

Re-framing the creative city: Fragile friendships and affective art spaces in Darwin, Australia

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Abstract

Australia has one of the most urbanised and diverse populations in the world, but there is little research that explores fleeting friendships between marginalised/racialised ethnic minority and indigenous populations. In contrast to metropolitan cities in white settler societies that have been the focus of much research, this paper focuses on the small, tropical city of Darwin in Northern Australia. This is a city that is at the centre of public debates on indigenous wellbeing, migrant integration and asylum seeker policies, with social welfare programmes that provide little opportunities for hopeful encounters among indigenous peoples and ethnic minority newcomers in surface spaces. I argue, however, that 'grass root' forms of creativity in an 'underground' car park bring their affective worlds together through a shared passion for art. The paper draws on gentle methodologies including participatory visual methods to privilege non-Western ways of inhabiting place. Through a 'quiet politics' and affective engagement with spacetimes both proximate and distant, the paper shows that it is possible to invoke different futures and crystallise experimental publics in the diverse city. The paper responds to a call to push the boundaries of urban research on social difference through geographies of friendship that are yet to engage with multisensory bodies, emotion, affect and art.

Keywords

art encounters, Darwin, indigeneity, public space, racialised bodies

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Introduction

There is a large and emerging body of literature that draws attention to the challenges of living with difference in cities with white majority cultures such as USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada (Amin, 2012; Fincher and Iveson, 2008; Fincher and Shaw, 2011; Valentine, 2008; Valentine and Sadgrove, 2014). Such a focus can be attributed to marked changes in the ethno-

religious composition of cities, the scale and complexity of global migration, and shifts in migration patterns in the last 30 years, or what Meissner and Vertovec (2015) term superdiversity. While such diversity provides

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cities with economic and cultural benefits, the allegiances, loyalties, faith-affiliated networks and emotional attachments of ethnic/racial minorities (local and overseas-born) make them suspect (Amin, 2012; Hage, 1998; Wise, 2010). When such suspicion resonates as fear in the 'collective unconscious' (Amin, 2012: 63) bodies of colour become 'stress points' (Ahmed, 2007: 160), and the opportunities for fleeting encounters and inter-ethnic/inter-racial friendships in public spaces of the city are limited.

Bunnell et al. (2012), in their review of geographies of friendship, regret that although emotion and affect enhance understandings of social and cultural life in cities, there is little in-depth research. This can be attributed to the lack of productive engagement between geographies of affect that draw on non-representational theoretical approaches and emotional geographies that draw on feminist approaches (Colls, 2012; Kobayashi et al., 2011; Pile, 2010). These distinct and separate bodies of work have emerged because feminist theoretical approaches are more concerned with the differentiated subject in embodied encounters while non-representational approaches focus on pre-cognitive understandings of the world (Colls, 2012). This paper argues that that harbouring 'generous and generative' relationships' (Colls, 2012: 430) between these bodies of work strengthens research on the geographies of friendship in cities.

Approaches within urban studies that centre affect in exploring encounters and relationships in city spaces are inspired by the work of Benedict de Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi (Amin, 2012; McCormack, 2013; Thrift, 2004, 2010). Affect is conceptualised as a force that circulates within and between bodies in ways that increase or decrease their capacity to act – bodies affect and are affected (Colebrook, 2011; de Spinoza, 2001; Deleuze and Parnet, 2006). These affective forces that have

