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*LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land*

**Way of the Turtle: Towards empowering community and building culture.**

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**This paper explores examples of cultural and creative projects in relation to 'transdisciplinary' thinking and Indigenous knowledge systems, to frame linkages between place, technology, science and identity.**

*digital divide, online media, Indigenous culture, tools and data, mobile technologies, augmented reality, data art, transdisciplinarity*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

*Way of the Turtle* is a collaborative longitudinal project between Yorta Yorta researcher Lee Joachim and artist Tracey Benson.

In essence, it is a multi-dimensional project which explores interconnected themes of place, country, health, creativity, technology skills transfer, intergenerational and intercultural knowledge sharing. To ascribe a theoretical model or methodology to locate how the project can be defined, transdisciplinarity is probably the closest, which will be discussed.

Transdisciplinary approaches embrace arts, science, and technology with Indigenous knowledge and has the capacity to bring multiple benefits to all these sectors and society at large.

Our project while multi-layered is also nodal in the way that we hope to connect with divergent branches of the academic realm in the arts and sciences fields, as well as creative, community and cultural contexts. Our purpose is pragmatic, focused on positive cultural, social, health and economic outcomes for the Yorta Yorta community.

There are challenges though - for example, how do we open the network more broadly? Also, how do we as cultural practitioners work in a way that can facilitate these connected networks to bring greater social awareness? Another challenge is

how can these networks have a meaningful influence in the areas of government policy setting, educational institutions and funding providers?

How we also think about 'data' in terms of culture is not just a question for collecting institutions; other forms of cultural material are also relevant - sites, kinship structures, cultural practices, genealogy, songlines, storylines, cosmology and language are all incorporated into the data taxonomy.

## 2. FINDING GROUND

Collaboration is a critical element when considering transdisciplinarity; as is the importance of social justice and equity. *The Charter of Transdisciplinarity* (1994) states that:

Whereas an historically unprecedented growth of knowledge is increasing the inequality between those who have and those who do not, thus engendering increasing inequality within and between the different nations of our planet.

The *Way of the Turtle* project is grounded in the goal of social justice and empowerment through the learning and sharing of knowledge through active collaboration.

Our project came by its title through a number of failed grant applications. Upon receiving a rejection letter we had a phone discussion, where it was decided to continue the project despite this setback. Lee said, "it is like the way of the turtle, one of our totems, turtles always get to where they are going, they go around, over and stick their neck out if when they have to." From that point in 2014 our work together has been under the banner of *Way of the Turtle*.

Here is a description of the Turtle totem on a site about spirit animals:

The turtle totem symbolizes our peaceful walk on this earth. It represents the path we take as we embark on our journey through life. In contrast to emotional or spiritual development occurring in bursts, the way of the turtle anchors our personal unfolding in a slow, more grounded series of steps and longer cycles of transformation.

The turtle is also an animal that is an excellent indicator of ecological health of an area, particularly the health of waterways.

## **2.1 Transdisciplinarity and Way of the Turtle**

What makes transdisciplinary process and why is it relevant? It is important to define the difference between transdisciplinary from interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. In short, all of these terms articulate a process that brings together disparate skills, disciplines, knowledge and technologies through the process of collaboration.

Transdisciplinarity has the power to transform and engage on multiple levels.

Basarab Nicolescu states:

Transdisciplinarity complements disciplinary approaches. It occasions the emergence of new data and new interactions from out of the encounter between disciplines. It offers us a new vision of nature and reality.

Not only are there interactions between multifarious forms of knowledge, there is also an acceptance of the tangible and intangible reality of all things, with no one element taking precedence. All are active participants in the process. There is also an acceptance of *the Sacred*, which can be described as the feeling of 'infinite solidarity' and 'that which connects' (Kagan 2011).

Transdisciplinarity in action has a focus on cultural and societal transformation which is holistic and considers the bigger picture. What is also highly relevant is that the ecology is an active player, not merely as a passive subject. Human and non-human actors all have agency in the transdisciplinary context. Kagan states this about ecological art:

Good examples of ecological art link specific multi-dimensional issues – that is issues that combine ecological, social, cultural, political and economic dimensions, with each other.

