

Making senses of it all

A ten minute talk by Australian writer Merrill Findlay for *Geography of the Senses*, a Wirksworth Festival's Fringe event hosted by Stirring Learning event at the Derbyshire Eco-Centre, England, 5 September, 2014.

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Greetings from Australia! It's a great pleasure to participate in Geography of the Senses, albeit remotely, on this perfect winter day. I'm speaking from a paddock on my family's farm on Gunningbland Creek, an ephemeral tributary of the Lachlan River in central western New South Wales, which we're slowly rehabilitating, as you can see. In terms of global geography, I'm more than 10,000 miles, as the crow flies, from the Derbyshire Eco-centre, or nearly 17,000 kilometres. Maryanne Jaques from Arts OutWest in Bathurst, a small city some two hours drive east of here, is videoing me so that, even if our live Skype connection fails, I'll still have a virtual presence at your gig. Such are the geographies of twenty-first century globalisation!

Here in Australia we non-indigenes have a tradition of Acknowledging Country, a protocol with which we demonstrate our respect for the First Peoples whose homelands our predecessors conquered and colonised some two hundred years ago. I live in Wiradjuri country – so I acknowledge the Wiradjuri people as the traditional custodians. I pay my respect to all the elders, past and present, of the Wiradjuri nation, and extend my respect to all other First Peoples. In the words of poet Jonathan Hill, a Dhurga man,

*We honour the presence of these ancestors
Who reside in the imagination of this land
And whose irrepressible spirituality
Flows through all creation.*

Most of my own ancestors were 'boat people' from Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland. For the Wiradjuri, their arrival was an apocalypse. An invasion even more catastrophic than your own Roman, Saxon and Norman Conquests. The British Conquest of Australia has meant, however, that we contemporary Australians are part of that vast cultural amalgam known as 'The West', a very imperfect term around which I always put sneer-quotes. Those of us born and raised within these cultural traditions tend to understand our external world as being mediated by *five* senses associated with *five* primary sense organs: our eyes, ears, nose, tongue and our largest organ of all, our skin. We

now know, however, that humans have myriad other senses which, I expect, you've already explored. But what about all our apparently extra-sensory perceptions: the hallucinatory visions, hunches, gut-feelings, intuitions, premonitions, and paranormal phenomena many of us experience? What are they? Do they constitute a 'Sixth Sense', as some people suggest?

Frankly, I don't know what to say about them. I do know, however, that people raised in non-European cultural traditions understand their sensory perceptions very differently from those of us who are immersed in 'Western' cultures. On the Indonesian island of Java, for example, people traditionally tend to list *their* senses as seeing, hearing, smelling, *talking*, and *feeling*. Cashinahuan people from Peru identify *six* senses, or 'forms of sentience', or intelligence, associated with their *six* sense organs: their skin, hands, eyes, ears, *liver* and *genitals*.¹ People raised in South and East Asian cultural traditions also tend to recognise *six* sensory organs, or gateways –eyes, ears, nose, tongue, *body* and *mind*. In Buddhism, for example, the mind, as a sensory organ, is associated with Dharma, which can be translated as mental phenomena to include our feelings, perceptions, volition or desire, and all the memories and imaginings we recount as stories, or narratives. It is *this* so-called 'Sixth Sense', or sixth 'gateway,' and the stories that pass through it, that I'd like to talk about today. What some people call the Mind/Narrative Nexus.

Being able to tell stories is, of course, a defining characteristic of our species. We're immersed in stories from birth, from even before birth. We imbibe them, digest them, internalise, change and regurgitate them. Stories, as narrated in words, images, even music, allow us to understand or cognise our world by 'chunking' its infinite complexity into easily digestible bits.² It is with such representations of reality, whether they be 'true' stories or fictions, that we *make sense* of the world.