outcomes for what bodies can do contribute to the intensity or feel of spaces and have outcomes for fleeting friendships among strangers in public space. Such fleeting or brief encounters have the potential to realign negative affects of fear, anxiety, anger and outrage that circulate in public space through a micropolitics that focuses on the 'thisness' of spacetimes (Amin, 2012; McCormack, 2013). McCormack (2013: 5) argues that thisness or 'felt gatherings' are fleeting combinations of affects (bodily intensities), percepts (ways of seeing) and concepts (ways of thinking). Rather than conceptualising space as a container for moving bodies, the focus is on affective spacetimes that are relational, processual, fragile, open to change and explored through more-than-human modes of enquiry (Lorimer, 2010; McCormack, 2013; Whatmore, 2006). However, it is the focus on emotional relationships central to feminist geographies of encounter and place-sharing that provide the potential to think about friendship as the entangling of the differentiated body-subject who inhabits these affective socio-spatial worlds, both proximate and distant (Ahmed, 2007; Amin, 2012; Fincher and Shaw, 2011; Lobo, 2010, 2014b; Tolia-Kelly and Crang, 2010; Wise, 2010). The paper suggests that affective forces of hatred, fear and misunderstanding that circulate in the city, facilitated by a global geopolitics, can begin to be realigned through fragile friendships in local community spaces. For racialised bodies of colour, when the 'hard work' of negotiating white privilege and bridging difference fatigues their bodies or 'breaks their backs', such fleeting friendships make space breathable (Ahmed, 2007; Amin, 2012; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2015).

This paper focuses on fleeting friendships in the small north Australian city of Darwin (population 140,386 in 2014) that unfolds through art encounters in a disused

suburban car park. It responds to the call for a research agenda on geographies of friendship that move beyond 'metrocentricity' or an overwhelming focus on global cities and English-speaking worlds (Bell and Jayne, 2009; Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010; Fozdar, 2011). This is necessary given that counter-terrorism laws, militarisation of immigration control and the policing of everyday city life, while heightening feelings of security and personal safety, does little to address prejudice or facilitate relationships of trust among diverse urban citizens (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2014; Kapoor, 2013; Wadham, 2014). Fozdar (2011) explores the difficulties of building such trust in white settler societies such as New Zealand with histories of institutional and interpersonal racism that have privileged Pakeha (white New Zealanders) and socially and economically marginalised Maori. Her in-depth study on the complexity of inter-racial friendships in Wellington opens up possibilities for thinking about the role that public spaces in smaller cities in white settler societies such as New Zealand, USA, Canada and Australia play in facilitating fleeting encounters and friendships. More research, however, is necessary to explore encounters/friendships among ethnic minority migrants and indigenous peoples who share histories and geographies of racism, colonialism and socio-economic disadvantage (Gyepi-Garbrah et al., 2014; Kobayashi and de Leeuw, 2010). Gyepi-Garbrah et al. (2014: 99) argue that the exploration of intercultural relationships among indigenous peoples and migrant newcomers has the potential to decolonise Western cities and unsettle the 'pervasive power of whiteness'. Their study demonstrates that initiatives by community organisations in Winnipeg, Canada (population 714,460), a relatively small northern city with a high indigenous population (11%) minimises social distance and contributes to intercultural urbanism

or closer relationships between cultural groups.

In Australia, there is little research on smaller northern cities such as Darwin that feature in vitriolic public debates on national security, indigenous wellbeing, migrant integration and asylum seeker policies (Ford, 2009; Lobo, 2014a; Woodley, 2014; Yolngu Makarr Dhuni, 2012). Instead, everyday multiculturalism or the challenges of living with and negotiating difference, have been explored in large immigrant-receiving cities such as Sydney and Melbourne (Dunn and Nelson, 2011; Hage, 2010; Shaw, 2007; Wise, 2010). These studies have been valuable in exposing the cultural politics of emotion, the prevalence of white privilege, everyday racism and the displacement of indigenous peoples. This paper builds on this body of research to show how the shared activity of 'making art' in a mundane semi-public space draws together bodies of strangers and facilitates the building of cross-cultural friendships, particularly among migrant newcomers and indigenous peoples. It involves a quiet and unassuming praxis of engaging with others through what Askins (2015: 471) conceptualises as a 'quiet politics of encounter'. Askins (2014, 2015) in her exploration of befriending relationships among residents, asylum seekers and refugees in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK, demonstrates that such encounters of being together involve political will, a desire to engage and purposeful acts of care that require considerable commitment by befrienders and befriendees. Such intimate friendships contrast with prosaic interactions and engagements in public spaces where such city dwellers who are caught up in a wider geopolitics brush past each other and engage at a surface level. This paper draws on and extends Askins' (2014, 2015) conceptualisation of a quiet politics of encounter to argue that the 'making of things' that leads to an accidental co-presence in public spaces

results in fleeting friendships and connections among migrant newcomers, asylum seekers and indigenous peoples who inhabit different socio-spatial worlds.

