STRONG CULTURE. STRONG LANGUAGE. STRONG PEOPLE: Indigenous Animation at the 17th National Remote Indigenous Media Festival.

Deb Szapiro

We are standing around the surprisingly deep, dry and perfectly formed, Wanirri Yankirri-kirlangu (Emu Rockhole), situated about thirty to forty minutes drive from Lajamanu, a remote Indigenous community on the northern edge of the Tanami desert in the Northern Territory. Lajamanu Elder, Jerry Jangala Patrick, has generously shared with us the Karnanganja Jukurrpa (Emu Dreaming) connected to the seasonal waterhole and explained its significance as a Dreaming site associated with a songline that stretches from the coast to inland Australia. Wanirri Yankirri-kirlangu also serves as a compass and a geographical marker of consensual boundaries between Indigenous nations.

Comments of recognition stir through members of the assembled crowd as people from Arnhem Land, the Pilbara and Kimberly regions voice their recognition of the story, as it also forms part of their Dreaming.

The joy of recognition, respect and connection through the shared story is palpable. Jerry looks around the circle we have formed at the edge of the rockhole, and speaks to the way the story has formed a link between people from regions geographically distant and yet connected, 'See... we don't make the stories, the stories make us.'

His statement sums up the heart of why 180 remote media workers and industry partners from across Australia have travelled vast distances to Lajamanu to participate in the 17th National Remote Indigenous Media Festival.

"We don't make the stories... the stories make us".

Jerry Jangala Patrick, 17th Remote Indigenous Media Festival, Lajamanu NT.

Local Lajamanu leader Steve Wanta Patrick, Jerry's son, says the theme for this year's festival *'Speaking to Country, Speaking from Country' (Wintaru Wangkanjaku Ngurruka* in the local Walpiri language) describes the role of Indigenous media in creating networks that connect people, places and stories across the country to strengthen culture, identity and wellbeing.

The majority of the NRIMF participants are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island media practitioners and the festival presents a packed program of industry forums, strategic discussions around policy, technology and issues facing the sector, skills workshops, nightly screenings, award presentations and a great opportunity to catch up on what everyone in the remote media sector is up to.

Nightly screenings showcase films that have been produced in the last twelve months and closing awards ceremonies (ICTV Awards And The Remote Indigenous Media Awards) recognise established and up and coming talent in the media sector. It's my first NRIMF and I've come to Lajamanu to see and hear what is happening in Indigenous animation.

I've been following the uptake of animation by Indigenous filmmakers and communities for some time and have used my role as a curator and festival director to support a wider understanding and recognition of Indigenous animation through screening the work of Australian, Canadian and US Indigenous animators both in Australia and internationally. As part of the UTS: Sydney International 2010 Animation Festival (UTS:SIAF) I convened an Indigenous Animation forum which showcased a range of Indigenous led productions. The forum included practitioners from the Northern Territory, South Australia and Canada and was accompanied with screenings of films that spoke to the diversity of

content, production processes and practices inherent in contemporary Indigenous animation.

Canadian First Nation filmmakers; Dennis Jackson (Cree) and Melanie Jackson (Métis/Saulteaux), American filmmakers; Ian Skorodin (Choctaw), Joseph Erb (Cherokee) and Roy Boney Jnr (Cherokee) and Australian animation director, Jason Japaljarri Woods (Warlpiri) are examples of filmmakers who are insistent on authoring animated narratives that position Indigenous culture firmly in the present and the future. These filmmakers engage with technology and media culture without sacrificing Indigenous identity or values. Their films respect traditions, reflect contemporary Indigenous experience and provide visions of an alternative future.

Over the last six years, the number of Australian Indigenous led, animated films has steadily increased with many remote Indigenous communities embracing animation as a filmmaking technique that sits well with their narrative and cultural practices. This has resulted in an exciting body of work that is both culturally and nationally relevant.

The National Remote Indigenous Media Festival (NRIMF) is a perfect place to see new animation and to catch up with the filmmakers, organisations and communities who are leading this movement as the majority of Indigenous animation is being produced in remote communities. The annual festival is co-hosted and supported by the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) in conjunction with the Remote Indigenous Media Organisation (RIMO) in whose area it takes place. IRCA represents and promotes the interests and achievements of the remote Indigenous media and communications sector and has recently been made the peak national body for the Indigenous media and communication sector.

