

## Multimodal Aesthetics – Rendering Complexity through Integrated Visual and Verbal Storytelling

The visual and the verbal afford expressive capabilities that theatrical practice, as a multimodal artform, aesthetically integrates to create intellectual and affective impact, engaging a complex regime of communication that orchestrates audiences' relation to the sujet in question. The paper critically analyses the integration of visual and verbal narrative delivery in Scott Rankin's multi-award-winning biographical play *Namatjira* (2010-13). It offers a nuanced discussion of its experiential effects and semiotic function as a conduit for valuing and appreciating Western Aranda culture as well as for advancing postcolonial reconciliation in Australia. Examining the tension arising at the interstice of communal and individual performance, visual and verbal storytelling, as well as theatrical and cinematic staging techniques, the article maps an advanced methodological approach for the aesthetic analysis of contemporary postcolonial theatre.

**Keywords:** *Namatjira*, multimodal aesthetics, postcolonial theatre, Indigenous Australia, cultural survivance

### Introduction

The visual and the verbal each afford expressive capabilities that theatrical practice, as a multimodal artform, aesthetically integrates to create intellectual and affective impact, engaging a complex regime of communication that orchestrates audiences' relation to the sujet in question. While there are manifold ways for theatre makers to creatively leverage the available tension between image and text as a productive site of meaning making, those instances where such aesthetic exploration is deployed at the service of promoting a broader conceptual argument, prove to be especially fruitful to academic enquiry. One such production is Scott Rankin's multi-award-winning play *Namatjira* (2010-13). It uses the biographical story of pioneering Western Aranda (i.e. Aboriginal) visual artist Albert Namatjira (1902-59) to advance a complex argument for intercultural acknowledgement and reconciliation of Australia's ongoing colonial legacy. The script – oscillating between direct address, dialogue and musical delivery – thereby provides historiographical narration on Namatjira's life and the context of colonisation faced by the Western Aranda people. At the same time, it takes the audience on an emotional journey that is to predispose them toward embracing the play's ideology of compassionate interpersonal relation. By contrast, the visual design of the staging engaged a dialectical communication toward the narrative of Indigenous disenfranchisement and alienation, introducing a competing frame permeated with a sense of cultural survivance and creative vitality amid the

contemporary Western Aranda community despite severe ongoing socio-economic marginalisation. The play's design draws on the professional visual art practice of Albert Namatjira's descendants who have carried forth his creative legacy as a family tradition.<sup>1</sup> *Namatjira* visually engaged its audiences through a heterogeneous mix of imagery, ranging from an exhibition of contemporary watercolour paintings lining the entrance to the auditorium, live portraiture and large-scale landscape sketching on stage (silently accompanying the actors' performance) to digital film projection. The aesthetic emphasis on process and slow-paced yet consistent emergence in the visual domain created a strong juxtaposition to the quick-paced turns of the verbal narrative of intercultural encounter. It accrued cultural significance through a narrative and performative framing that evoked Western Aranda ontology (i.e. theory of being-in-the-world) which centralises the land as an enduring lifeforce and bedrock to identity formation.

Upon delivery of a brief overview of the play and its production context, the article carefully analyses the integration of textual and visual communication in *Namatjira*. It draws out the individual contribution of each to the play's narrative project, critically considering the communicative affordances and impact of each modality on the attempt to award space and value to Western Aranda culture and its underlying ontology.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Namatjira*: Background, Plot and Design**

*Namatjira* was conceived and written by non-Indigenous Australian playwright and director Scott Rankin on behest of and in collaboration with descendants of famous late Aboriginal watercolour artist Albert Namatjira. These family members have included Kumantjai L. Namatjira Lankin, Kumantjai K. Namatjira, Gwenda and Albert Jnr. Namatjira, Gloria Pannaka, Ivy Pareoutja, Mervyn Rubuntja, Kumantjai P. Taylor, Betty and Marcus Wheeler, Mostyn Kentaltja, Elton and Hilary Wirri and Dougie Kwarlple Abbott. The play has been part of a larger community cultural development project conducted on the traditional homelands of the family, which ran from 2009 to 2019, encompassing intergenerational workshops in watercolour painting, performing arts, digital literacy, filmmaking and leadership (Big hART, n.d.). This project sought to reinvigorate the artistic legacy of their pioneering ancestor and to create much-needed financial revenue for the family by (inter)nationally promoting the professional visual art practice of the older family members, while fostering interest and response among the younger

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<sup>1</sup>Known as the niche 'Hermannsburg School', which in its adoption of realist perspective renditions markedly departs from the distinctive Indigenous Australian contemporary visual art currents that have developed out of the Papunya Movement, i.e. dot paintings enlisting a bird's eye view for rendering landscapes (French, 2002).

