Urban Aboriginal Identity:
“I can’t see the durt (stars) in the city”

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The contemporary Melbourne landscape is usually defined in a physical sense. The complex cultural landscape, however incorporates not only the physical, but also what's beneath, on and above the surface, including the sky and the cosmos. These cultural landscapes form essential components of a Wurundjeri person’s identity and connection to ‘Country’, the Traditional Custodians of Melbourne. Firmly imbedded within Wurundjeri identity is our language, Woiwurrung. Many places, buildings, programs, etc., in Melbourne are now named in language. But, what is the significance and relevance of this to not only Wurundjeri people, but also the wider community? What other ways can they engage with Wurundjeri through language? Language is the key to understanding culture; culture is like a tree; language its roots; if you cut the roots the tree dies. Creation Narratives incorporating language is another way that Wurundjeri express identity. Many of these narratives relate to the cosmos, the creation of the durt (stars), Tharangalgk (Bunjil’s home), how the emu sisters became the Pleiades, and how Bunjil himself is part of the Aquila (eagle) constellation like in Greek mythology. In Melbourne, the durt are flooded out by the artificial lights, the ground is covered by artificial infrastructure, so if we cannot physically see the stars or feel the dirt beneath our feet, how do we remain culturally connected? This paper explores how the re-making of Melbourne’s landscape affects Wurundjeri ability, as Traditional Custodians, to find, connect and reconnect to our cultural narratives and identity.

Keywords — Wurundjeri; Melbourne; cultural landscapes; identity.

INTRODUCTION

The physical landscape can be defined in many ways, depending on your standing. According to the Environmental Engineering Dictionary, the physical landscape is simply “Natural land forms and associated natural phenomena of a region.” (2008). For an indigenous perspective, the definition is quite different with complex systems at play, including not separating one’s physical body from the landscape. A more accurate term would be a cultural or spiritual landscape, or Country. Wergaia elder, Eleanor Bourke, describes in more detail the Aboriginal spiritual connection to self and the cosmos,

“...Australia was, and is, a vibrant spiritual landscape...peopled in spirit form by the ancestors who had originated in the Dreaming...a description of how what was created became an ordered system or; more accurately, a moral system.” (1995)

According to Bourke, this spiritual landscape, is very difficult for a non-Indigenous person to see, feel or understand as they have different ways of seeing “spiritual and physical survival.” (1995) This kind of landscape also includes gender roles, not only in the physical form on earth, but also in the stars. For instance, the Wurundjeri believe that Bunjil the Creator, the wedge-tailed eagle (Aquila audax) is male, and his two wives, Gunawarra the black swans (Cygnus atratus) are female. Narratives like these are mapped out in the stars and demonstrates that Bik-dai (Land Country) Wurrara-wurr Birrk (Sky Country) are one and intrinsically connected in many ways. (Massola 1968); (Hamacher 2014); (Christies & Bush 2008). Country embodies these connections associating with what’s under the ground, on, above, into the sky, and finally into the cosmos. This paper will attempt to bring further understanding to the ways that the physical and spiritual landscapes are connected and interact tangibly and intangibly, and how language plays a vital part. It will also discuss, from a Wurundjeri perspective, how to remain part of the many intersections and interconnections of a spiritual landscape, or Country. Through examining and defining place and space, and reclaimed place and space in a contemporary world, we will discover how Wurundjeri people successfully maintain cultural practise and keep their identity strong in a built environment.

METHODS

Wurundjeri are the Traditional Custodians of Melbourne and surrounds, and form part of the Eastern/Central Kulin Nation, which consists of five language groups with common customs, and language. Wurundjeri land encompasses the Birrarung (Yarra) watershed, with many Wurundjeri still living on Country. The majority living in the inner and outer suburbs of Melbourne. Our traditional boundaries, as described by Wurundjeri Elder, Bill Nicholson junior:

“Wurundjeri Woiwurrung Country extends east from Melbourne to the Werribee River, north-west to Mount Macedon, east to Mount Baw Baw, north to the Great Dividing Range behind Healesville, south to the Moorabool Creek and resides on the northern boundaries of the great swamp lands of Koo Wee Rup.”