Indigenous production of media is an essential public service that speaks directly to Indigenous audiences in a way that mainstream media does not. There are about 130,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in over 1,100 discrete communities across remote Australia (IRCA 2015). In remote Indigenous communities, local media is a big part of life and the majority of media production, training and support is carried out by RIMOs, Art Centres and Wellbeing Centres.

Numerous government reports, including the 2010 Review of Australian Government Investment in the Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Sector have identified the potential of a well resourced and skilled Indigenous broadcasting and media sector to contribute to the wellbeing and future of Indigenous Australians, to address issues of equity and access to information and technology, and more broadly, to strengthen Australia's national cultural identity. However the sector remains, under-resourced, understaffed and largely unrecognised.

This year Pintubi Anmatjere Warlpiri Media and Communications (PAW Media) is the RIMO who is co-hosting the festival. PAW Media has an impressive track record with all forms of media and has been a leader in animation production and training in the Indigenous media sector. It operates across 11 communities, 11 language groups including English, and its remit spans an area of 480,000 square kilometres in the Tanami Region. Lajamanu, a Warlpiri settlement, is one of these 11 communities.

The drive to Lajamanu, and Lajamanu's history itself, is part of understanding remote media organisations and the animation they produce. It's my first trip to 'The Territory'. I am warmed by the humour, spirit and openness of the Territorians I meet, yet appalled by the acceptance of what seems to resemble a contemporary apartheid system in Darwin. I've heard things are similar in Alice Springs.

The Darwin pubs that overflow with white patrons at all hours of the day, remind me that whilst mainstream media rhetoric sees drinking as an Indigenous issue, drinking is in fact a whole of Australia issue. The British and Irish brought their drinking problems to this land. Indigenous Australia pays the price for this legacy and non-Indigenous Australians blissfully stick their heads in the sand with their glass of beer or wine in hand, ignoring the negative effects of alcohol on their own culture. Yet

the Territory is a complex relationship, people are refreshingly irreverent and funny like the Australia of my youth, a quality that my hometown of Sydney seems to have lost.

We drive the ten hours from Darwin to Lajamanu through stunningly beautiful landscape. The colour palette, vegetation and light shift subtlety every 50 to 100 kilometres. The sky is endless and the landscape is unique. For city dwelling Australians this is a foreign land that many will not visit in their lifetime.

It is impossible to experience this landscape which speaks of vast distances, not just in kilometres but in time, without wondering why mainstream Australia insists on chronologically positioning and describing itself as a young country... a nation child... always looking out for a Colonial parent nation to guide it. The Northern Territory landscape speaks to the undeniable fact that we are an ancient country... an Elder nation with a strong, vibrant and insightful Indigenous culture that stretches back more than 40,000 years. We should listen.

Lajamanu, the location for this year's festival, is a remote Aboriginal community situated 10 hours drive from Darwin. It sits midway between Darwin and Alice Springs on the northern rim of the Tanami desert. The population is Warlpiri, however this is Gurindji country. The settlement was forcibly established when the Native Affairs Branch of the Federal Government decided that the Warlpiri settlement of Yuendumu was overcrowded. Their solution was to truck people against their will to a spot 600kms north of Yuendumu.

The forced settlement was away from Walpiri country, family and Dreaming sites so the people walked back to Yuendumu. They did this three times, were rounded up each time and trucked back until they finally settled in the area. A series of ceremonies were conducted in the late 70s where the Gurindji people generously handed over the country and their Dreaming to the Walpiri of Lajamanu.

Lajamanu's story is a common example of the long history of punitive and restrictive Colonialist policies that refuse to acknowledge Aboriginal sovereignty and the importance of connection to country, relationship, culture and self-determination for Indigenous Australians. The continued history of restrictive assimilationist policies continues to be evident in contemporary punitive measures such as the 2007 'NT Intervention' and the restriction on Indigenous language literacy in NT schools.