The paper draws on fieldwork conducted in Darwin over the period 2011–2015 that explored intercultural encounters and shared belongings in public spaces. It is informed by interviews with residents of diverse cultural backgrounds as well as participant observation in public spaces such as beaches/beach reserves, parks, public squares, cafes, sidewalks and suburban community centres. These places were sites for daily, annual, weekly or bi-weekly gatherings such as ethnic festivals, multicultural celebrations, commemorative vigil services/film screenings, protest marches, celebration walks, open-air markets, football matches, as well as shared activities of cooking, sewing and making art. My aim at these events that included the ‘making of art’ in the disused underground car park, that is the focus of this paper, involved conducting research *with* residents who used these city spaces rather than *on* residents who were present in these spaces (Kendon, 2010). In other words, it involved engagement with indigenous and ethnic minority residents as co-researchers and decision makers. Therefore, in addition to in-depth interviews, fieldwork also include informal conversations, participatory action research and participatory visual methods. Participants were asked to use a small video camera to capture the material and sensory nature of these events. My aim was to provide a space for indigenous and ethnic minority participants to express how they felt in public spaces of the city without being constrained by the use of the English language. Participatory video has been shown to be successful and innovative because it allows research subjects to shape the output and co-produce knowledge in ways that go beyond ‘talk’ (Garrett, 2014). Such co-production of knowledge is central

to research on friendship that so far has focused on diary entries and in-depth interviews to explore acts of generosity and care (Darling, 2011).

Darwin

Fleeting friendships in public spaces of Darwin have historically provided the possibility for indigenous peoples and ethnic minority migrants to escape victimisation and negotiate racist sentiments (Martinez, 2006). Martinez (2006) argues that in spite of the predominance of assimilationist and discriminatory policies of control and racial segregation, these fleeting friendships in contact sites such as schools, churches, the sports ovals and the wharf often resulted in long-term relationships as well as mixed marriages. Therefore, unlike south Australian cities, Darwin has a polyethnic population and many residents identify with an indigenous, Asian and Anglo heritage. Lea (2014) argues that ethnically blind resettlement policies after Cyclone Tracey, a natural disaster that devastated Darwin in 1974 also contributed to a different ethno-cultural geography compared with south Australian cities – the racial and ethnic segregation that marked the built environment of Darwin in the early 19th century became less visible. Today, however, there is a high population turnover of international students, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, many of whom live in the affordable northern and eastern suburbs of Malak, Karama and Anula, places that also have a high indigenous population. These are suburbs in Greater Darwin where the percentage of indigenous people and those who speak a language other than English exceeds the average of 9% and 16%, respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011). Many of these ethnic minority residents, in particular migrant newcomers,

share histories and geographies of forced displacement or dispossession with indigenous peoples such as Larrakia, the traditional custodians of the land on which white settlers built the city of Palmerston (now Darwin) in 1869.

Within the popular imagination, today, multiple narratives of this small northern city co-exist. It is a tropical multicultural paradise with Asian-style open-air markets, a creative city with arts practitioners, a remote northern city with redneck racism, a carceral city with prisons/detention centres and a multicultural city with a transient 'fly-in/fly-out population'. (Brennan-Horley and Gibson, 2009; Carson et al., 2010; Ford, 2009; Lea, 2014; Luckman, 2011) Although there are many residents who have lived in Darwin for more than 30 years, there is a high turnover of defence personnel and fly-in/fly-out workers from large metropolitan cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth, who are employed in large gas and mining projects in Darwin's harbour/hinterland (Lea, 2014). In addition, indigenous visitors from neighbouring islands, inland cities, small towns and regional communities in the Northern Territory come to Darwin to visit relatives or access health services – Tiwi Islands, Groote Eylandt, Croker Island, Goulburn Island; Alice Springs, Batchelor, Katherine and Pine Creek. Public spaces such as beaches, bus transit centres, car parks, neighbourhood streets and community centres are places where indigenous and ethnic minority newcomers are co-present, but rarely interact. Instead, often there is misunderstanding, misrecognition, simmering inter-racial tensions and the eruption of visceral racism (Ford, 2009; Lobo, 2014b, 2015). Explorations of public spaces that seed indigenous-ethnic minority friendships through art encounters or the 'shared passion for creativity' (Gibson et al., 2012: 7) is therefore crucial.