<sup>2</sup>The research laid out in this paper deepens my studies of Rankin's play that I presented in previous publications (Thurrow 2018 & 2019).

generations to continue the family's painting tradition (Rentschler, 2015). The play acted thereby as a vehicle to raise awareness of Albert Namatjira's life story as emblematic of the challenges that Indigenous people have been facing under colonial rule in Australia. These challenges have included, for example, forced displacement from fertile land, racial discrimination, segregation, severe poverty, poor health and cultural oppression (Pascoe, 2018). Despite battling these conditions for all of his life, Albert Namatjira became one of Australia's first and commercially most successful visual artists of Aboriginal descent who won extensive international acclaim. His signature painting style is characterised by realist interpretations of Central Australian desert landscapes, most often framed by white eucalyptus trees. Many of Namatjira's *sujets* were renditions of sites on his traditional homeland, which extends west from Mparntwe/Alice Springs. Painting these enabled him to remain close to his people's Country and to capitalise on this relation through artmaking (Uhlmann, 1999). While most often read as mere naïve imitation of Western landscape traditions during his lifetime (French, 2002), Namatjira's art is today appraised as a sophisticated attempt at channelling Western Aranda conceptions of land through a novel artistic medium that for him required a thorough reconsideration of perspective and expression (Uhlmann, 1999). The Western Aranda people were introduced to perspective landscape painting by a range of non-Indigenous Australian visual artists who began to travel the outback from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century in pursuit of a genuine national iconography freed from British influence – a project deeply intertwined with the efforts toward building the young Australian nation (Edmond, 2014). Among these artists was WWI veteran Reginald "Rex" Battarbee, who became Namatjira's tutor and life-long friend and sales manager. The play *Namatjira* traces their entwined biographies, frequently inviting the audience to consider continuities with today's life worlds through the prism of the experiences of these two men – to provoke audiences to question the pervasive optimistic narrative of decolonial progress in Australia and to foster understanding of the challenges Indigenous people continue to face to this day.

The drama is centred on one male Indigenous actor delivering the script predominantly in monological form, embodying all of Albert's and Rex' actions as well as acting from time to time as humorous epic narrator. This allows him to contextualise the chronologically sequenced scenes, and to comment on the relation to and resonance of dramatic action with contemporary social practices. Another supporting Indigenous actor fills in for minor roles, adding comedic relief and occasional dialogical response to the delivery of the script. The cast is complemented by one musician contributing a live soundscape to the stage performance, as well as one non-Indigenous painter continually sketching a portrait of the lead actor in vivid oil colours, and a minimum of two descendants of Albert Namatjira completing a large-

scale evocative chalk sketch of a Central Desert landscape in a pastiche of Albert's signature style on the backdrop of the stage.<sup>1</sup>

The first act relates Albert's<sup>2</sup> birth in Western Aranda desert Country and his childhood on the Lutheran mission at Ntaria/Hermannsburg, his elopement into the bushland with his lover Rubina<sup>3</sup>, and the subsequent hardship of supporting his growing family when they return to the mission. Problems encountered in intercultural communication and adaptation between the Western Aranda people and the Christian missionaries dominate the light-hearted scenes of Albert's young years. These eventually channel into reflections on differing concepts of art, culture and economic practice as Albert meets and befriends visiting painter Rex Battarbee. From the outset, their coming-of-age narratives are interwoven, effectively calling into question the nature of Albert's sheltered yet segregated childhood on the mission by having its representation intercut with dramatic enactments of Rex' concurrent wartime experiences. As Albert's and Rex' teacher-student relationship evolves into one of equal personal and creative exchange, the play increasingly focuses on questions of universal social engagement, calling on the audience to consider their own positioning in the intercultural space.