The resilience and strength that Indigenous Australians continually harness to keep culture alive, and the importance that connection to country and culture play in identity and wellbeing is key to understanding contemporary practices in Indigenous animation and media.

Whilst there are complex dilemmas facing Indigenous cultures worldwide, they maintain strong social and cultural practices and imaginaries that are vibrant, evolving and contemporary. Yet dominant cultural models, particularly in mainstream entertainment animation, have a tendency to deny Indigenous futures by chronologically positioning Indigenous cultures in a narrative past.

This view is often sanctioned as a harmless and well-meaning romantic view of traditional cultures, or, as in films such as Disney's Pocahontas (1995), an easy way to avoid paying for copyright, due to traditional Indigenous stories being deemed as public domain. However this popular media model is far from harmless in its denial of a culturally distinct Indigenous future, in its plundering and commodification of traditional narratives, and its insistent portrayal of Indigenous cultures as homogenous, fossilised and unchanging.

Despite the recent success of Indigenous live action feature film directors and television series, there is still a cinematic absence of Indigenous stories and characters from Australian screens. Animation is no exception and is far behind its live action cousin in its dissemination of Indigenous perspectives through traditional media distribution channels.

Whilst the cultural nationalism inspired by Gough

Whitlam's early 1970s legacy saw a renaissance in Australian cinema which brought an acknowledgement of Indigenous culture and filmmaking which has gradually built (Collins 2013), in 2015 there is still a distinct lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous perspectives in animation practice, discourse, distribution, reception, education and research, all of which are governed by a narrow and prescriptive value system which preferences Western, and more recently, Asian animation aesthetics and practices.

Assessment markers of quality and success in both mainstream and independent animation comply to the rules of this value system which is closely linked to social, political and economic power structures. In general, this value system marginalises any animation that does not comply with its rules, and in particular it marginalises Indigenous animation.

The majority of Australian Indigenous animation is produced outside mainstream funding and distribution networks through Arts Centres, Wellbeing Centres and Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs). This is sometimes by choice, but more often due to assimilationist policies that favour mainstream Western filmmaking practices and have been rewritten over the last decade to reflect neo-liberal inspired key performance indicators (KPIs). There is a general failure to acknowledge the value of including Indigenous cultural values, production practices and circumstance in funding, production and distribution guidelines.

One of the topics of discussion at the Festival was the precarious funding of the RIMOs. National and State film funding and broadcaster remits are predicated on a system that revolves around an individual writer, producer or director's success and by mainstream marketplace achievements. Current film funding policy does not allow for collectivist production practices, for difference in formats and outcomes that many culturally relevant stories require in order for them to be told appropriately, and for the lack of access to and acknowledgement by mainstream (whitefella) audiences.

One example of this is that most federal and state film funding requires a broadcaster or distribution licence that excludes organisations such as Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) which is the major broadcaster of remote Indigenous media content and was clearly everyone's favourite TV channel at the festival. These policies also fail to acknowledge the relevance and impact of productions that are Indigenous led and produced for an Indigenous audience.

Within this media landscape, animation is being used strategically by a number of Indigenous communities as an inter-generational tool for cultural resilience and to communicate and bind elements such as new technologies, culture, tradition, languages, identity, social relations, history, education, media literacy and digital skills. In the midst of the growing neo-liberalist corporate control of media, the mainstreaming of animation practice and the fetishisation of 3D, motion capture and AR technology, Indigenous animation is creating alternative futures that simultaneously adopt, adapt and disrupt the dominant practices that surround animation movement, aesthetics, narrative structures, development, production, distribution, reception and the use of mainstream technologies.

This mirrors a growing movement worldwide, where animation is providing a fresh voice for contemporary Indigenous representation and communication. Many Indigenous productions are directed toward what anthropologist Faye Ginsberg calls 'the ruptures of cultural knowledge, historical memory, and social relations between generations'. (Ginsberg 1999). Indigenous communities are recognising the power of animation to bridge the generation gap, pass on languages, some of which are at the point of extinction, and as a way for Indigenous voices to be heard in popular culture. Poignantly, the animations are also utilised as a form of living will from the Elders to current and future generations in the hope that their stories and culture will survive.