Emerging research celebrates Darwin's as a creative tropical city with 'raw vitality'

while acknowledging that it also occupies a liminal space on the edge of the Australian continent, is grappling with its colonial legacy and has an uncertain future (Gibson et al., 2010: 32). Gibson et al. (2010) argue that this narrative of Darwin as a creative city with cultural vitality is shaped through everyday practices of residents and creative practitioners, in particular, those of indigenous/Southeast Asian background. Gibson et al. (2010) mapped creative clusters in Darwin as part of a larger project and showed that this grass roots emphasis on creativity or 'hidden' creativity that is not always connected to the market place of the neoliberal city was important in maintaining a healthy cultural milieu that facilitated diverse encounters. Their results that focused on creative groups such as architecture/design/visual arts; music/performing arts; film/TV/radio, publishing; advertising/marketing and software/interactive content, showed that creative epicentres or contact zones were located in the northern suburbs of Parap and Nightcliff known for open-air Asian-style markets as well as the city centre (CBD). In contrast, the culturally diverse and socio-economically disadvantaged suburb of Malak that is the focus of the paper does not emerge as a significant creative epicentre. This paper, however, argues that everyday creativity does flourish in community spaces in Malak and fleeting friendships emerge in mundane spaces of this suburb even though there are limited financial resources. I spent considerable time in several of these enclosed community spaces from 2011 to 2015, where young women as well as senior citizens of diverse cultural backgrounds engaged in creative activities such as painting, woodwork but also cooking and sewing. But such a shared passion for creativity among people and places on the margins often escapes attention and can only be explored by 'being around', 'hanging out', informal chats, 'small talk' discussion

and more ‘gentle interviews’ (de Leeuw et al., 2012; Gibson et al., 2012: 7; Hawkins et al., 2015).

The methods open up avenues for a quiet politics and a more ‘gentle activism’ (Hawkins et al., 2015: 335). Therefore, although creativity is recognised as a contested concept, is semantically opaque and frequently politicised within cultural planning discourse (Gibson et al., 2012), this paper illustrates that grass roots or vernacular creativity (Edensor et al., 2009) is central to the emergence of fragile friendships among residents whose affective engagements with places ‘underground’ escape attention. The ‘underground’ arts space that is the focus of the paper is quite different from other community spaces that engage but also unintentionally segregate migrant newcomers and indigenous peoples – there are few opportunities for fleeting cross-cultural friendships. In the ‘underground’ community arts space, however, fragile friendships unfold through the co-presence of indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers of Asian, South American and Middle Eastern background who belong through the tactile engagement with things.

Fragile friendships: Art encounters ‘underground’

Malak: The materiality of the suburban contact zone

The community arts space in Malak is a disused section of an underground car park in one of the most culturally diverse suburbs of Darwin that provides affordable housing to indigenous peoples and migrant newcomers (including refugees and asylum seekers). On weekdays/weekends some activity is visible in the large surface car parks as there is a small cluster of government/non-government offices that offer social welfare services. There is also a community hall, a

community garden, an indoor entertainment centre for children, a take-away restaurant, a grocery shop and a petrol station; many shops and office spaces are vacant. Trees and covered passages between buildings provide shade from the tropical heat and are places frequented by indigenous people who ‘live rough’, popularly known as ‘long grassers’ (Lobo, 2013).

The outcome is that this suburban centre with its large surface car park is often avoided and popularly perceived as a dangerous place. If a taxi is called, particularly after dark, it seldom arrives to pick up passengers. In contrast to visible surface public spaces that are often avoided, the subterranean car park is a place where fleeting encounters and friendships unfold through art activities among ethnic minority migrant newcomers (including asylum seekers and refugees), Anglo-Australians and indigenous peoples. Askins and Pain (2011: 803) in their discussion of a community arts space in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, draw attention to the messiness and materiality of such contact zones that are emergent, transitory and fragile. They argue that such contact zones can be hopeful if the interplay between actors, materials and spaces are explored.