The second act describes Albert's ongoing struggle for economic survival on colonised Western Aranda land and his eventual (inter)national rise as famed watercolour artist. This narrative is presented through the non-Indigenous populace's frenetic infatuation with Albert's iconic art and public persona. The presentation of this 'success story', however, is continually interlaced with scenes in which Albert is subject of overt racism and exploitation. For example, the Government decides to tax his income without granting him civil rights, while his admirers are unable to conceive of him as anything but an exotic curiosity. Throughout, the play emphasises Albert's unreserved grounding in the Western Aranda cultural sphere, explaining its communal principle and practice of equitable sharing that in the play invariably comes to clash with the imposed colonial social, political and economic structure: Non-Indigenous Australians embrace Albert's art as ostensible proof of individual distinction as well as capability and willingness to assimilate to Anglo-Australian values and social practices. His public persona is construed as confirming the colonial project and becomes the ground for awarding him privileges otherwise withheld from Indigenous Australians, such as the right to buy and consume alcohol. Albert, however, through his continued compliance with Western Aranda protocols that require him to distribute money and

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<sup>1</sup>Thus far, *Namatjira* has been staged only by the art & social change company Big hART Inc. with the original cast, who were deeply involved in the play's development process. Lead was Pitjantjatjara actor Trevor Jamieson, supported by Arrernte/Yankunytjatjara actor and singer Derik Lynch, with professional non-Indigenous artists Genevieve Lacey performing the live musical score and Robert Hannaford sketching the portrait. The production was directed by playwright Scott Rankin himself.

<sup>2</sup>Western Aranda name: Elea

<sup>3</sup>Luritja name: Ilkalita

1 alcohol into his eroding community, quietly counters these attempts at colonial  
 2 absorption. The impossibility of navigating the nexus of the two opposing  
 3 cultures under colonial rule ultimately spell out Albert's economic and physical  
 4 demise in a community broken by cultural alienation: His ill-informed decision  
 5 to sell his copyright to a Sydney-based publisher erodes his financial backbone,  
 6 plunging him and his community back into dire poverty; while a court  
 7 sentences him to hard labour shortly before his death for supply of alcohol to  
 8 his community after a woman was raped and murdered there by a drunken man.  
 9 Once the performance concluded with a blackout, a spotlight flickered back  
 10 onto the portrait painter's easel. The image of the lead actor performing as  
 11 Albert was replaced by a projection screen, showing a brief video of Albert  
 12 Namatjira's present-day descendants talking on Country about the cultural  
 13 development project's beginnings, structure and tangible benefits for the  
 14 community. The family members drew the audience's attention back onto the  
 15 watercolour exhibition in the foyer. They invited patrons to purchase these  
 16 paintings, which had been created by the present-day family members, and to  
 17 donate to the family's trust fund to support them in setting up sustainable  
 18 educational and business structures in their community to break the cycle of  
 19 poverty and cultural alienation.

## 22 **Multimodal Aesthetics: Verbal and Visual Storytelling**

24 *Namatjira* integrates its verbal and visual storytelling to communicate a  
 25 two-fold narrative to its audiences. Firstly, through its verbally delivered script,  
 26 the play seeks to inform about the devastation and ongoing hardship that  
 27 colonisation has inflicted upon Western Aranda people – with the aim to  
 28 predispose audiences toward changing their ways of socio-political  
 29 engagement. Secondly, it aims to do so without reinforcing persistent narratives  
 30 of cultural loss and scarcity that to this day often accompany discourses on  
 31 Indigenous Australian communities. Such discourses, while acknowledging the  
 32 injustices and harm caused by non-Indigenous invaders, ultimately disempower  
 33 because they render Indigenous subjects solely as victims of external force,  
 34 while obscuring histories of resistance and the resources still available to  
 35 people which may be drawn upon to rebuild communities from within (Enoch,  
 36 2001; Langton, 2003). Without excavating and creatively reinvigorating these  
 37 resources, the story of loss and devastation alone risks confirming the colonial  
 38 project as it cannot provide a glimpse of a sovereign cultural practice for  
 39 colonised peoples. *Namatjira* sites such building blocks for regaining Western  
 40 Aranda cultural identity predominantly in the performative and visual domain.  
 41 On a very elementary level, any identified performance by Indigenous actors on  
 42 stage confirms survival of colonialism and asserts a basic form of resilient  
 43 subjectivity (Glow, 2007). Such identification is provided by the play's lead  
 44 actor who introduces the cast in his opening monologue, placing special  
 45 emphasis on their cultural affiliations (Rankin, 2012). In addition, *Namatjira*'s

multimodal aesthetics, that sees the delivery of the script complemented by continuous visual art practice, song, dance and epic narration, co-articulates a pan-Indigenous Australian traditional embodied storytelling practice that combines various storytelling modes to evoke a sujet in maximally immersive ways (Casey, 2012). Rather than privileging the spoken word as the prime carrier of signification through dialogue and exposition (as characteristic of classical Western drama), visual and corporeal modes of expression are enlisted to draw audiences into a performative space that resonates with and conjures Western Aranda notions of being, doing and knowing (Thurrow, 2018).

