

# Dancing Circles and Growing Trees

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Though now working in academia I come from a background in the arts. For a considerable period of time I sought to make a living in writing, principally for performance. Here, the process of casting images from which an audience can make meaning was central to my endeavour. In performance words can be transformed. Other than literal languages come to the fore. The languages of the body, of sign, symbol and ceremony, of rhythm, passion and intensity emerge as significant. Add to this the vast range of connotations that can be placed on those language forms and you begin to see the complexities that are explored in and through performance. By contrast, in academia rational argument prevails. There is a difference between these means of communication. There is a distance: misunderstanding threatens, even confusion, sometimes conflict. I am interested in that misunderstanding. I am interested in the meetings, the separations and negotiations, in both practical and theoretical terms, between the denotation and the connotation of experience and the manner in which it occurs in different forms of research and expression. I am interested in what I can say, how I can have conversations, how I can construct relationships and communicate my understandings in languages that satisfy both my academic and my creative urges.

Some researchers have sought to find similarities, to build bridges between these urges. One such bridge has been constructed in self-organising systems theory, as articulated by Humberto Maturana & Francisco Varela<sup>2</sup>. This way of thinking, which analyses change through a focus on relationships, brings the academic and the creative together in a scientific investigation of transformation. The study is constructed from that which is transformed: the body, the subject and the 'self'. Maturana and Varela argue that the process of transformation comes about through a process they call 'autopoiesis'.



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<sup>2</sup> H.R. Maturana, and F.J. Varela (1987), *The Tree of Knowledge*, Boston, Shambhala.

*Auto*, of course, means 'self' and refers to the autonomy of self-organising systems; and *poiesis* - which shares the same Greek root as the word 'poetry' - means 'making'. So *autopoiesis* means 'self-making'.<sup>3</sup>

Here, science and imagination are married in a process of meaning making marked by the participation of the meaning-maker. Yet, this involves more than meaning making. To Maturana and Varela autopoiesis is a process of pattern-making. In effect they suggest an equivalence between the molecular processes of life and the experience and intellectual interpretation (or explanation) of those processes. This work is taken further by sociologist Niklas Luhmann in his theorising around 'communicative systems'. Luhmann applies Maturana's and Varela's analysis of biological change to social patternings. Accordingly he describes society as autopoietic on the basis of the 'communicative events' that maintain it, thus acknowledging the centrality of the languaging systems that we participate in. It is especially interesting to see a methodology drawn from biology applied to the analysis of language and meaning making. It is equally interesting to read science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin imagining her way from fiction into biology and similar conclusions.

They (bodies) arrange things. They make sense, literally. Molecule by molecule. In the cell. The cells arrange themselves. The body is an arrangement in space time, a patterning, a process; the mind is a process of the body, an organ, doing what organs do: organise. Order, pattern, connect. Do we have any better way to organise such wildly different (dream) experiences as a half remembered crocodile, a dead great-aunt, the smell of coffee, a scream from Iran, a bumpy landing, and a hotel room in Cincinnati than the narrative? - an immensely flexible technology, or life strategy, which if used with skill and resourcefulness presents each of us with the most fascinating of all serials, *The Story of My Life*.<sup>4</sup>

Sociologist Laurel Richardson is also interested in the relationship between creative work - poems, drama and stories - and more formal research and inquiry processes. She writes of the need for 'combination genres' in ethnography. "In combination genres, fictional stories, field notes, analysis, reflectivity all can coexist as separate (and equal?) components. Each part takes meaning and depth in the context of the whole text."<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Richardson feels comfortable using poetry to present sociological profiles, as she does using drama to highlight issues in theoretical debate. She describes the sociologist / poet as writing "in the pauses".<sup>6</sup> She says "an experiencing person is a person in a body... Thus poetry, built as it is on speech as an *embodied* activity, touches both the cognitive and the sensory in the speaker and the listener."<sup>7</sup> This is consistent with her observation that,

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<sup>3</sup> F. Capra (1996), *The Web of Life*, HarperCollins, London, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> U. Le Guin (1989,) *Dancing at the Edge of the Word*, Harper and Row, New York, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> L. Richardson (1997), *Fields of Play*, Rutgers, New Brunswick, New Jersey, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 143.

some of the things we want to say... might be better communicated through 'showing'. Showing, I submit, can happen when different voices deeply penetrate our texts... (when they) become characters in 'drama'... when (they)... become embodied, take form.<sup>8</sup>