The car park with two large entrances cautions ‘aliens’ or motorists to drive slowly and has a large colourful signboard with pink tulips and a watering can; yellow butterflies and bees; tools such as a hammers, forks, spades and spanners. This space draws people from the neighbourhood who choose to walk in, walk through, cut across, loiter, sit, stand around, make something, watch or leave. Young women, mothers with children, single men and senior citizens use this space at different times during the week and engage in the collective making of things – painted flower pots/plates/canvas, refurbished sofas, a wooden hammock with sea-shells, furniture, recycled fridges, papier mache masks, crocheted or knitted blankets,

an indoor mini-golf course and a miniature indoor garden. Through the tactile engagement with things, friendships unfold.

Anglo-Australian–ethnic minority friendships ‘underground’: Care and pride

Peter, the creative producer and a committed member of the suburban community arts organisation says the goal is to ensure that ‘art can be made and shared by anyone, anywhere, anytime’. Anglo-Australians such as Peter and mature-aged women, many of whom are volunteers, assume leadership and responsibility in welcoming participants by teaching them new skills and providing a space for them to express their creativity. Peter draws attention to happiness that is palpable on Saturday mornings, in particular, when women use this space. He says:

We use art to bring people here to make them happy. Art makes you happy and when you’ve got your happy aura going then people around you get happy.

Peter suggests that something ‘happens to bodies’ (Saldanha, 2010: 2414) in this ‘messy’ underground car park with its donated tins of acrylic paint, broken furniture, metal pipes, old toilet bowls and well-worn sofas. Askins and Pain (2011) have shown that such messiness that is associated with ‘physical stuff’ or the materiality of doing art can lead to unpredictable and unforeseeable encounters. For Peter, such messiness and materiality creates an aura that is felt as an affective force of happiness that circulates within and between bodies. Amy, a young woman from Brazil who arrived in Darwin 6 months ago, feels this force when she engages in the creative practice of ‘woodwork’. She uses the video camera and says:

There is a lot of woodwork here. So, she has been teaching me everything because I don’t

know anything, the name of the tools, how to use, or what is this for. So, she has been very patient and showing me how to use and be able to fix things. So, in the future I will be doing it myself. So, last week we fixed this chair.

Amy enjoys making and repairing furniture. Through guidance provided by Anglo-Australian women and tactile engagements with pieces of wood, saws, nails as well as power tools, fragile friendships emerge. The risk with such Anglo-Australian–ethnic minority friendships, however, is that the hierarchical host–guest relationship remains intact and often reproduces unequal power relations even though this is unintended (Darling, 2011). Amy, however, is less aware of such power relations and feels a sense of pride when she shows me the furniture she has repaired or made. She enjoys the opportunity to participate in these creative activities that were not available to her as woman growing up in Brazil. This sense of pride that comes from making things is further enhanced when sofas, chairs and tables are used in the community space or displayed/sold at the monthly neighbourhood community dinners that attract 300 people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Such friendly encounters between Anglo-Australians and ethnic minority newcomers were very common in faith-based affiliated social welfare organisations, multicultural/indigenous organisations and other non-governmental organisations. In contrast, fleeting friendships between indigenous and migrant newcomers were less likely to occur. Such friendships were impeded by negative stereotypical understandings of indigenous and migrant identities based on representations circulating in the media or through hearsay and gossip (Lobo, 2014b). However, through frequent visits to this arts space on Saturdays, I witnessed and was involved in fleeting friendships with Charlene, a young

indigenous woman who grew up in Alice Springs, a city in central Australia, and Nasim, a young Muslim woman who arrived three months ago from Isfahan in Iran.