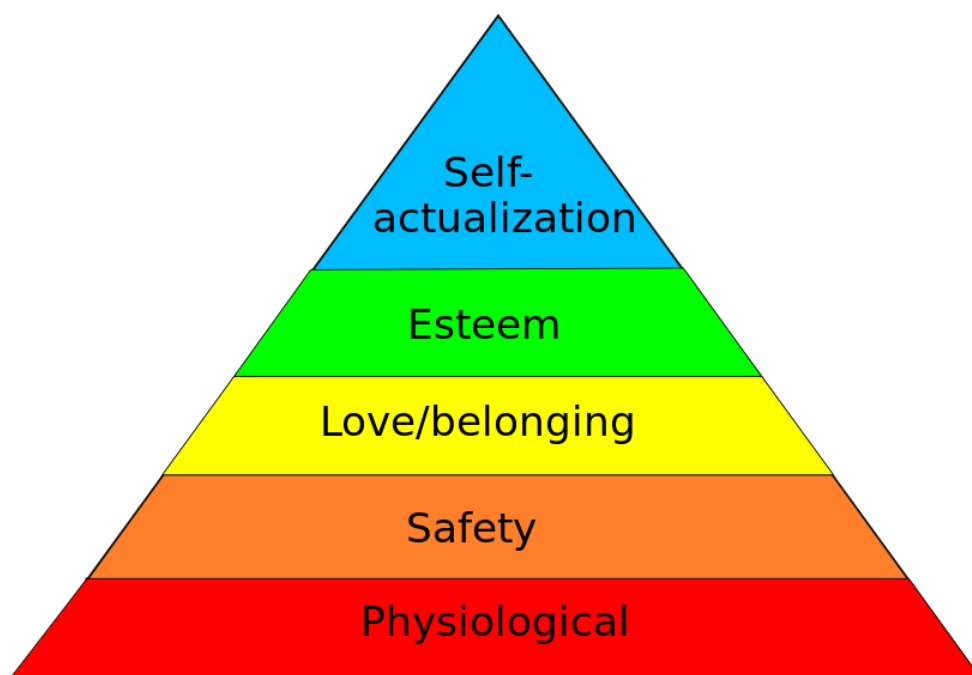
Artists have a critical role to play in this process, not just as enablers of discussion through art, but also to more deeply analyse the challenges that are presented through such immersive processes. There is no separation between art and life as the transdisciplinary process acknowledges all ‘actors’ in the space, including the non-human.

For transdisciplinarity to be successful, there also needs to be like-minded systems in place which support such forms of inquiry. For example, the model needs to also be applied to government policy development and funding, with active engagement from the bureaucracy in the process. This is quite a radical proposal, where the funding body is no longer a passive source of funding but an essential piece of the puzzle, actively working with the makers. This is no doubt a Utopian view, but in order to conceive of transdisciplinarity in an ideal setting, systems would support not thwart the process (Nelson 2012).

Transdisciplinarity also supports the notion of all forms of knowledge being of equal value, like an ecosystem.

In *Way of the Turtle* the concerns cover the linkages between health, environment, science, art and technology. The health of humans and nonhumans are considered equal and act as part of a balance. “We are the land and the land is we. The water that falls upon the land, flows over and under our land is represented of our blood, sweat and tears...” This belief of the Yorta Yorta peoples is essential to the character of non-humans survival sequestrate be they land or water dependant non humans, inclusive of intangibles. All connected through law of contiguity for holistic health and wellbeing measurable, to lose one is to lose many.