(Nicholson & Nicholson 2016)

This description is a physical one, but it contains many hidden stories of connection to place, spiritually and knowing. Note the boundaries are marked by natural features, either a river, mountain range or swamp. We have innate knowledge of these places as they are where our culture began in Creation Time. Therefore, Country defined by an Aboriginal person is multifaceted, it includes the physical, non-physical, linguistic, spiritual and emotional. It includes self, and feels emotion as we do. If we are sick culturally our Country becomes sick, so maintaining culture maintains Country. Country heals these ills, Country is reflected in you. Country is family, incorporating its animals, plants, landforms and features right down to the smallest of things like a grain of sand. ‘Cultural Heritage’ is the term used to define the tangible attributes of culture, as Culture in Development describes it as, “tangible representations of the value systems, beliefs, traditions and lifestyles...[can be found in the]”

- Built Environment (Buildings, Townscapes, Archaeological remains)
- Natural Environment (Rural landscapes, Coasts and shorelines, Agricultural heritage)
- Artefacts (Books & Documents, Objects, Pictures). (unknown)

These definitions overlook the intricately woven framework and foundation that lays beneath the tangible aspects of culture that make up Wurundjeri identity. Increasingly today though, there is more recognition for including the tangible and intangible in definitions of Cultural Heritage as adopted by UNESCO in 2003, the “oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.” (2017) One of the most important being knowledge, as the tangible is created from the intangible and overlaps and reflects on each other. Tangible Cultural Heritage includes things that you can see and feel, but also places. While, intangible includes how you feel connected to place and space. Remembering this isn’t always an ancient connection, there are also many recent and shared history connections, i.e. the Mission period, Wurundjeri people...
Aboriginal people often refer to these intangible components with familial names like mother, father, brother, sister. Vicki Couzens, a Keerraywoorroong woman from Western Victoria, explains, “As the Land is the Mother, we belong to Her. We are charged with the responsibility to care for our Country and all creatures...through the continuation of our traditional practices, we maintain and strengthen the Spirit of the Land, our People and the creatures in a perpetual cycle or renewal and regeneration.” (Couzens 2016, p. 6)

Language is the key to further understanding and unlocking knowledge of these layers of Country. Reinforcing this is the literal translation of Tharangalk, in Woiwurrung the words darrang-tree, galk-stick, and biik-Country, literally mean the 'forest Country in the sky'. Language connects animals, and Country to self as evidenced by their language names. For instance, the Woiwurrung word for ‘eye’ is mirring, and ‘hole in the ground’. Similarly, the word for ‘body’ is marram, and ‘kangaroo’. Furthermore, there are names related to the stars. The word for star, 'durt', is related to light or lack thereof. It is the prefix to the words for ‘blind’ durting, and deaf dut wirring. (Blake 1991, pp. 107-22) So Wurundjeri look at things in a deeper way, still doing so even when surrounded by a built environment.

Through a Traditional Custodian lens, looking over Melbourne’s cityscape, we don’t see the buildings and roads. We recollect from our oral histories where our people conducted ceremony, had mass gatherings, or lived along the Birrarung (Yarra), as seen in the walert-gurn (possum skin cloak), designed and created by the author, in Figure 2 before it was straightened and polluted. Places like Yarra Park (MCG) is well known for the famous Marngrook being played there still have a strong connection to Coranderrk. (ABC Online 2004). Figure 1 describes the components of all the different Country’s that help make-up Wurundjeri identity. It shows how each rely on each other and how they can be traversed. All over Aboriginal Australia, the belief of a Magic Man climbing huge eucalyptus or pine trees (Clarke 2015, p. 26), or cords made from "hair, string, a rainbow, lightning, a spear, a grass rope, a tree, flames, a totem board and a turtle." (Johnson & Namara Tjapaltjarra 2014, p. 24); or spears that create a ladder (Clarke 2007/2008, p. 41). Wurundjeri people’s belief is that your murrup (spirit) climbs the karalk (setting sun rays) to reach Tharangalk, but only the spirits of the dead or Birrarup’s (Magic Men) (Ellender & Christiansen 2001, p. 48) or Song Men can enter to get their powers and songs. Howitt, in Brumm describes how songs were not created by people, but they came from Bunjil, a dream, or from the spirits of deceased loved ones.” (2010, p. 186) The in-between place, Ngamut, is a place of death. The Woiwurrung word for white man is Ngomutji, literally meaning ‘death—am asking you.’ During European invasion, like many Aboriginal people who had never seen white man before, believed them to be dead loved ones’ due to their similarities to the paleness of a corpse. Hence the connection of the names Ngamut and Ngomutji can be determined easily.