### *Verbal Storytelling*

As indicated, Rankin's script acts as a scaffold to deliver the biographical coordinates of Albert's story, conveying knowledge of historical and political context that shaped his life and societal relations in Australia at large. Even though the play was conceived as a celebration of Western Aranda achievement and resourcefulness that is to inspire contemporary Indigenous Australian communities to explore their dormant cultural capital, its predominant audience has been metropolitan non-Indigenous theatre patrons. The play's 'explanatory' narrative mode particularly targets this demographic, seeking to sway their assumptions about Indigenous capabilities as well as past events, and to enlist them as allies in the Namatjira family's quest for building socio-economic and cultural sustainability. Rankin accounts for their likely lack of intimate knowledge about Australian colonial history and Indigenous experiences, using Albert's biography to weave together an easily accessible account of early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Australian history. Accessibility for mainstream audiences is enhanced through an aesthetics of verbal storytelling that closely accords with non-Indigenous biographical conventions, e.g. chronological progression, clear siting of action in place and time, distinguishing character voice, providing rudimentary motive and causality for actions, etc.. This heightens identificatory potential with the action and dramatic personae, readily drawing in audiences and keeping them engaged, not the least through the play's often light-hearted and humorous tone.

A key feature of the script is that the lead actor often breaks character and jumps into the role of epic narrator to reflect on select aspects of Western Aranda cultural life. By explaining the rationale for certain behaviours and drawing parallels to Anglo-Australian practices, he dissolves significant cultural differences and knits the two cultural spheres closer together. In previous publications, I extensively discussed the shortcomings of this representational approach that channels the biographical narrative through a prism that invites identification primarily through emphasis on familiarity, i.e. bringing into view only those aspects of Western Aranda culture that are similar to, or can be reconciled with, non-Indigenous Australian practices (Thurrow 2018 & 2019). While this enables audiences to easily and positively

1 relate to Western Aranda representations on stage, it unduly contracts  
 2 signification and ultimately delivers a distorted account of the Western Aranda  
 3 cultural realm, because the colonial framework remains dominant and dictates  
 4 the terms on which engagement with Indigenous Australian practices can take  
 5 place (Rutherford, 1990). In Rankin's script, Western Aranda frameworks are  
 6 curtailed and remain subjugated, able to only ever emerge as –at most–  
 7 minimally different from the Australian mainstream. In *Namatjira*, this  
 8 representational strategy is enlisted to counter the segregating exoticising  
 9 impetus of colonial discourse, which enshrines difference as justification for  
 10 maintaining socio-economic and political inequality. Despite the problematic  
 11 pitfalls of Rankin's adopted narrative approach, the script serves the important  
 12 function of anchoring the stage performance, supplying a foundation to the  
 13 play's objective of reconfiguring the public discourse on Albert Namatjira's life  
 14 at the service of eliciting real-life support for his present-day family. While  
 15 having attracted criticism for its disempowering configuration (Godwin, 2018),  
 16 *Namatjira* proved its worth as an advocacy tool for improving the family's  
 17 social and financial outlook, directly contributing to re-engaging a number of  
 18 Western Aranda youth with the painting tradition, generating significant  
 19 income through painting sales and donations, as well as providing the much-  
 20 needed public profile for the family to gain back Albert's alienated copyright  
 21 (Brash & Haskin, 2018).

