

# RE-STITCHING CULTURE



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*"Dolls serve to us as talismans. Talismans are reminders of what we feel, but do not see, of something that is as it is, but we cannot see it immediately. Talismanic numen of a doll is here to remind us, to speak and to anticipate for us."*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

One of the earliest play artefacts, dolls are models of human beings that are often representative of a local and/or global community's identity. In a contemporary context, dolls are typically associated with children, toys and play. However, they have also been used by adults as talismans to support various social, psychological and cultural functions such as spiritual ceremonies, and rituals associated with birth, death and marriage, and as symbols to be worshipped, sung to, sacrificed and nurtured. In fact, dolls have been used to help people move to the spiritual world, to assist in rite-of-passage ceremonies, and to encourage reproduction, reduce infertility, produce good mothers and create beautiful daughters. As a result, dolls are symbols of identity and fantasy, often leading to the creation of self-attitudes, rules for behaviour, shared perceptions, and mental images of what is expected. Dolls can act as vehicles for the translation of cultural heritage because the stories behind them help to deliver both group and individual histories. They are used to teach, entertain or support personal healing – processes that are of particular importance in many contemporary Indigenous cultures.

Doll-making is an intrinsic part of many Indigenous cultures across the world, including communities in Australia, Canada and South Africa. In all three of these cultures, doll-making represents a transfer of cultural knowledge, the building of capacity, and the reclaiming of Indigenous identity, on both a local and a collective level. The benefits of these outcomes are important to supporting health and wellbeing in Indigenous communities. Through the revitalisation of such culturally generated behaviours and activities, the three projects represented in this exhibition showcase effective ways to move forward from the pain and grief experienced by Indigenous communities and to work collaboratively towards building a healthier future for subsequent generations.

<sup>1</sup> Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*.

The oral translation of Indigenous world-views and the expression of cultural identities through artistic means are largely undisrupted. However, since colonisation, Indigenous peoples across the world have suffered multiple injustices enabled by colonial racism. All of these actions have negatively impacted the transmission of Indigenous knowledge between generations and have led to much grief and trauma.

One of the most effective ways to move forward from this degree of pain and to build a healthier future for subsequent generations is by supporting the revitalisation of culturally generated actions and behaviours. Communal crafting has traditionally been a medium for expressing cultural identities. In the pre-colonial past, plant materials, bush products and animal/human hair were gathered and crafted in combination with activities such as singing and dancing. These actions helped to maintain social relations, perpetuate ideals and guide cultural behaviours that were beneficial in upholding communal wellbeing for many Indigenous groups.

The therapeutic benefits of traditional art forms are linked to improved physical and mental wellbeing, social cohesion and inclusion. Furthermore, the disruption in cultural continuity and cultural connectedness faced by Indigenous communities can be ameliorated by the transmission of Indigenous culture and the maintenance of strong links to country (lands and waters). In this process, such art activities are especially important and valuable. They can lead to the building of a sense of purpose, hope and belonging, especially in remote communities where limited infrastructure and services can often lead to unhealthy activities among both youth and adults.

Because health and wellbeing within an Indigenous context extends beyond that of an individual, it is important to recognise the social, spiritual, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the entire community. This view represents a holistic perspective that includes the cyclical, continuous concept of life–death–life. These values can be upheld within the framework of contemporary health-care models through culturally generated health initiatives and culturally respectful community partnerships.

Doll-making is an example of a communal visual art form that plays a role in supporting healthy Indigenous communities. The communal creation and display of hand-

made dolls is a culturally generated vehicle that has been used to promote health in a non-threatening way. This includes the gathering of individuals to learn new artistic skills and to revitalise the stories, memories and identities that are exemplified by the creation of their individual dolls. In addition, the act of doll-making provides the physical space and the kinetic opportunities to weave together the symbolic and literal threads of Indigenous culture, contributing to the reclaiming of identity and the strengthening of local communities. Similarly, the gathering of people to participate in and observe the making of such an intimate art form encourages personal shared healing and allows the space to build capacity (such as new sewing techniques) and to learn new problem-solving skills (such as how best to deal with familial challenges or to cope with loss). Doll-making serves as a vehicle for the translation of traditional stories and songs and visual depictions of culture, allowing Indigenous peoples to formulate stronger connections between new skills and existing knowledge constructs. These benefits contribute to the overall wellbeing of individuals and communities at large.

Storytelling represents an important process of translating knowledge that is culturally meaningful and has impact on both the storyteller and the listener, with both parties involved in the creation of knowledge. Throughout history, Indigenous peoples have developed complex systems of knowledge, philosophy, government and medicine. These systems are often passed down through the practice of oral storytelling, which encases narratives that symbolise holism and cultural/political resurgence. Storytelling is also seen in dances, songs and paintings. It is displayed on message sticks, and in rock paintings and sand drawings. Storytelling is especially important because it is handed down to subsequent generations as a way of upholding ancient mantras and important teachings around cultural respect, responsibility and reciprocity. In fact, stories are dynamic (evolve over time) and help to guide decision making and problem solving. Storytelling has sustained Indigenous communities by validating the experiences of peoples in a space where knowledge is honoured, affirmed and shared.