Festival co-host, PAW Media, a RIMO based in Yuendumu in the Northern territory, is an exemplar

of this movement. The community of Yuendumu have a reputation for being early adopters of technology and produce media outcomes that serve their community's cultural and political purposes. The co-existence of tradition and modernity that is inherent in the majority of Indigenous communities has enabled them to develop resourceful and innovative approaches that maximise the effectiveness of small and large-scale technologies, organisations, communities and budgets, within a fluid mix of old and new. Their approach offers an inspirational alternative to production that we could all learn from, and rejects the global commodification of media and the technophilic and technophobic divide and that is informing many practices and processes in animation world-wide.

English is the second, third, or fourth language of most people in the area that PAW Media services, and part of PAW's remit is language support and retention. Languages are an essential part of the knowledge system of human culture and frame people's way of seeing and understanding the world. The HREOC *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) acknowledged the social dysfunction brought about due to the decline in the use of Indigenous languages. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are disappearing with approximately only one third of the languages spoken pre-contact having survived. The majority of radio broadcasts and media that PAW produces are in Language as is its animation.

"The responsibility is to make films through the right channel of land and people ... this makes our films, and what we are doing, grow the right way. The responsibility is to have the proper feelings. To feel the country and the people and the spirit of the film that wants to come out – that's the responsibility. Your responsibility is to make sure that the feelings are true feelings".
Francis Jupurrurla Kelly (quoted in Lewis 2012),

Francis Jupurrurla Kelly is the Chairperson for PAW Media as well as a board member for IRCA. Kelly was one of three Warlpiri people who developed ideas on Aboriginal control of video production and broadcasting that continue to have an impact on Aboriginal media today. He is a key supporter of animation in his community, having produced the first Warlpiri animation, *Two Janagalas* as well as participating in the production of *Manyu-Wana*, an award winning mixed Warlpiri language series for children that was produced in the early 1990s to support literacy and numeracy. The nine episode series, often referred to as Warlpiri Sesame Street, incorporated stop-motion animation and live action techniques. Content for the series was produced in collaboration with the community. It was filmed by local crew who worked with local children in a participatory and improvisational manner.

The production of *Manyu-Wana*, with it's collective community production model; its use of local performers, crew and language; its content driven by Indigenous culture, visual language and storytelling; and the series intended outcome as a production that was made locally for local audiences, reflects the best-practice production model employed in Indigenous animation today.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, PAW Media's animation production became less of a priority but came back stronger than ever with the production of the *Animating Jukurrpa* series, produced in 2009/2010.

"We're interested in passing on Jukurrpa stories – ancestral-being stories – through media. This has been at the core of our work for the last 27 years. However when the elders speaking on camera are deceased, these Jukurrpa videos can't be shown. Therefore we looked at alternative ways of passing on Jukurrpa stories. Animation was an answer".

"What we've tried to do is look at the ways people tell stories traditionally, and then look at animation as another form for that storytelling. Sand drawing, for example, is a very traditional way of telling a story. We worked with someone who would tell the story using sand, then we've done stop-motion animation with that. So there's a cross-generational focus, but also a focus on how we can use

traditional storytelling modes within an animation context".

Susan Locke, Manager PAW Media and Communications 2008-2012

The *Animating Jukurrpa* series utilised a range of sand, stop-motion, painting and digital techniques to bring the Jukurrpa to the screen. It also set in place a training and production program that has consolidated PAW Media's position as a leader in Australian Indigenous animation and built the foundation for a new wave of Indigenous animation in Australia. PAW's work in this area is significant, not just in terms of the considerable body of animated work it has produced since *Animating Jukurrpa*, but also in the way that it has generously passed on its training to other RIMOs so that they can also use animation in their media practice.

Whilst *Animating Jukurrpa* was produced with collaborative community practices and crew, it also nurtured the talent of a young Warlpiri graphic designer and PAW Media worker, Jason Japaljarri Woods. Jason embraced animation production and has gone from strength to strength to become a talented director with numerous award winning animated films that include films from the *Animating Jukurrpa* and *Animating Yimi* series, the contemporary short fiction film, *Jack And Jones* and the pilot for an animated version of the famous Warlpiri Media television series, *Bush Mechanics*. Jason works fluidly with traditional and digital animation techniques and is passing his knowledge to other Indigenous media workers.