In her considerations upon the relationship between creative work and academic inquiry, Richardson is entering into the area explored somewhat differently by Walter Benjamin in his essay 'The Storyteller', first published in 1936<sup>9</sup>. Unlike Richardson, who uses the discussion to reflect on new ways of communicating ethnographic insights, Benjamin focuses on historical changes in our relationship to knowledge through an historical analysis of story telling. The decline of a story-telling culture, which Benjamin locates first in the rise of the novel, represents he says, the decline of an "artisan form of communication"<sup>10</sup>, a form of communication in which the "righteous man encounters himself".<sup>11</sup> This encounter is made up of considerably more than the sensory response of which Richardson writes. It incorporates the long running processes of synthesis by which the story lingers (in the story teller and the audience) long after that very first encounter. True story telling, Benjamin contends, reveals the difference between 'information' which "does not survive the moment in which it was new... (and) lives only at that moment"<sup>12</sup> and 'the story'. "A story is different" he says. "It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time."<sup>13</sup>

For story telling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of story telling is cradled. This is how today it is becoming unravelled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship.<sup>14</sup>

Images of the spinning and weaving of cloth and the spinning and weaving of the storied strands of the past, present and future resonate in Benjamin's writing, in his story telling. It is his subject matter as well as his method. His discussion leads me to ponder the role of story in indigenous Australian cultures, as reported in Diane Bell's (1998) detailed recording of the stories of the Ngarrindjeri people of South Australia<sup>15</sup> and Deborah Bird Rose's<sup>16</sup> anthropological work with the stories

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<sup>8</sup> p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> W. Benjamin (1973), *Illuminations*, Collins/Fontana, London, pp. 83-109.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> D. Bell (1998), *Ngarrindjeri Wuruwarrin: a World that is, was, and will be*, North Melbourne, Spinifex Press.

<sup>16</sup> D.B. Rose (2000), *Dingo Makes Us Human*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

and people of the Yarralin community in the Northern Territory. It also leads to me recall David Mowaljarlai and Jutta Malnic's<sup>17</sup> remarkable *Yorro Yorro*, which represents the story of the Wandjina creation spirits of the Kimberley region. Each of these major works point to the impossibility of representing culture without reference to stories - be they recorded in word, song, painting or dance. These stories do more than weave a social fabric, they offer an understanding of the autopoietic organisation of the relationship between the people and the land - in effect, the self-organising system of which they are a part. These are the stories that are needed by those who are embraced by them. They are culture specific knowledge forms and the loss of story is the loss of knowledge. Indeed, the analysis of such stories by those not of the originating culture can challenge the capacity of the story to survive as a living system.

Here I am reminded of an experience reported by ethno-musicologist Catherine Ellis. She embarked on a project to record and preserve traditional performances by indigenous Australian communities. She rationalised the attempt to codify the performances of these communities by arguing that "permanent preservation of their songs could help to provide for the world a fuller picture of their musical/ intellectual life (the two being inextricably tied through mythology)".<sup>18</sup> This rationale, while apparently accepted, perhaps even welcomed by the traditional performers she worked with, was based on assumptions that finally led to distress. These arose from different understandings of 'codification' and 'preservation'. Ellis writes:

the senior Indulkana women asked us to film an important ceremony, which was the first we had seen performed at the actual sites represented in the song... The performance lasted for four days. The body designs, which are painted out of view of the main group of singers, were very elaborate and took a long time to perfect. During that period the women responsible for the singing had to keep the relevant painting song present in the minds of the performers. A form of antiphonal singing arose when the women being painted also sang these painting songs. This part of the ceremonial performance sometimes took up to three hours, while the actual dance that showed the design might only have taken two minutes. It is important to remember in such circumstances that the actual performance lasts from the minute the women occupy the ceremonial ground, not just during the time the women are performing... Meaning was conveyed through the singing of many small songs, through the body design, the dance steps, the musical structures and it was tied into the mapping of the region... We took still photographs, 16mm black and white film, anthropological, musical and textual details of this and the other performances we were privileged to witness.<sup>19</sup>

Several years later, upon returning to the region, Ellis reported,

We talked about how beautiful the performance had been when I was there... I inquired of the principal performer how recently and how often the ceremony had

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<sup>17</sup> D. Mowaljarlai & J. Malnic (1993), *Yorro Yorro*, Inner Traditions, Rochester, Vermont.