This exhibition sought out Indigenous community-based projects that use doll-making, to highlight how these practices were being used to support healing through storytelling within Indigenous communities internationally.

## The Gomeroi gaaynggal program

The Gomeroi gaaynggal program is an Arts Health program based in Tamworth, NSW, Australia. The program provides an informal forum to facilitate health-related discussions and to exchange cultural knowledge, including knowledge of the arts. Among the many different artistic mediums offered, doll-making enables 'yarning' to occur naturally and in a non-threatening manner.

Telling stories while making Gomeroi Yarning dolls utilises yarning approaches and the social skills that are important for personal and community functioning. Similar to other visual arts projects, the making of Gomeroi Yarning dolls provides an opportunity for senior community members to practise their traditional arts and to pass along that knowledge to the younger generation. The facilitation of intergenerational learning, sharing stories and building communication skills aids in the active transmission of cultural knowledge, builds capacity, and reclaims Indigenous space and identity. Through the development of these specific threads within the fabric of Indigenous peoples' view of wellbeing, local communities are strengthened and supported.



The Gomeroi doll-making sessions aim to share the Elders' history, knowledge and experience by engaging Elders with the younger generations in a relaxed and safe environment. Attendees become joined in the mutually positive activity of the Elders, who will frequently discuss the meaning behind their dolls, sharing personal narratives of their life experiences with the others.

Conversations are often filled with laughter, illustrating the unique therapeutic impacts of gathering together to engage in traditional art forms and to promote individual and collective Indigenous identity.

Gomeroi Yarning dolls are made to represent a particular person (whether literal or figurative) in the participant's life. One participant, who recently made her eleventh doll, says she has 'become addicted ... I never had my own doll; now I can't get enough'. Every doll has a unique beauty and showcases people and events that are meaningful to the maker. Many stories are shared within the yarning circle, opening up much discussion around the participants' upbringing, motherhood, bush medicine and bush food, and current life realities.

The Gomeroi gaayngaal doll-making workshops support the space for communities to engage in Indigenous cultural activities. The shared yarning process experienced by the doll-makers encourages a shared journey of healing that may assist many of the Elders and their families in recovering from past traumatic histories and unresolved truths. Elders and youth have continued to gather to form and re-form cultural identity and to learn through the sharing of stories, knowledge and life experiences.

The space that is created by yarning circles is culturally safe for Elders and young people to come together to re-stitch old identities and meanings and perhaps even create new identities, finding new ways to bind oneself together.

Given their rich meanings, these creations are destined to be cherished throughout both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian communities.





### Cornhusk dolls of the Six Nations Haudenosaunee People

The Six Nations of the Grand River is a reserve of the Haudenosaunee People, the largest First Nations population in Canada. The Six Nations – consisting of Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, Seneca, Onondaga and Tuscarora peoples – were unified under the Great Tree of Peace in order to sustain peaceful decision making. Six Nations Cornhusk dolls are made by wrapping and tying layers of dried corn cob leaves (the husk) into a human figure shape. The dolls remain faceless as a reminder to be humble and to set aside vanity. They are additionally embellished with colourful beads, yarn, leather, feathers and/or felt pieces.

Cornhusk dolls are often made to showcase cultural teachings and stories that highlight important human values, and to pass on knowledge about community identity. The teaching of traditional narratives translates important communal values, supporting the promotion of cultural connectedness among

community members. Celebrated doll-maker Elizabeth Doxtater decided to document the Peacemaker's journey using cornhusk dolls.

*'Cornhusk is a pure catalyst to our ancestors. Working with cornhusk is like reaching into an ancient period and creating something that looks, smells and feels like something very close to the time of the Great Peace... Corn is still grown and harvested, and the husk is still braided for storing corn the same as it has been for thousands of years and over many generations.'*<sup>2</sup>

Doxtater's dioramas of cornhusk dolls is her interpretation of what certain parts of the Peacemaker's journey may have looked like, and of its meaning through her personal interpretation of the Great Law.

Each diorama, consisting of bones, clay, cornhusk, leather and beads, represents a significant place in the culture and a

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Dotater, *Art of Peace* 2016, Everything Corn Husk, Ohsweken, Turtle Island, Canada

connection to the ancestors.

To summarise the story, Peacemaker (born in the area now known as Tyendingaga) travelled Lake Ontario teaching the 'good message'. The message of the Great Law came from the Creator to Peacemaker himself and provided the basis for the people to be safe and comforted without hunger or loneliness.

According to this ancient teaching, Peacemaker fashioned a canoe of stone and travelled in it to spread the message to the five nations that eventually ratified the Haudenosaunee Five Nations Constitution. Peacemaker's journey began on the north shore of Lake Ontario, and the message of the Great Law of Peace – Kaianerekowa – is still celebrated and practised throughout Haudenosaunee territories.