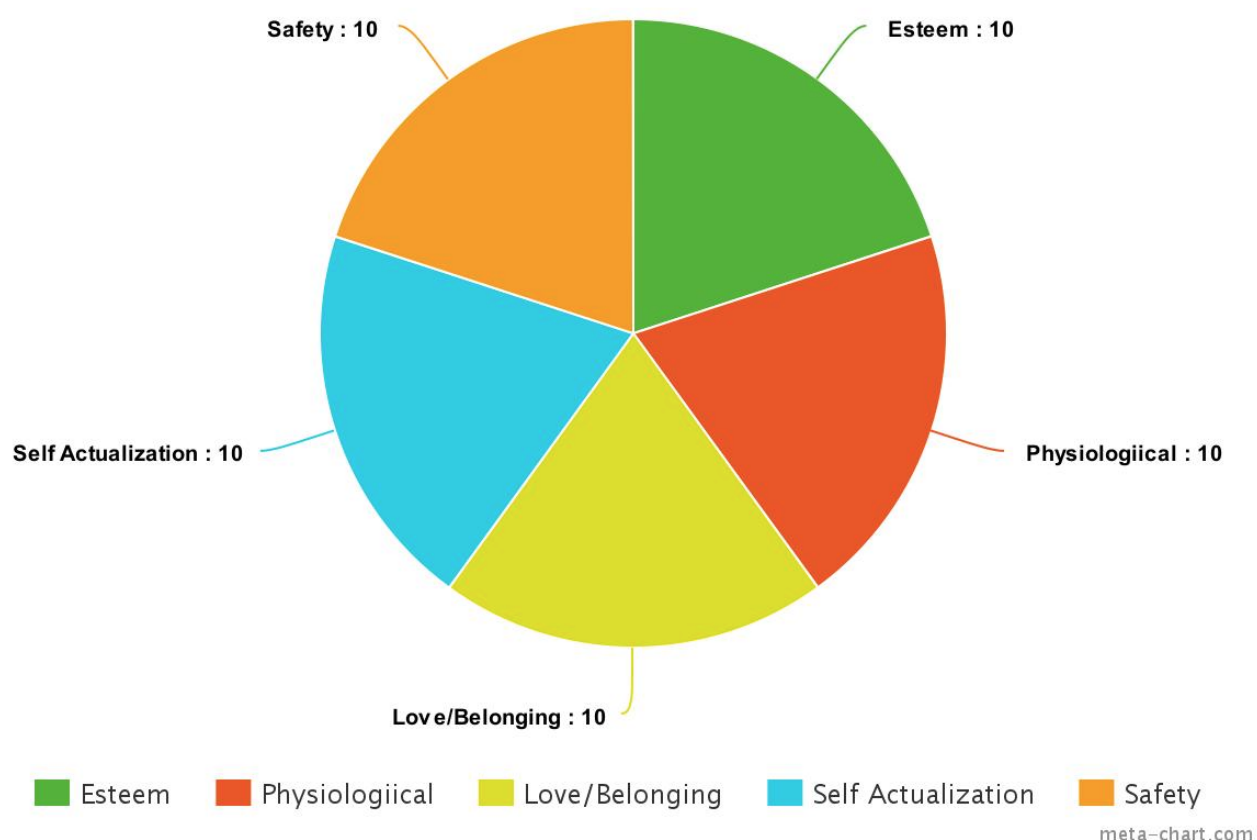
The well-being of community can be measured broadly by the physical, mental, economic and spiritual health of its people. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the framework is a pyramid, but we use the same elements as a flattened structure to simultaneously define human connectedness and self-identity.



Maslow studied what he called exemplary people such as Albert Einstein, Jane Addams, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Frederick Douglass rather than mentally ill or neurotic people, writing that "the study of crippled, stunted, immature, and unhealthy specimens can yield only a cripple psychology and a cripple philosophy." While the elements of need are useful, the hierarchy is not to our purpose and we wish to engage and motivate community at different levels.

*Way of the Turtle* is focused, through a process of engagement and knowledge sharing to increase the health and wellbeing of all project participants. We envisage this through developing opportunities for learning, sharing and through practical action in the shape of diverse workshops sharing knowledge and creative exchange.

Positive self and community identity through creativity, environmental awareness and cultural participation is a key objective of the *Way of the Turtle* project.