22 The key to the play's affective power lies in the script's careful  
 23 engineering of dramaturgical arc and performance tone, juxtaposing moments  
 24 of vigorous joy with those of intense grief. This takes the audiences onto a  
 25 turbulent emotional journey, which becomes memorable not just for the  
 26 intellectual insight awarded but even more so for the profound emotional affect  
 27 it elicits. The affective potential of the spoken word is thereby often heightened  
 28 by the resonant musical score that amplifies a given scene's mood. For  
 29 example, when Albert grieves the death of his father, a rendition of the  
 30 Lutheran hymn *Abide by Me*, sung by a female choir in Western Aranda  
 31 language, adds a tone of elation and transcendence to the words – a conduit for  
 32 empathetic relation that pulls the audience into the evoked space of grief and  
 33 loss. The patrons' emotional response to the scene and subsequent projection of  
 34 emotion into the performing subject thereby establish an accord on which  
 35 identificatory relation is built and maintained. As Rankin emphasises, the play  
 36 is structured to ensure that the audience is not jarred by the darker dimensions  
 37 of the story but are at all times kept in the safe care of the Indigenous  
 38 storyteller, who does not pass on but performatively contains the violence  
 39 playing out in Albert's story by continually balancing the darkness with light  
 40 tone and carefully timed diversions (Rankin, 2011). Rankin's form of  
 41 storytelling here mirrors the Indigenous practice of 'yarning' that seeks to  
 42 render Indigenous stories as contextualised and deeply personalised narratives,  
 43 enhancing their identificatory capability through emotionally accessible and  
 44 engaging dramaturgical structuring that rejects the distancing focalisation of  
 45 colonial discourse (Austin, 2015). The aim is to inform on, yet not revel in, past

wrongs in order to explore ways of building a better present and future for intercultural practice in Australia. The integration of past and present that results from the continuous disruption of narrative delivery by meta-commentary, intertwines the temporal layers and provides an experiential conduit for Indigenous conceptions of time as non-linear and non-cumulative (Muecke, 2004). The epic narrator uses this subtle temporal blending technique to advocate a form of personal engagement that resonates both with the Western Aranda ideal of equitable sharing as well as the Christian principle of charity. He identifies this in Albert's and Rex' evolving partnership that is characterised by reciprocal service and compassionate care, emerging as the two men travel, paint and converse together on Namatjira's traditional homeland, his 'Country'. The blending of temporal layers that is caused by the narrator's braided meta-commentary, directly aimed at the audience, promotes this form of deeply connected engagement also in the present time frame.

The Western Aranda conception of 'Country' is important to acknowledge here as it co-articulates the philosophical foundation to the play's ideology of connection.<sup>1</sup> In very general terms, 'Country' supplies the bedrock to any concept of identity in Indigenous Australian philosophies. Land and people are conceived as intimately conjoined, both thought of as living sentient entities that stand in constitutive relation to one another (Rose, 2008). Rather than being defined through binary oppositional pairs that render people agential subjects and the land as passive object of their actions, the notion of 'Country' positions people as an integrated part of the land, with clearly defined functions that are geared to maintain the health and balance of the ecological system (Mowaljarlai & Malnic, 2013). The land therefore is the origin and purpose of all matter, a "living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life" (Rose, 2008). Western Aranda culture is deeply informed by this notion of ecological interdependence and serviceable cohabitation, with its societal norms and spiritual beliefs moulded in such a way as to support the ongoing maintenance of the land's ecology (Strehlow, 1907). The play's ideology of reciprocal service and compassionate care resonates with these values, proposing a balanced adaptation of the Western Aranda protocol of equitable sharing in the contemporary Australian context (Thurrow, 2019).

### *Visual Storytelling*

The play's visual communication – which encompasses the watercolour exhibition in the foyer, the continuous sketching on stage, the set, as well as the performance by the actors –, ensures that Country remains ever present in the audience's perception. The predominance of insignia that reference the Central

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<sup>1</sup>This foundation in the play is also articulated through a Christian frame, paying homage to the strong uptake and translation of the Lutheran creed amid the Western Aranda people, which I extensively discussed elsewhere (Thurrow, 2019).