Indigenous art practices and fragile friendships

Charlene and Nasim usually come to the community arts space by 9 a.m. on Saturdays if they have no family commitments on that day. While Charlene lives in the neighbourhood, Nasim travels to this place by bus – both of them look forward to painting for a few hours. Through casual conversations, I discovered that Charlene had never had the opportunity to develop a friendship with a migrant newcomer who was a Muslim woman from Iran, and Nasim had never had a relationships with an indigenous woman. In this subterranean car park, however, the site-specific, situated practice of art opens their bodies to forces that enable them to share material and affective worlds (Hawkins et al., 2015). These are worlds where negative affects of suspicion, envy, fear and pity that impede positive encounters among racialised indigenous bodies and the ‘newly fabricated’ bodies (Pardy, 2009: 208) of Muslims/those of ‘Middle Eastern appearance’ get realigned. No questions are asked and no stories exchanged – Charlene and Nasim rarely speak but occasionally move the video camera so their painting is visible. It is only through informal conversations that I initiate that the silence is interrupted and Nasim becomes aware that Charlene is a single mother who cares for two dependent children, works two days a week and is doing a university degree through part-time study. Also, that Charlene’s Sundays are busy with household chores, church activities, family gatherings and sports training for the international indigenous marathon. Similarly,

Charlene becomes aware that Nasim lives in a northern suburb, is married and grew up in Iran. Prior to my intervention such knowledge seemed unnecessary in this quiet friendship. Instead, it was art encounters that involved silence, stillness and the tactile engagement with pots of paints, brushes and canvases in this messy space that drew their bodies together in an ‘activity orientated friendship’ (Richaud, 2016). Charlene and Nasim never keep in touch during the week and had not exchanged emails or mobile phone numbers. Richaud (2016) describes this disposition as an ‘ethics of indifference’ that is peculiar to city living, involves no tight reciprocal commitment but brings unacquainted bodies together in relations of familiarity and friendship.

I watch as Charlene completes a painting of the central Australian desert. While she paints she begins to talk about Alice Springs, a city in central Australia where she spent her childhood and where her mother, a professional artist, and extended family still lives. Nasim is silent and watches Charlene paint. As a migrant newcomer, she is eager to learn indigenous art which she finds quite different from the Persian style of painting. She looks at one of Charlene’s finished paintings and tries to replicate it – she draws four circles and etches moving sand grains of white, yellow ochre and brown along the circumference (Figure 1).

Instead of convivial conversation, there is a tapping sound of the back of the brush on the canvas, the swishing of brushes in the water and the stroking of the canvas with red ochre, yellow or white paint (Figure 2). Bush food such a honey ants, ‘witchetty’ grubs, bush onions and bush bananas, not available in Darwin’s many Asian-style open-air markets, are etched on the canvas. Although Charlene and Nasim do not regularly visit these markets, they tell me why they like to spend time ‘underground’:



Figure 1. Nasim paints: Charlene uses the video camera.

Source: Charlene.



Figure 2. Charlene paints: Nasim uses the video camera.

Source: Nasim.

Charlene: It's good fun ... and I get to know new people and yeah, maybe I enjoy myself with the painting a lot.

Nasim moves the video camera so that her painting is visible and says:

Nasim: My first [indigenous] painting [in Australia] is this one.

Affects or bodily intensities from another spacetime flow, mix, leak, vibrate and resonate in this arts space that emerges as a pleasurable space of joy and pride. The affective

nature of these spacetimes entangle human, non-humans as well as inanimate objects from the past in ways that interrupt and resonate in the present – bodies feel intensities from the liveliness of the world (Hawkins et al., 2015; McCormack, 2013). As Nasim paints the Australian desert landscape, she begins to tell me about the Iranian cities of Shiraz and Isfahan that have a rich and ancient cultural heritage.

Nasim: If you are interested in history, there are lots of places to see in Iran. Lots of historical cities. There are some buildings from one thousand years ago, or more. Isfahan, I think you need more than two weeks to search all of Isfahan. It is really big and there are lots of museums and buildings to see. And Shiraz. It is really nice.