<sup>18</sup> C.J. Ellis (1992), "Living preservation: problems of cultural exchange with central Australian traditional performers". In Moyle, A.M. (ed.), *Music and Dance of Aboriginal Australia and South Pacific*, Oceana Publications, University of Sydney, p. 157.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 158

been done since then. Her shocked response was something for which my field training had not prepared me. She said, 'Never. We've given it to you.' I discovered in the course of talking to them that I was now the sole possessor of that ceremony, and that the act of filming and recording it in order to 'preserve' it had, in fact been an act of destruction of the tradition. I had put a vital and living tradition into a dead form and I had no mechanism that would be traditionally acceptable for undoing that action. I was shattered.<sup>20</sup>

The digital codification of the performance, while designed to lead to its preservation, failed because of misunderstandings around what 'preservation' means. On this occasion Ellis and her colleagues (and perhaps even the senior Indulkana women) could be described as hampered by concerns about the future sufficient to inhibit their capacity to appreciate the present. The dance, and therefore the story, was lost in dreams about its significance. With these thoughts in mind, I would like to tell a story of my own.

*I first noticed his legs. They were tanned but hairless, scratched, scarred and barbed. Like fence posts put up over 40 years ago. Corner fence posts. The sort that others gain their strength from. He walked in straight lines as much as possible, but never fast. Then again, he hardly ever slowed, and never stopped in one place for long. It was as if he was walking the land. He called himself Tree. It was the 1970's, people tended to do that sort of thing. Acid casualties, pseudo-mystics, those left homeless when the government closed psychiatric hospitals in preference for decentralised mental health units. 'Tree'. Tree walked one time from Ceduna to Port Augusta to Adelaide then Mildura then Shepparton. He picked fruit for the season then started walking again. South to Wilson's Promontory for a month or so, then north-east via Sale, Bairnsdale, Orbost, Cann River, Genoa and Mallacoota to Eden. Perched on the headland that separates the two folds of Twofold Bay, Eden used to be a whaling town, till there were no more whales. It then became a base for tuna fishermen, till there were no more tuna. To-day it is a wood chip town.*

*Tree arrived in Eden one mid-afternoon towards the end of winter. Winters get chilly in Eden - rattling cold - as the wind rages up from Antarctica. This day the rage was restrained. The spitting rain of the day before had ceased but hooded and resentful clouds still looked out from dark corners in the sky. He followed the main road into town. A car load of youths slowed to look him up and down but most other drivers, well accustomed to the travellers who pass through from time to time, either didn't notice or ignored him. This was to be a turning point in the life of Tree and in the life of the town.*

*Tree walked past petrol stations and shops and cafes then slowed outside a hotel called The Great Southern. He slowed and looked in the window as he passed. As he looked he saw little out of the ordinary. It was mid-afternoon. People were drinking, as would be expected, they were playing pool and talking. There was no rush, no hurry. Everyone knew each other, or so it seemed, as it so often does in places like these. Young and old, loud and quiet. This was The Great Southern and these were the people usually found here. Then suddenly he stopped. As if riveted to the spot he halted then and there. He looked in through the window again. Across the room, shoulder distance from several other men, half sitting on a bar stool, one hand at his belt, one elbow bent holding a beer, Tree saw himself. It was him. He was wearing different clothes, had a different hat and a different colour hair, his beard had been trimmed short but, it was him. His arms, his legs, his head, his face. What was he doing? Why? How did he fit in? What did he think of him, Tree, standing outside looking in, seeing himself, wondering. Him! He looked in through the window again. What was*

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 158.

going on? What did it mean: to see yourself in a bar, so close, so distant? Was this why he had come to Eden? Was this why he had arrived this afternoon, after yesterday's rain ahead of the rain he was sure would fall tomorrow? Was it this that made him choose the coast road rather than the road through the mountains up to Bombala then Cooma then on? Who was he? What was he thinking? What was he doing? Standing there, a drink in one hand, eyes grinning sweeping the lounge bar, knowing everyone, at ease with the world, and the world with him, confident, content, calm. If he was on a train the train would have kept moving and Tree would have seen himself disappear into the distance. He would have left himself behind as the diesel burned and the pistons pumped and the wheels turned and he, like other passengers was carried on, towards his destination. But this was Eden, there was no train line, and he was walking and had been for a very long time now. It was his energy that determined whether he moved on or stopped and waited and looked in and wondered. And he was weary, but weariness was not the cause of his concern.

