elders and culture, and performances affirm that Indigenous culture has a valued place in the contemporary world. The Narunnga and Wirangu woman Lee-Ann Buckskin (Interview 2009), an arts producer and First Nations Arts and Culture Program manager for Carclew Youth Arts in South Australia, understands the Dreaming festival as providing a space for intergenerational cultural translation: a process that is challenging, ongoing and takes place in sites where young people work closely with elders. The Dreaming 2009 saw a revitalisation of culture and intergenerational exchange for the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY), encompassing 103,000 square kilometres of remote country in the northwest region of South Australia. After a lengthy consultation with the elders to address the need for younger men and women from communities to be involved in their Inma (dance cycles), cultural leader Tapaya Edwards and young dancers led Rikina Inma at the Dreaming festival. The revitalisation of the Inma came under the guidance of Buckskin, who over the last few years has been instrumental in working closely with cultural custodians across the APY lands to produce creative projects for people aged 26 and under (Interview Buckskin 2009; pers. comm. Rhoda Roberts 3rd Sept. 2009).

Buckskin spoke of the breakdown of social bonds, and the pressure young people are under to keep culture strong, and the distractions and attractions of contemporary mainstream culture, which often results in great distress, confusion and inertia. Young Indigenous people, as Hinkson and Smith write, do not just make a choice between two worlds, or simply move between them, selecting the best both have to offer. To think this is possible, 'fails to comprehend the processes through which representations, cultural identities and life worlds are produced and reproduced' (Hinkson and Smith 2005, p. 164). In the lead up to the Dreaming, the young dancers rehearsed a great deal and were confident about their routine. Notably, it is very challenging for young people to understand how the festival environment works, the programming, scheduling and to translate ceremony that often continue for days, into twenty-minute dance routines without losing its integrity (Interview Buckskin 2009). However, just prior and during the festivals, elders changed the routine, which is their cultural prerogative. In respect for the elders, the young people did as they were told, however such instances result in them feeling under further pressure and inadequate, and lacking in autonomy. These are difficult issues, and I do not write about them lightly, but as Lee-Ann Buckskin offered, for all the challenges of dancing at the Dreaming Festival, it importantly enables the necessary discussions to begin with the elders about the young people needing autonomy, room for 'creativity' and support and encouragement (Interview 2009). Louise Partos and Renata Glencross (Interview 2009), Artback, NT, share Buckskin's sentiments that festivals, and more localised community celebrations and community cultural development, play pivotal roles in cultural maintenance and strengthening intergenerational relationships. It is vital to create cultural spaces that help strengthen young Indigenous people's relationships with their own culture and community and foster a contemporary Indigenous youth identity. The Dreaming Festival is a context for the contemporary negotiation and circulation of Indigenous identity, intergenerational connections and cultural transmission (Myers 1994; Slater 2010).

Conclusion

In a discussion about how to ensure Indigenous aspirations and values are the focus of community celebrations, an interviewee pithily said, 'Don't let the Sport and Rec. officer get hold of it'. It remains one of the most telling quotes. He was not only referring to Sports and Recreational officers, present in many Indigenous communities, but to a generalised government or not-for-profit agency worker whose job it is to generate 'cultural activities' to engage youth in 'positive social norms'. His concern and criticisms, shared by many, was that government and mainstream agendas too readily overshadow and sideline local ideals and understandings. In this paper I presented findings from two very different festivals celebrating Indigenous culture, not as an exercise of compare and contrast, but rather because through the research on the Dreaming festival (and other festivals) one can hear with clarity what (and why) Indigenous people are wanting from cultural festivals. In contemporary Australia, where Indigeneity is too often romanticised from a distance or too readily perceived as deficient and dysfunctional, there is even more need for public spaces where Indigenous life worlds (in all its diversity) takes precedence over the mainstream values and experiences. What can too readily happen, with all the goodwill in the world, in the panic (and shame) about the 'crisis' in Indigenous Australia, local aspirations, experiences and knowledge is further silenced. While the research recognises that the diversity of festival types is an important part of their social impact and there is no 'one size fits all' model, certain features can be identified for optimising social and cultural wellbeing outcomes. These include, but are not limited to: culturally appropriate, localised and stable Indigenous control and 'authorship' under a considered governance/management model (this does not always mean Indigenous event management); long-term vision, leadership and support for the event within communities; ongoing Indigenous community consultation and strategic planning; and long-term vision, leadership and support (especially funding) from partner organisations (Phipps & Slater 2010). Indigenous Australians have rich cultures, histories and heritage to draw upon to strengthen individual, family and community wellbeing and to share with and challenge broader Australia.

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