Our Country is also reflected in the stars. This view is also shared by other Aboriginal groups as noted by Clarke, “The heavens were perceived as a Country with the same species of plants and animals that existed below.” (2015, p. 23) The German Missionary Teichelmann, describes his observations of Aboriginal people in South Australia, “...all celestial bodies were formally living on the earth, partly as animals, partly as men, and that they left...all the names which they apply to the beings on earth, they apply to the celestial bodies (1841, p. 4)
Figure 4: Aunty Diane Kerr, senior Wurundjeri Elder. (Garvey 2015)

Tanderrum is a traditional Wurundjeri ceremony where members of the Eastern/Central Kulin Nation language groups would gather to settle politics, arrange marriages, trade, and feast on the abundant food resources that were around at the time the ceremony was conducted. Birrarung Marr Tanderrum is a traditional Wurundjeri ceremony where members of the Eastern/Central Kulin Nation language groups would gather to settle politics, arrange marriages, trade, and feast on the abundant food resources that were around at the time the ceremony was conducted. Birrarung Marr was the location for these large gatherings, where gifts were exchanged, visitors welcomed, ending in a celebration of dance after the cultural business was over. Today, the Eastern/Central Kulin re-enact the various stages of this ceremony, beginning with a Smoking Ceremony. Visitors are invited to place a bough from their Country on the ceremonial fire as a sign of respect to their hosts. A water ceremony is conducted allowing visitors to feel culturally safe by sipping water through a reed. Visitors also exchange a mungo (message stick) as a gift, which are kept by each respective group, then returned the following year.

Tanderrum supports the aim to make Aboriginal culture present, relevant and noticed amongst all the skyscrapers. Figure 4. Wurundjeri culture is breathing, dynamic and strong, and with every generation, comes new knowledge, new songs and dances, that we create from essence of the ancient. Tanderrum is conducted in the same location on the banks of the Birrarung (Yarra), and at the same time of year during spring when iuk, eels (Anguilla australis) run, further keeping the integrity of this ceremony. Tanderrum connects all the complex layers of Country seen in Figure 5.

Biik-ut (Below Country) by the collection of ochre beneath the ground; Biik-dui (On Country) for dancing and feeling the earth with our feet; Baanj Biik (Water Country) the water ceremony which forms part of Tanderrum. Murnmut Biik (Wind Country) our voices singing in language and carried by the wind; Wurru-Wurru- Biik (Sky Country) our dances to honour our Creation Beings in their physical forms, and Tharangalk Biik (Bunjil’s home, cosmos) we sing to honour the spirit forms of our Creation Beings. Being aware of not only the tangible, but the intangible will help to create greater awareness of not only Wurundjeri, but Aboriginal culture generally and its relevance today for everyone, as seen in Figure 6.
Bunjil’s sons/helpers:
- Archernar (Tadjeri), the Brush-tailed Phascogale
- alpha Crucis-Southern Cross (Yukope), the Green Parakeet
- unknown star (Turnung), the Glider Possum
- beta Crucis-Southern Cross (Dantun) the Blue Mountain Parrot
- alpha Centauri-Pointers (Thara), the Swamp Hawk
- beta Centauri-Pointers (Djurt Djurt), the Nankeen Kestrel
- Antares (Nurong), Bunjil’s brother
- Bunjil’s wives (Gunuwarra), the black swans are either side of him. (adapted from Howitt 1904, p. 128)

To take this cultural knowledge further, Wurundjeri people create new dances to honour the old songs, and perform them both publicly in a performance capacity and for the Wurundjeri community privately. The public performances are integral to keep our culture visible, but even more so the private ceremonial dances we keep our community healthy. These private ceremonies bring the whole community together, from new born babies to senior Elders, teaching and learning from each other. These ceremonies, that are ‘out bush’ allow us to see the durt (stars) shining bright, but what do we when we get back home to the artificial lights of a built environment?