Tree built a humpy in a dip in the hills about 4 kilometres west of town. He strapped some timber together and with scrap that he found he fashioned a roof sufficient to protect him from rain. With rocks he built a sort of fireplace, for warmth and cooking, and with timber again constructed a bed that supported his body about eighteen inches above the ground. After he cleared the floor of leaves, hung his pack from a branch, introduced himself to the local environment then rested a while, he began walking again. Now, instead of walking in straight lines he began walking in bends, in arcs, in ellipses, in opening, expanding, enveloping curves that sooner or later, pre-planned or not, circled to take him back into town, back into Eden, where invariably, like that first afternoon, he slowed then stopped outside The Great Southern. From there he always looked in through the window to see himself standing sometimes, sitting sometimes, talking sometimes, silent others. Some times he stood outside the hotel for a minute or two, but it was usually longer. One day he stood out there almost an entire afternoon, from just after midday to just before sunset, as children with bicycles cycled around and women with groceries struggled on home, as dogs chased sticks and trucks coughed fumes. And in all that time, during all those hours Tree watched himself inside the hotel, he never didn't belong, he never looked out of place, he never lacked money, and he never sought unnecessarily the confidence or goodwill of the others in the bar, around him.

Tree mapped the land as he walked, the hills, the streams, fields and forests. He began to know the patterns of the life that surrounded him. He began to learn which plants flourished where and when and under what circumstances. He began to learn which insects, which birds, which reptiles gathered, what they ate, where they sheltered. He came to recognise their nests, their tracks, their markings on the ground. He learned about the seasons and the signals that told of rain and the signals that told of ongoing heat without rain. He learned what he could eat and when. He learned when to look up and when to look down. He penetrated the inside and the outside - the soil and the rock, the bark and the resin, the skin and the flesh - of the environment that surrounded him. And he kept walking. Circles again.

One day the loggers came. It was clear that the dip in the hills in which he had built his humpy from timber and scrap was now on their map, now part of their plan. The trees under which he sheltered, alone but never in isolation, were wood chips and it was time they were cashed in. Plants that made cardboard boxes lay waiting. He looked up and he saw that Tree drove the bulldozer. He was wearing different clothes, had a different hat and a different colour hair, his beard had been trimmed short, but it was him. His arms, his legs, his head, his face.

The way he tells the story, Tree's body was found by the side of the road. He had no heart beat, he was not breathing. An ambulance was called but before it came he sat up, then stood and started to walk again. And he told me that as he walked into town people saw him coming and averted their gaze. One by one, two by two, three by three they stepped out of his path, turned down side streets, scurried away. Men and women did all they could to avoid him. Parked cars pulled away from kerbs, shopkeepers bolted their doors, children

*were called into houses, even wandering dogs were whistled home. Throughout Eden an echo could be heard as front doors were slammed. When finally he reached The Great Southern Hotel he saw that all its doors: bar, saloon and lounge were bolted, locked, shut, even the blinds had been drawn down to black out all the world outside.*

*Tree stood alone in the middle of a once bustling avenue. No life acknowledged his presence. No presence reflected his life. It was as if the town had closed down and he, like a ghost, could do no more than haunt it now. He remembered the bulldozer. He felt his hand on the steering wheel, he felt the tension as the tyres tried to grip the crumbling soils, the angle of the hill, the wind rushing through the upper most branches of the trees. The promise of summer. The bulldozer tipping. Endlessly.*

*From the main street Tree started to walk. His steps followed a curving pattern that took him beyond the immediate boundaries of the town, beyond the beach, beyond the bay, beyond the hinterland. As the isolation that he now felt forced upon him, came to bite, the circle widened and widened and widened until once again he discovered he was leaving Eden, heading north, walking a line once again. An increasingly straight line that took him finally away, far away from the humpy, the town and the bay that enfolded it and absorbed for a significant period of time, him, his senses, his emotions, his attention. This is the story I was told.*

My own experience – for, in truth, the story above is drawn from one told to me – reinforces the power that story holds. I have had to make my own meaning from this story. Enough uncertainty is embedded in it to allow me this. Likewise, I have had to make my own meaning of the person who told me the story – the story teller – and the way in which the story and the story teller intersected with my life. In the process I have found myself constructing mythologies. Others, who were there at the time, have sought to rationalise the story and the story teller. I have shied away from this, preferring to live with it differently. A simple explanation could, I believe, steal something away from me.

Similarly, the gift of the dance Catherine Ellis received from the Indulkana women was not an invitation to explain or rationalise or place the dance within a tradition. It was an invitation to embody an understanding and to sustain that understanding through carrying it in the sinews of the flesh. It was an invitation to be changed by the dance and to carry that change into the world: in effect, to live the changes wrought by the dance. Such an experience transforms consciousness. Story telling can work in a similar way.