## **Siyazama dolls from Kwa Zulu-Natal, South Africa**

The Indigenous Zulu people, 'the people of heaven', reside in the remote KwaZulu-Natal area of South Africa. 'Siyazama' means 'we are trying' in the isiZulu language of the region. For generations, South African women have plaited, coiled and woven traditional grasses and reeds into objects for everyday and ceremonial usage. In the 1950s, telephone wire became readily available and diversified the range of materials used. Zulu women are well known for their intricate beadwork, the colours and designs of which are used to reflect status and identity, and to convey messages to individuals within communities.

Traditional large Siyazama Zulu dolls are created by rural women from a variety of materials, including beads, metal pieces, fabric, yarn and recycled trinkets. The dolls are topped with a beaded red hat to represent a rural Zulu woman's commitment in a marriage. The Zulu traditional code of conduct called *hlonipha* includes many taboos, such as a prohibition on women – especially married women – discussing sex.

The Siyazama doll-making project evolved in the late 1990s when there was much fear in the community related to HIV/AIDS and many of the doll-makers were affected in some way. Most often, this was as a concerned community member and woman in a society in which there was little understanding of contraception. The series of workshops sought to raise awareness of HIV transmission through informal discussion with a health team. The women in the community were at first angered and confused by the lifestyle changes suggested by the health educators, and a number of them suffered abuse and beatings when they took home condoms. At that time, Zulu men in the community were in denial about HIV/AIDS, and those who had paid *lobola* (bride price) felt that they had full rights over their wives.

The opportunity to hear about the physical, mental and social complexities of AIDS became a transformational process for many of the doll-makers. In fact, learning of others' unique stories and sharing their own created a mental space where the women were able to produce a variety of beaded masterpieces representing women's struggles and their increasing anger about the spread of AIDS in their community. The Siyazama dolls promote the traditional role of art and design in encouraging Indigenous knowledge and skills, in addition

to being a vehicle for disseminating important information about HIV/AIDS in a non-threatening way among the most economically marginalised and vulnerable people in South Africa – rural women. Over time, this has led to a change in personal attitudes, and AIDS awareness has begun to increase in rural communities.

Professor Kate Wells (Siyazama coordinator) has described the beaded dolls and soft-sculpture tableaus as 'dolls with a job'. Some of the most prolific of the Siyazama doll-makers have benefited economically from sales of their dolls, which has considerably improved their stature in their communities. This increased stature has also meant that the HIV prevention messages that are being relayed through the dolls are becoming more respected by the wider community.



## Conclusion

This exhibition showcases three international examples of doll-making from a number of Indigenous groups that continue to strengthen their local communities. Specifically, the Gomeroi Yarning dolls (Australia) encourage the sharing of oral personal narratives; the Six Nations Cornhusk dolls (Canada) promote the transmission of cultural teachings; and the Siyazama Zulu dolls (South Africa) create community support networks through locally relevant HIV/AIDS awareness. As a result, the local Indigenous communities are strengthened through the creative space that is created for a healing process, capacity building for problem solving, and the reclaiming of Indigenous history and identity.

The unique designs of the Gomeroi Yarning dolls (promoting personal narratives), Six Nations Cornhusk dolls (promoting cultural teachings and cultural connectedness) and Siyazama Zulu dolls (promoting HIV/AIDS awareness and enhancing support networks) allow for the expression of local Indigenous community identity, which is essential for ensuring a holistic approach to wellbeing. This celebration of unique communal identity is deeply embedded in the Indigenous world-view of health.

The impact is achieved by the individual contributions of these cultural art forms to become a notable art form for strengthening local communities. By creating an open dialogue that supports a healing process, bringing people together to help support the learning of new problem-solving skills, and reclaiming Indigenous space and identity, doll-making is a culturally generated vehicle for creating a long-term positive impact on the health of Indigenous peoples.

**Associate Professor Kym Rae 2017**

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Image front: left & repeated p3, Aunty Audree Trindall, *Untitled*, 2017, ecodyed fabric, yarn, threads, necklace, filling, ht 32cms. Photography: Tess Reading, Tamworth.

Image front centre & repeated p6, Elizabeth Doxtater, *Ganondagan*, cornhusk, fabric, threads & wood.  
Photography: Woodland Cultural Centre, Canada.

Image front right & repeated p7, Foskosile Ngema Makoti, fabric, beads, yarn, found shoes and mixed media, ht 84cms.  
Photography: TRG.

Image p4: Gomeri gaaynggal doll making workshop Monday 27 March 2017, L - R: Aunty Margaret Morris, Loretta Weatherall, Aunty Edith Slater, Aunty Grace Munroe. Photography: Tess Reading, Tamworth.

Image p5: Elizabeth Doxtater, *Where the Water Never Freezes*, cornhusk, fabric, threads & wood.  
Photography: Woodland Cultural Centre, Canada.

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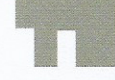
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