Desert landscape implies an enduring connection of Western Aranda people to their land. It establishes a continuity of cultural practice between the contemporary Namatjira family artists and their famous ancestor through the art of watercolour landscape painting, firmly siting the family within the Western Aranda cultural realm for which family connection and the continuous practice of traditions is a defining pillar of identity (Muecke, 2004; Strehlow, 1907). By highlighting the continuity of family traditions centred on an engagement with Country, the play invites the audience to interpret the Namatjiras' creative art practice as a productive example of translating and maintaining Western Aranda cultural values within the contemporary space. While in pre-colonial times, the Western Aranda lived off the land, today the family still draws its sustenance from it through marketing their creative arts practice – a way of navigating the Australian market economy while maintaining the integrity and health of Central Desert landscapes. Hence, the visual communication of *Namatjira* from the outset emphasises survival and dynamic adaptation of Indigenous people to colonial challenges. It enables rejecting the narrative propositions inherent in Albert's tragic biography that cannot escape speaking of loss and devastation under colonialism. The number of artists contributing to the exhibition and the live sketching signals that, despite ongoing hardships, the Western Aranda community has managed to build capabilities and resources for resilience since Albert's passing – showcasing a pool of talent that in its communal representation makes it impossible to maintain the colonial narrative of Albert as a gifted yet *singular* individual amid a presumably flaccid Indigenous populace. This assumption was consciously promoted by Albert's contemporary critics in support of colonial assimilation policies that pushed for the creation of a homogenous nation under Western auspices (French, 2002). This argument has since come under revision in the academy, with historians having mapped the genesis of the Hermannsburg School as a collective endeavour, spearheaded by a number of Western Aranda artists who have inspired and worked alongside Albert (Edmond, 2014). Through the play's exclusive concentration on Albert's biography and his close partnership with Rex at the expense of portraying the vibrant arts community that formed at Ntaria during Albert's lifetime, the manuscript, however, reinscribes the narrative of individual exceptionalism. It does so to broaden its discursive parameters by representing Albert not only as a gifted artist but first and foremost as a discerning entrepreneur who identifies and exploits opportunities to improve his community's wellbeing (Thurow, 2019). This allows Rankin to enlist Albert's biography for a larger argument in promotion of Indigenous economic and political participation – key capabilities that today are still often discounted by non-Indigenous stakeholders in positions of power<sup>1</sup>.

The play's visual communication once again works to contain the impression of Albert's proposed singularity by framing the staging through

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<sup>1</sup>A point extensively I discussed in previous publications (Thurow, 2019).

1 creative expression of multiple Indigenous visual artists<sup>1</sup>. It is their work that  
 2 the audience encounters when passing through the foyer and theirs they see  
 3 unfolding on the backdrop of the stage throughout the 90min performance. In  
 4 fact, none of the visual material included in the show, and only very few of its  
 5 print and digital communication, featured Albert Namatjira's original artwork.  
 6 What the audience comes to relate to and aesthetically appreciate is the work of  
 7 his descendants and present-day interpretation of his story, style and work –  
 8 pointing to the present and future of the Western Aranda community in and  
 9 around Ntaria rather than only offering an account of its past. The play  
 10 contributes to an agenda of historical acknowledgement that is to serve  
 11 Indigenous advancement in the present, seeking to 'set the record straight' by  
 12 highlighting misinterpretations of Albert's practice and decision making by  
 13 non-Indigenous stakeholders and rendering his story as his family makes sense  
 14 of it. The legitimisation by and collaboration of his family is thereby crucial as it  
 15 places control back into the hands of the culturally appropriate stewards of his  
 16 story. Within Western Aranda protocol, stories are treated as currency with  
 17 strict rules around their transmission and distribution based on family  
 18 genealogies. To have the play co-developed and presented by Albert  
 19 Namatjira's descendants invigorates an engagement with Western Aranda  
 20 cultural conventions. Even though these find only very brief mention in the  
 21 script when the lead actor points out that "the Namatjira family have invited us  
 22 to share their grandfather's story" (Rankin, 2012), their performative  
 23 translation in rehearsal and on stage bears deep significance for reconciliatory  
 24 intercultural engagement in Australia. Since Indigenous cultural protocols have  
 25 been widely discouraged for years in order to further assimilation into  
 26 mainstream Australian society (Pascoe, 2018), such reorientation toward  
 27 Western Aranda practices constitutes an important act of acknowledgement and  
 28 appraisal that is to signal a change in intercultural engagement (Rankin, 2011).

29 The form of inclusion of the family members on stage positions them in  
 30 noticeable contrast to the lively action unfolding around them. They silently  
 31 and slowly complete a landscape sketch in chalk with their backs turned to the  
 32 audience while the two non-Western Aranda actors deliver the quick-paced  
 33 script. While the latter engage the audience through lively verbal interaction,  
 34 facial expressions, gesture and choreography, the family members remain at the  
 35 outskirts of the stage action, representing an authorising institution who,  
 36 through their silence, thwart easy resolution of the difficult questions raised in  
 37 the script about the future of reconciliation in Australia. Their silence can also  
 38 be read as an acute representation of the widespread lack of direct engagement  
 39 between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, whose communication  
 40 often relies on select intermediaries who facilitate exchange – with a loss of  
 41 agency invariably occurring once translation replaces direct communication  
 42 (Godwin, 2018). *Namatjira* does not avoid this awkward constellation, e.g.