PAW Media's storytelling and animation skills were on display in the first night of screenings at the 17th National Remote Indigenous Media Festival with a sneak screening of their latest film, *Kardiyarlu Kangurnu*, a half hour documentary which is a mix of live action and claymation. The film is a beautifully crafted, poignant and often humorous firsthand retelling of First Contact stories. It offers up a refreshing look at Kardiya (whitefellas) from a Yapa (Indigenous) perspective. As with all PAW Media productions, community members and staff worked on the film in a crew and training capacity. PAW Media's animation co-ordinator, Jonathan Daw worked closely with Simon Japanangka Fisher Jnr on *Kardiyarlu Kangurnu* and told me that like Jason Japaljarri Wood, Simon is a natural animation talent.

Jonathan facilitated an animation workshop at the Festival, which he usually conducts as a double act with Jason, however with PAW Media as the co-host, Jason was kept busy finishing the fantastic bespoke 2015 Remote Media awards. Although they did do a double act on the design and making of the awards – one of which was Jonathan's interpretation of PAW Media's logo. The other, a Munga-munga character designed by Jason which became a favourite with festival participants who nicknamed it 'the Black Oscars'.

Bernadette Angus, Annette Victor and Ian Wainer from Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media (PAKAM) who had recently completed a two week animation training workshop in Broome dived head first into a tribute to the RIMOs who had driven so far to the festival, with a cameo from Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister, Nigel Scullion, and his plane. Dayne Noah from 4MW Radio Station in the Torres Strait produced his first short animation, where he showed some of the dugong and turtle hunting practices of his people. Lizzie Ross from PAW produced an animated homage to her favourite television station ICTV, and Uncle Lenny Cubby produced a Wanyi literacy animation for children in his home town of Doomadgee in Queensland. There was no shortage of ideas, talent or fun in the room, the workshop produced two minutes of stop-motion animation from three short sessions.

Animation was a strong presence on all four nights of screenings at the festival and evidenced a diverse range of styles, storytelling and production processes. Stand out films in the festival included *Strong Cycles, Not Wrong Cycles*, produced by the Woolbubinya Doomadgee Wellbeing Centre. The media training for the film was facilitated by Jan Cattoni (Tropic Productions) and David Slowo (PAW Media) in an animation training workshop they held

with the Wellbeing Centre. Jan and David worked with Centre Manager Kelly Barclay, Uncle Lenny Cubby and community members who produced the story and the artwork for the animation.

Uncle Lenny explained how many young Indigenous men in Doomadgee end up being put in prison. The closest prison is the Townsville Correctional Centre, which is thousands of miles away. The men have extended periods with no contact to their country, family or culture. Uncle Lenny wanted to use the animated film to talk to them about finding their way back to their own culture. He is passionate about the need to strengthen Wanyi culture to safeguard his people's wellbeing and future. He talked about the role that animation might play in this:

"I've been animating from early this year – two or three months the first time I've ever done it. I'm 65 years of age when I started to animate early this year and the first time in history I ever done this thing.

I was invited to the festival here from Queensland, Doomadgee. First festival I ever been to outside Queensland, I never went to any festival, but I got the privilege of coming out here to the Northern Territory among Territory people here to Lajamanu. They talk their language, they got their culture and their law themselves. But our side, they lose their law and culture, yeh, that why we send our young people out to the Territory, Borroloola side to put them through that law so they can understand that law. Nothing in Queensland here today.

Doomadgee trying to teach them about the cultural thing. I think I got the way of the bloke that showed us to do animation so we might be able to do animation for Doomadgee to keep the culture".

Jan Cattoni, who has been working with remote communities as a media trainer and producer feels that animation provides a safe space to deal with some of the hard content that Indigenous communities want to talk about. Equally she feels it works well with communal production practices and the tactile materiality that many communities bring to their art practices.