Through silence and the stillness of their bodies, sensations from affective spacetimes in the cities of Alice Springs, Isfahan and Shiraz resonate in this underground arts space. Through co-presence, Charlene and Nasim develop a friendship that is fragile rather than based on strong social ties – they smile, paint and talk when and if they meet. de Leeuw et al. (2012) argues that indigenous understandings of friendship focus on relationships that do not just shape reality but are reality. Such a reality is expressed through sharing space at the same table and co-producing art that attunes their bodies to other spaces and worlds that are more-than-human. Stewart (2011: 445) argues that attunement occurs when 'the sense of something happening is 'palpable, imaginary uncontained' but also material and tactile. Such sensory moments result in affective forces that charge atmospheres so that the world is animated through the engagement with things. Such a pre-conscious, ongoing, subtle tuning is the key to interpersonal becoming because it sparks new relations that alert the senses through moments that are distracting and surprising (Manning and Massumi,

2014; Stewart, 2011). Such distraction and surprise is evident when I show reluctance to paint. I was keen to invest my time so that Charlene and Nasim get some good video footage of the event, rather than relax and enjoy myself. In other words, there was a pressure to also be productive in the research setting rather than just engage in research friendships (de Leeuw et al., 2012). Charlene presses me to get canvas and some brushes and enjoy myself. She said:

We need a chance to have our space you know, and a chance to relax and enjoy, yeah.

I begin painting, an activity that I last engaged in while my children were in primary school – I paint the canvas black and then draw three circles which I paint brown. The colours merge as I am distracted and do not wait for the canvas to dry. Nasim picks up the video camera and shifts the focus to my painting and laughs. I begin to paint in silence so that I make no more errors, but while dipping my brush in the paint, I unintentionally nudge Nasim's hand creating a smudge on her painting. Nasim is very annoyed as it has taken her several weeks to produce an indigenous painting and it is almost complete. Charlene responds with silence and gestures that show Nasim how to correct the error. We paint in silence again. I begin to talk about the sandy Thar desert with its camels and large crescentic dunes in a place called Sam Sand dunes, near the city of Jaisalmer in western India that I visited several years ago. It is evident that the 'underground arts space' both distracts as well as alerts my senses so that our friendship is not about intentional acts of hospitality but the affordances this place offers through grass root creative practices. The affordances are the registering of affective bodily intensities through spacetimes that are kinesthetic, conceptual, material and gestural and are co-produced by both

human and non-human bodies, both proximate and distant (McCormack, 2013).

Masks and ephemeral friendship: Forces and things that move bodies

On weekday afternoons a large company that provides services for Australia's on-shore/offshore high security detention centres brings their 'corporate clients' or asylum seekers (who arrive by boat) to use this art space. For many of these young single men this weekly visit is an opportunity to be present in a public space of Darwin, even though it is subterranean. Peter, the arts coordinator struggles to make these visitors happy by engaging them in art. He says:

It is very difficult to make them [asylum seekers] happy with art. They look at the fridge and they think to themselves 'Why the hell do I want to paint an old fridge for?' But I do a lot of stuff and start the ball rolling and let them do the middle, and then I finish it. And they can see 'Oh look at that, I helped, helped do that', not so much I did it all myself, but I participated in making that item. And what I know it works, because every time they leave, every single person comes up to me and either shakes my hand or bows and thanks me, and leaves with a big smile on their face, every single one.

The affective intensities and affordances this underground space offers to women on Saturday mornings is not evident. It is 'hard work' for Peter to motivate these victimised young men to use bright colours and paint papier mache masks, flower pots and recycled fridges, or do things they have never tried before. The unwilling nature of habitual thoughts about risky journeys made by sea, the loss of loved ones and an uncertain future often results inaction rather than collective art practices. Peter is surprised that even loud rock music does not move them. However, before these young men board the



Figure 3. Masks painted by asylum seekers: Amy uses the video camera.
Source: Amy.