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<sup>1</sup>The performance by the cast naturally also showcases Indigenous capability, providing access to Albert's story in the first place through a sleek professional production.

1 enlisting a non-Indigenous playwright and director while opting for actors from  
 2 outside the Western Aranda community; yet, the play clearly marks such  
 3 decisions as approved by the family and hence indicates a preceding  
 4 engagement with questions of representation and voice. The family's wish for  
 5 the story to be told on stage has made the cast and audience gather in the first  
 6 place, supplying the rationale and basic conditions for performance. Hence,  
 7 their presence on stage, albeit devoid of a speaking voice, exceeds a merely  
 8 tokenistic gesture as it indicates that a process of negotiation had taken place  
 9 that made the show possible in the first place.

10 Aside from signalling maintained Western Aranda cultural practices, the  
 11 family members' painting on stage also emphasises their enduring connection  
 12 to their lands. By tracing geological features and populating the landscape with  
 13 plants and animals, the family members demonstrate their close knowledge of  
 14 the land to the audience. As such, their painting awards a glimpse into Western  
 15 Aranda ways of viewing and rendering Country and signifies as a political act  
 16 of asserting their claim to the land. The silent sketching is not commented on  
 17 nor explained in the verbal narrative. This respects cultural protocols that  
 18 protect spiritual practices from outsider intrusion. *Namatjira* does not delve  
 19 into this spiritual space but orchestrates a symbolic performance via artistic  
 20 means. Through unmarked continuous practice on stage, the sketching calls for  
 21 an acknowledgment of significance of the land to the family without exposing  
 22 or explicating the precise nature of Western Aranda ontology and associated  
 23 practices. It thus alludes to, yet also protects, this sovereign space from the  
 24 prying eyes of outsiders, formulating a call on the audience to award respect for  
 25 Western Aranda practices that in their entirety must remain unknowable  
 26 (Thurow, 2019). This invites a genuine form of decolonisation as recognition  
 27 of difference do not rely on first reducing that which is 'other' to something  
 28 familiar – a strategy the script, as indicated, unfortunately promotes  
 29 relentlessly. Understood as a concrete political act of holding and revitalising  
 30 connection to Country, the Namatjira family members' visual arts practice on  
 31 stage introduces traces of Western Aranda ontology into the play's signifying  
 32 framework, ensuring that Country remains at the forefront of the audience's  
 33 perception throughout the performance.

34 Albert Namatjira's art, as well as the paintings hung in the foyer exhibition  
 35 and the large-scale chalk sketch on stage testify to the family's sustained acts of  
 36 engagement with Country, representing artefacts of their perception and  
 37 affective response to Western Aranda land. As argued elsewhere (Thurow,  
 38 2018), the play values artmaking not for the material objects it produces but  
 39 centralises the act of relating to an entity, celebrating the moment of encounter  
 40 and communication rather than the fossilised artefacts that remain to testify of  
 41 the action having taken place. In the script, this becomes clear when Albert and  
 42 Rex converse about art sales, with Albert expressing confusion as to why his  
 43 non-Indigenous admirers buy his paintings rather than create their own  
 44 (Rankin, 2012). In the context of *Namatjira*, the acts of perception, integration  
 45 and creative expression bring people together, bridging the divide between

1 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. They enable encounters in which  
 2 agents performatively articulate their observation of other entities, contributing  
 3 to a cosmos of simultaneous creation that is not defined by competition but by  
 4 relational and parallel action. As such, visual practice in the play references key  
 5 tenets of Western Aranda culture whose ingrained relational ideal is built on  
 6 reciprocal service and compassionate care. Such action thereby does not only  
 7 encompass the relation between people to Country but is extended on stage to  
 8 the interpersonal realm through the performance of the painter who is sketching  
 9 the lead actor's portrait from scratch. Through gradual transposition of the  
 10 actor's body onto canvas, the visual domain comes to mirror the verbally  
 11 articulated process of reconstituting Albert's biography and identity (Thurrow,  
 12 2019). It draws attention to the mechanics of assembly and unfolding-through-  
 13 time that govern the creation of any image, be it visual or verbal, exposing the  
 14 underpinning choices that determine subsequent signification in relation to  
 15 other objects in space. As such, the portrait creation contributes a critical  
 16 commentary on identity practice, highlighting the subjective nature of every  
 17 narrative and any image, yet also how these can act as connecting tissue that  
 18 strengthens a community through active remembering and interaction.