Jan produced two of the other stand out animations I saw at the festival, *Dauma And Garom* and *Jarrbayarr And Yarakara*. Jonathan Daw (PAW Media) was the trainer on *Dauma And Garom* and David Slowo (PAW Media) was the trainer on *Jarrbayarr And Yarakara*. Both these films are stop-motion, yet they have a very different style in storytelling and technique to PAW Media's animation.

Ethical trainers and producers such as Jan, Jonathan and David, work within a respectful and balanced power structure. They do not impose their style on the people they work with. PAW Media articulates this process as .... a strong two-way model. In two-way the various strengths of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are brought together to produce content that supports the maintenance of culture and language as well as supports community expression of ideas. In all projects and productions, Aboriginal cultural protocols are the determinants of what are appropriate subjects for production as well as who are appropriate crew and what are appropriate modes, locations and timing of productions (PAW Media 2015).

Dauma And Garom is the first animation produced on Erub (Darnley Island), situated in the Eastern section of the Torres Strait. It was commissioned by the Australian Museum in Sydney and is screening as part of their exhibition of Ghost Net Art. The film is a contemporary story composed by the late Mr George Mye and tells of a love story between a crab (Dauma) and a fish (Garom)... along with a very cute cockroach who almost steals the show. The main characters were created from ghost net materials.

Ghost nets pose a massive threat to marine life in the seas around the Erub Erwer Meta (Darnley Island Arts Centre) in the Torres Strait, where the film was produced. Rangers collect, record and identify the origins of the ghost nets, which often travel huge distances to Northern Australia. Employing true Indigenous alchemy and creativity, locals have turned these destructive materials into works of art, and now into animation. The animated characters are smaller versions of the large scale artwork

commissioned by the Museum, with local students' designing charcoal drawings for the minor characters in the film. The animation was last year's festival favourite, winning two ICTV Awards – *The People's Choice Award* and *Best Collaborative Video*.

Jarrbayarr And Yarakara produced by the Kalngkurr Mornington Island Wellbeing Centre and based on a story by Sarah Isaacs, is a story of two outrageously cute birds, and their friendship. The film is gentle and non-judgmental in its message that sometimes people go off the rails, but even if they do, their friends will still be there to support, not shame them. The film is voiced by males and aimed at teenage girls. When I asked Jan about this, she talked about it being a conscious decision that reflected community practice and Indigenous relationships. The voice over actors and the participants in the live action sequences that bookend the film are respected older community members whom the local girls would listen to.

There were many more fantastic animations at the festival, however I don't have the space to do them justice. The short overview of the films and production processes I have written about above, provide examples of culturally appropriate production processes and of communities using animation to strengthen their culture and their Languages. There is no 'one size fits all' approach in Indigenous animation as Indigenous culture and practices are diverse. There are however common goals, aspirations and rights that need to be respected and supported. The following two articles from The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People sum these up:

Article 13 states: ***Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities places and persons.***

Article 16 states: ***Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination.***

The remote Indigenous media sector needs to be supported through sustainable funding, training and employment opportunities; policies and guidelines that reflect and enable the circumstances of remote Indigenous communities and equity of access to the same technology and infrastructure that non-Indigenous and the more populated areas of Australia enjoy.

Whilst this was my first time at the National Remote Indigenous Media Festival it definitely won't be my last. NRIMF was the most refreshing and positive film conference/festival/event that I have experienced in some time. The animation and other media projects at the festival had an energy and intent that reminded me of the power of independent media to make a difference.

Watching the films and meeting so many passionate, proud and talented remote Indigenous media workers who work under difficult conditions for the right to tell their stories, their way, made it clear … strong Language and strong Culture equals strong people, and an equitable and exciting future for all Australians. Animation is definitely not the main factor needed to strengthen Indigenous Languages and cultures, but it definitely has a role to play in the bigger picture.

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Jack And Jones
PHOTO COURTESY OF PAW MEDIA

'The Black Oscar'
PHOTO COURTESY OF PAW MEDIA

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One Complete Revolution
PHOTO COURTESY OF NOEL RICHARDS

BELOW: *SuperPaint*
PHOTO COURTESY OF NOEL RICHARDS