How do Wurundjeri people remain connected and remember, when the durt (stars) are flooded out? If we are starting to forget, we simply look up and still see the brightest ones that are linked to our Creation Narratives, so our connection is not broken Figure 8. Even in a built environment, Wurundjeri are constantly reminded of our identity. We can still see binbeal (rainbow), connecting the ground to Wurru-wurru Biik (Sky Country), we can still witness the setting sun, a direct link to Tharangalk, via Ngamat. Our spirits are lifted when we see the physical forms of our Creation Beings. We can still feel the water, the earth between our toes and we feel the wind.

Wurundjeri can teach about that different perspective, as the durt (stars) enable expression of identity. Durt (stars) are tangible, but our connection to them is intangible. They have been a navigation tool all over the world, by land or sea. For people who have had to live off the earth’s resources, it was integral for survival to read them. They are ‘mapped’ as memories of trade routes, animal breeding times, seasons and plant food availability. Ceremony times are all dictated by the mirnian (moon) and durt (stars). One way that this is memorised is through song, or ‘Songlines’. Song is easily transmissible to the next generation of learners. These durt (star) Songlines are also connected to the Water and Sky Songlines. A Wurundjeri example is Berak’s (William Barak) song entitled ‘Corroboree’. The song is about the genunwil (duck), gunuwarra (black swan), and two different language names for (pelican), burndangala and wadjil, all wetland birds. (Torrence 1887, p. 339) It paints the picture of the wetland Songline connected to Wurundjeri Creation Narratives of the duck being the mother of the platypus, the black swans being Bunjil’s wives and the pelican who travels great distances to follow the water. Songs such as these are also linked to specific durt (stars) as seen in Figure 7.

Stages to follow:
- Learn: the facts, appreciation begins
- Appreciate: more knowledge gained through research
- Meet: talk face-to-face with Wurundjeri people
- Look after: an urge to protect and preserve
- Understand: by connecting to the peoples who’s culture it is, not simply what you find online or in academic journals
- Protect together: create strategies of protection and maintenance
- Relevant in a built environment: creates a presence and shines a light in its importance for everyone
- Shared history: preventing culture being seen as stagnant or relic
- Avoid: reference to Aboriginal culture in past tense
- Learn and teach: others, create relationships

When these steps are followed, the bigger picture starts to immerse and the outcomes are mutually beneficial, raising awareness of what lies beneath, around and above the city and allows people to start to look at it in a new and different way. It will also allow people to look at the durt (stars) from a different perspective also.

Figure 7: Southern Cross showing some of Bunjil’s Helpers. (Image adapted by author, original by Ventrudo 2010)

Figure 8: The brightest stars that can still be seen with the city lights. (Stellarium 2017)
CONCLUSION

Understanding that Wurundjeri people and Aboriginal people generally look at the landscape in a very different way than non-Indigenous people, will help others to gain an appreciation of what Melbourne truly is, tangible and intangible Country. It helps others to understand that Wurundjeri look at the city as though it isn’t there, looking through the built environment to see what lies beneath, on, around and above it. This spiritual landscape or Country is what makes up our cultural identity. This does not dwindle when we live in the city, our cultural responsibilities are the same, to our people and the environment. To take care of Country and self as one, is an integral part of keeping Country healthy, if we are culturally ill, so is Country. We maintain this by keeping our Songlines strong through public ceremonies like Tanderrum, where the Kulin ‘Sing Up Country’ to make it breath again and further strengthening our Songlines through our private ceremonies for future generations.

Songlines help Wurundjeri people to remember and teach younger ones about distance, water and food, direction and ceremonial times and places, all created to help ‘remember Country’. These Songlines are reflected in the *durt* (stars). Again, reinforcing the links and pathways of the ever changing ‘layers’ of Country through time that Wurundjeri have to adapt to do to survive culturally in a built environment. Included in this definition, should also be the recent shared history with non-Indigenous people, so the journey doesn’t stop, but continues.

Our connection to the *durt* (stars) in integral to completing our cultural identity. Even though we may live in the city, and the stars are flooded out by the many artificial lights, we can still see the brightest ones (Figure 8). This can be compared to the cultural life of a Wurundjeri person in the city, who may at times forget to look up into the sky to reconnect with Country.

The important steps mentioned in and below Figure 6 will help to overcome any barriers that may be preventing Wurundjeri culture from being more present, relevant and celebrated by everyone. It involves meeting Wurundjeri people first hand, and learning directly from them, not simply what’s on the internet, or academia. By doing this creates an appreciation and understanding that is always mutually beneficial as genuine relationships are built for the future.

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