The process for exploring these diverse ideas is being designed through a number of long term projects:

- leading a transdisciplinary residency and symposium on country along the Dhungala (Murray River) and Barmah National Park at the Dharnya Centre
- developing a series of intergenerational workshops focused on creative and technology skills combined with building culture and connection to country
- long term goal of creating interactive online learning space at the Dharnya Centre

The connection to country to *Way of the Turtle* is critical in terms of grounding the project culturally and geographically. By spending time actively considering 'place' as a theme, we hope to build an ongoing process that will build awareness and respect of Woka and Walla Walla (Land and Water). It is the thread that reduces the field of subject and object through acknowledgement of the body in multidimensional space. For example in Merleau Ponty's discussion of the body, he acknowledges that "the body stands between this fundamental distinction between subject and object, ambiguously existing as both."

## **2.2 Intercreate and Way of the Turtle**

Transdisciplinary spaces are by default collaborative; learning and sharing is a mutual journey when these energies combine. For example, Intercreate is a collective of artists, scientists, technologists and tangata whenua (people of the land) based in Aotearoa, NZ, who are focused on environmental sustainability and cultural bridging. Since 2006, Intercreate has run a series of artists residencies called SCANZ (Solar Circuit Aotearoa New Zealand), based in New Plymouth in the Taranaki region of the North Island. From the start there was a focus on acknowledging the role of tangata whenua and actively working with them to find practical ways to increase community awareness. This can be demonstrated by the continuing relationship with Indigenous research centre Te Matahiapo as well with the people of the Parihaka community. The focus of Intercreate residency process is to work across disciplines and cultures to focus on issues related to the environment, cultural bridging and sustainable futures.

To provide a recent example, in January 2016, an Intercreate residency titled "Water, Peace, Power" was held in the Taranaki region of Aotearoa New Zealand. The 9 day residency involved hui (symposium) at the camp house at the Egmont National Park, nestled at the base of Mt Taranaki. After three days the group moved base of the Western Institute of Technology in Taranaki and then two days at Parihaka. Throughout the event, the group were guided by Māori Elders, with Māori language



being extensively used. The creative result of the process was an outdoor exhibition of artworks, some powered by batteries and solar at Parihaka. The specific project was a collaboration between Yorta Yorta researcher Lee Joachim, cartographer Martin Drury and media artist Tracey Benson, under the banner *Way of the Turtle: Exchanging Breath*. It is a prototype project which is intended to expand as a community driven project with more layers of data, projection and audio.



**Figure 1:** Image: Tracey Benson. “*Way of the Turtle: Exchanging Breath*”, installation, Parihaka Pa 2016

For this project we obtained some turtle data from TurtleSAT courtesy of New South Wales Department of Primary Industries and Ricky Spencer from TurtleSAT. The data included the approximate latitude and longitude of Yorta Yorta country and nesting sites of turtles in that region. This data was generated through a sequence of LEDs representing Biami (rainbow serpent) and a Koru (a spiral, a powerful symbol for Māori). We also had an audio component which was in two parts - the story of how the Murray River was created in Yorta Yorta and English by Sharon Atkinson and a water (wai) waiata (song) in Māori by Jo Tito, who is descendant of Parihaka.

It is important to state that Parihaka was a significant site for peaceful protest, with the community resisting the forced acquisition of land in the early 1880s. Men 'ploughed' the fields and were arrested one by one and sent to Dunedin to prison. With each man that was taken away, another would stand in his place. Now Parihaka is a place of pilgrimage for peace leaders, First Nations peoples and people seeking to learn and pay respects.

The work sought to focus on the cross-cultural points of connection via the technical challenge of creating a data driven artwork that was intended to be presented outside. It also linked to the event themes of Water, Peace and Power. The piece could be run either on batteries or solar energy.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

This paper sought to provide context to some of the theoretical and practical aspects of the *Way of the Turtle* project as well as outlining some of the key issues and approaches. It is our goal to effectively incorporate the many layers of meaning connected to country which exist in the spaces between science and storytelling, data and interpretation, place and people. To this end a range of community projects will be undertaken in 2017 which will inform our future research.

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