And since we're talking about sense and senses ... the narratives we imbibe and tell also give us our so-called Sense of Place, our Sense of Belonging, our Sense of History, and our Sense of the Future and its possibilities. But there's more. Because stories are also the very resources from which we co-create our social worlds, all those collectivities we're part of – our families, communities, networks, organisations, religions, nation-states, societies, cultures, even civilisations – *and* from which we co-create our Selves. Our individual identities, or sense of *me*-ness, or who we are in the world.³

Cognitive scientists, narrative psychologists, philosophers, even some literary theorists tend to agree that, as a species, we humans co-create the story that is "me" by appropriating narratives from our social environments and integrating our own 'idiosyncratic experiences' into them.⁴ The general consensus is that, as Molly Andrews' tells us, 'We become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell'.⁵

Our sense of who we are in the world is thus contingent upon the stories we're exposed to in our daily lives, and the stories we participate in, or enact, through our social relationships, within the vastly complex narrative concoctions we call cultures.⁶ Within this paradigm, human individuals and collectivities can be seen as being continually constructed and reconstructed through the embodied social practice of storytelling, a creatively collaborative process which enables us to 'assume the common we of mutual recognition', as philosopher David Carr so nicely expresses it.⁷

Most of us are exposed to fresh stories every day, some of them visionary and life-affirming, some of them pathologically *not*. We tend to accept and internalise the stories we believe to be true, and reject the others.⁸ We then enact, embody, embed, reify or materialise these 'true' stories to co-create all the towns, cities, farms, dams, transport systems, factories, information technologies and communications networks we depend on, and all the other stuff we surround ourselves with, along with the perverse consequences of our behaviours, such as Global Warming, pollution, species loss, and land and water degradation.

But, whatever identities we claim, whatever our cultural backgrounds, our vocational callings, our daily lives, all of us participating in this gig are surely committed to changing our societies to reverse the damages our collective behaviours have caused. And the only way we can change any human collectivity – be it a family, an organisation, a city, town or village, a nation state, religion, culture, or 'civilisation' – is by introducing *new* stories into these communities' repertoires, or by re-emplotting already familiar stories from different perspectives.⁹ Which is what we writers, artists and other creatives are doing all the time.

Now, more than ever, we need inclusively life-affirming stories which enable people to understand the impacts of our collective actions and to redefine our relationships with one another and with other species. With such stories we can change the world. This is the psychic power of Dharma, and our 'sixth' sensory organ, our mind. With it comes profound moral responsibilities.

Thank you

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¹ Howes, D. (2011). *The Senses: Polysensoriality. A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment* F. E. Mascia-Lees, Wiley Blackwell.

² Herman, D. (2013). *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind*, MIT Press.

³ Bruner, J. S. (2003). *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, Harvard University Press. Chapter 3, The Narrative Creation of Self, Pp. 63-88.

⁴ Rappaport, J. (2000). "Community narratives: Tales of terror and joy." *American Journal of Community Psychology* **28**(1): 1-24.

⁵ (Andrews cited in Sclater, S. D. (2003). "What is the subject?" *Narrative Inquiry* **13**(2): 317-330. Sclater 2003 p.317.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Singer, J. (2004). "Narrative identity and meaning making across the adult lifespan: an introduction." *Journal of Personality* **72**(3): 437-459., Dennett, D. C. (1993). *Consciousness Explained*. London, Viking Books., Rappaport, J. (2000). "Community narratives: Tales of terror and joy." *American Journal of Community Psychology* **28**(1): 1-24., Currie, M. (1998). *Postmodern narrative theory*. New York, St Martins Press., Crossley, M. L. (2003). "Formulating Narrative Psychology: the limitations of contemporary social constructionism." *Narrative Inquiry* **13**(2): 287-300. Gergen, K. J. (1998). "Narrative, Moral Identity and Historical Consciousness: a Social Constructionist Account." Retrieved 24 December, 2004. Rigney, A. (1992). "The point of stories: on narrative communication and its cognitive functions." *Poetics Today* **13**(2): 263-283.

⁷ Carr, D. (1986). "Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity." History and Theory **25**(May 1986): 117-131.

⁸ Evidence is now also emerging that people's ideological affiliations and voting behaviours have biological as well as cultural dimensions. See, for example, Hatemi, P. K., N. A. Gillespie, et al. (2011). "A genome-wide analysis of liberal and conservative political attitudes." Journal of Politics **73**(1): 271-285. ; Jost, J. T., J. Glaser, et al. (2003). "Political conservatism as motivated social cognition." Psychological Bulletin **129**(3): 339-375. and Haidt, J. (2008). What Makes People Vote Republican? . Edge, Edge Foundation Inc.

⁹ Rappaport, J. (2000). "Community narratives: Tales of terror and joy." American Journal of Community Psychology **28**(1): 1-24.

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