19 The paintings as physical artefacts, even though the script qualifies their  
 20 capability to act as conduits for establishing active relation, nevertheless serve  
 21 a function in the ecology of *Namatjira*: As material objects, they become part  
 22 of the play's space, accruing meaning through its performance. Especially the  
 23 watercolour artworks hung in the foyer that were offered for purchase to the  
 24 audience presented an opportunity to carry the Namatjira story beyond the  
 25 theatre space. As portable memory loci that would be hung in the audience's  
 26 personal spaces, they may function as new anchors for reminding patrons to  
 27 sustain their relation to the Western Aranda people's plight and to change their  
 28 habitual ways of engaging – if only by sparing an occasional thought to their  
 29 world. Echoing the performance, the visual artefacts can continue to elicit an  
 30 emotional affect that channels into serviceable action to the benefit of the  
 31 family, increasing their public profile and reach.

32 The 'afterlife of images' provides a counterweight to the play's tragic  
 33 conclusion of Albert Namatjira's biography that sees him dying in a state of  
 34 alienation and despair. The verbal rendition of his demise is mirrored in the  
 35 play's dramaturgy that slows action down, gradually arresting the lively  
 36 performance, with choreography pacing ever slower and gravitating toward the  
 37 centre of the stage, where the cast eventually silently congregates around the  
 38 lone pile of Albert's clothes, marking and grieving his passing. The narrative  
 39 arc arrests life in death, movement condenses into dwelling, and ultimately, the  
 40 light wanes on the cast and leaves only the portrait visible as a final image  
 41 before the blackout plunges everything into darkness. This form of staging  
 42 instates the portrait as container for the audience's emotional response to the  
 43 play's heart-wrenching conclusion. It calls for a moment of empathetic  
 44 reflection that primes the audience to rise to the challenge of redressing the  
 45 historical wrongs laid out in the script.

The path to doing so is mapped in the film which is projected onto a blank canvas that has spatially replaced the portrait after a brief releasing round of applause. In its evanescent nature that replaces the organic materiality of the portrait with a play of light, the film deepens the narrative of impending disappearance inherent in *Namatjira*'s verbal communication as flesh-and-blood bodies are replaced by virtual renditions. On the one hand, this aesthetic rendering in which the organic body disappears heightens the urgency of the plea that the recorded message of the Namatjira family delivers to the audience, calling for support to escape the cycle of poverty and cultural disintegration on Western Aranda land. On the other hand, the lively delivery of this plea and its complementary beautiful videography of Namatjira's Country also re-energises the performance space again. It substitutes the arrested portrait with moving imagery that bespeaks a form of resilience and ongoing adaptation of modern-day technologies. Same as Albert having enlisted the Western technique of watercolour painting for ensuring his community's economic survival, his descendants continue this path by turning to new means of expression for vouchsafing their visibility in Australian society.<sup>1</sup> The stark documentary photorealism of the film competes with the soft aesthetic of the watercolour paintings, seeking to break with the fictive frame of the theatre play to alert to the real-world plight of the family and to leverage financial support for the Namatjiras.

## Conclusion

Verbal and visual communication in *Namatjira* are closely integrated, each relaying a narrative that discloses complex truths about Western Aranda experiences of Australian colonialism. While the script feeds extensively off Western storytelling aesthetics and engages audiences through provision of historical contextualisation and argumentation, the visual communication of the play introduces key components of Western Aranda ontology, enabling an experience of cultural values in practice. This two-fold layering of communication in *Namatjira* allows rendering the complexity of Western Aranda history and contemporary identifications that are marked by both devastating loss and concomitant cultural resilience and vitality. Rather than indulging in either narrative, the play elegantly interweaves them to articulate a proposition for reconfigured intercultural engagement, which appraises Western Aranda cultural values and makes them relevant to the contemporary Australian space.

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<sup>1</sup>The broader community cultural development project delivered many digital workshops that targeted particularly Western Aranda youth, training them in new technologies for storytelling to increase their engagement with their ancestor's story.

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