In a paper delivered to a 1992 ‘Conference on Thinking’, Michael Christie argues that indigenous story telling constructs mythologies rather than explanations. In his discussion of language use in Yolgnu communities in northeast Arnhemland Christie points to such story telling as constructing “the possibility of a reality in which we have no need to assume an atomistic, segmentary structure”.<sup>21</sup> He contrasts this with western approaches to knowledge, arguing that,

The definition of something in terms of its boundedness, its discontinuity with other realities, the borders between itself and all possible others, is only one way of talking about our experience. We have another possibility – a system in which

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<sup>21</sup> M. Christie (1992), “Exploring Aboriginal alternatives to western thinking”. *Supplement to Issues in Education* No. 3. Faculty of Education, NTU.

received meanings... are applied to make sense of a whole range of experiential realities... In the Yolgnu world (it) is not so much the case that every reality has an inherent structure, but that every reality can be seen to inhere in a whole range of realities (p.4).

Benjamin's discussion of ways of finding meaning in story is of this kind. To Benjamin a story lives because of its engagement rather than its relationship to any grounded reality. The reality of the story is in the mind of the one who receives it (be that person listener, reader or writer), hence its mythological significance. I find it remarkable that children can ask again and again for the same story to be read. And that generation after generation of children can find pleasure in the same stories. And that these can become reference points, marking important transitions in life. Only last week I watched Atom Egoyan's sparse but distinctive film *'The Sweet Hereafter'*. This film, drawn from a novel by Russell Banks, based on true events, is structured around the tale of 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin'. Although historical events are depicted in the film, Egoyan (via Banks) finds meaning in those events through reference to that ancient tale, and he uses the tale to communicate his reading of that reality to his audience. No matter that the pied piper story is itself a metaphorical construct, the power of the tale is such that it crosses centuries and continents to find relevance once again. That it is a story often read to children as they drift off to sleep may have something to do with its lasting significance. Not only is the story read aloud, it is experienced by a child in the borderlands of dream, its reality and logic gradually succumbing to the reality and logic of dream. This borderland is the domain within which mythologies are sustained (and yet another powerful reason why children should be read to at bed time).

The story above, 'Tree' comes from and feeds back into such a domain. Through it I seek to tell of an encounter I can best make sense of poetically. Explanation defeats it. To talk of it in such terms reduces it to manageable units that do a disservice to the depth and breadth the story holds. I have done such things. I have conducted the analysis and reported my findings but there has seemed little purpose in the exercise. Such a report is no less a fiction. I prefer the 'misunderstanding'. I prefer that which, in this instance, I cannot explain. And when I have told the story to others, as I have done, for many, the story holds similar significance. The craft of writing it down makes it different again. When I write it down I find I add things. I work things up, I construct inferences that point to some sort of explanation. When writing my audience is broader. I cannot look each one in the eye and work to ensure they connect with my sense of the experience. I compromise and my story is compromised also. And yet some of its mythological import remains. It dances, it teases, it plays, it communicates elliptically. Its meaning is found in the gaps (or 'pauses') and in the phrasing and rhythm as much as specific words themselves. And of course it is also a story about a relationship to land. Not so much the land we walk upon but the land we carry with us, wherever we go, through which we know ourselves and other things. This form of knowledge is experiential, like dance it is embodied. It is, to the extent that it is languaged, cultural. It is also deeply emotional. It resides in the need to make meaning, to find connections, then patterns. Within

the gaps made available in this patterning lies considerable room for wonder, fear and speculation. Such gaps are not left so wide in academic discourse. Assiduity fills them in. We want to know with certainty. We want logical discussion. My story is not logical. It is evocative. It lingers. I cannot argue it to you. It's a story, no more no less, and I can't tell what you it means.

In working with this understanding I am doing more than constructing or participating in an intellectual discourse. I am participating in a tradition that challenges such discourses. I am responding to something I remember clearly, and do not understand, yet think of as meaningful. Moreover, something is transformed as I offer it to various audiences in various forms; hence my focus is on the process rather than the product. This is consistent with Luhmann's understanding that autopoietic systems are engaged in both the first order practice of observation and the second order observation of observation (or self-observation). It is this self observation (or 'self-reference') that accounts for both systemic autonomy and the means by which systems change and adapt to, or achieve resonance in, their environment.<sup>22</sup>

Such observation is of course limited by a constitutive blindness. The process of observation determines that some parts of a system remain unseen. Second-order observation, the observation of observation, admits this unavoidably partial knowledge as part of the systemic construction of knowing. It acknowledges that interpretation is required. This invites creativity, imagination, knowledge and skill. It requires, contains and displays learning and as such can be described as transformative, for it establishes the pre-conditions for subsequent experiences of transformation. This process is nothing if not 'social' and nothing if not 'ecological'. It is this ecological imagining that sustains us within our difficulties in understanding. That, and of course more story telling.

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<sup>22</sup> Wolfe, C, (1998) *Critical environments: postmodern theory and the pragmatics of the 'outsider'*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.