large bus that takes them back to the high security detention centre, they express gratitude for the joy they sense in this space by shaking Peter's hand, bowing and smiling. Such gestures unsettle hierarchical relations of friendship that centre the tolerant and paternalistic white subject who welcomes the asylum seeker. Instead friendship or unconditional hospitality occurs by being overwhelmed, affected and moved by the response of the unexpected and uninvited guest who says farewell (Barnett, 2005; Darling, 2011; Derrida, 2005). As women who use this art space on Saturday mornings, the material traces or the artwork by asylum seekers who are from Iran, Iraq, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India and Vietnam move us too. We see unfinished papier mache white masks initialled with their names and boat numbers (Figure 3). On Saturday mornings we complete these white masks with splashes of colour and playfully wear them. Amy uses her woodwork skills to make a long rod with hooks which she fixes below the small rectangular window that provides a shaft of sunlight in the underground space – passers-by can see these masks as they take their children to the indoor entertainment centre

or sometimes wander in. Through a quiet politics the silent bodies of asylum seekers are valued in this underground space when surface spaces are sites where injustice unfolds.

Darwin: Creativity and friendship

Fleeting, fragile friendships that crystallise through art encounters in a mundane subterranean spaces described in this paper strengthen the narrative of Darwin as a tropical creative city that is diverse and inclusive. These friendships engage indigenous, asylum seeker and migrant bodies, some of whom are caught in reflective or ruminative thoughts of loss and dispossession or 'bad' habits of self-harm and violence that stills such thought (Bissell and Fuller, 2014; Dewsbury, 2014; Lobo, 2013). Although social welfare programmes that focus on alleviating trauma and social disadvantage yield measurable outcomes, the challenge is to work with bodies that are distracted, disoriented, unreadable and unworkable. This paper shows that flickers of activity or site-engaged art practices that are 'unintentionally intent' (Dewsbury, 2014: 429; Hawkins

et al., 2015) provide opportunities for thinking about the spatiality and temporality of friendships in terms of affective intensities – it is friendship with a ‘light touch’ that is fun, rather than associated with strong emotional bonds. Stewart (2007) argues that these positive ‘ordinary affects’ are forces in a state of potentiality or resonance that escape representation or evaluative critique but have outcomes for potential modes of knowing, relating or attending to things and each other – it influences what thoughts and feelings are possible.

This paper demonstrates that vitalist philosophies of the body and life provides the possibility to think about friendships as momentary attunements that open bodies to a material world of flows, connections and becomings. Bodies are conceptualised in terms of their affective materialities and intensities or their capacity to affect and be affected rather than in terms of their physical boundaries and the performative articulations of their identities (Dewsbury and Cloke, 2009; Manning and Massumi, 2014). Affects are worthy of attention because they have outcomes for what a body can do – circulating affects can either increase or decrease the capacity and power of differentiated bodies to act (Colebrook, 2011; de Spinoza, 2001; Deleuze and Parnet, 2006). For example, in Darwin when bodies are affected by forces that debilitate them, emotions of anger, rage, fear and anxiety unfold as embodied habitual acts of misunderstanding, misrecognition and evaluative judgement (Lobo, 2014b, 2015). Alternatively, when bodies are affected by forces that propel them, they are more likely to increase their power to act and engage in ephemeral friendships as shown in this community arts space. Central to exploring the propelling nature of these forces is the differentiated character of space that is not passive but affective in the way it has variable reaches and is experienced through different sensory

registers (Stewart, 2011). Space then is imbued with power and can enable or constrain the movement and flow of bodies that become entangled through fragile and ephemeral friendships. Rather than purposeful and structured activity that produces measurable outcomes, grass roots arts initiatives described in this paper results in friendships that bring together people who inhabit different lifeworlds. Affective forces from spacetimes both near and distant modulate events and rearrange affective intensities of despair, anger and outrage among indigenous peoples and migrant newcomers that are rarely expressed, move through contagion, stress bodies and can be disempowering (Ahmed, 2007; Lobo, 2014a). In other words, affect as a pre-personal force has the potential to transform rigid boundaries between bodies into thresholds that invoke different futures for living together with difference.

Conclusion

The paper contributes to urban research on geographies of friendship through its focus on art encounters that engage sensory bodies who are most disadvantaged, marginalised and racialised in Australian cities – ethnic minority migrants (including refugees and asylum seekers) and indigenous peoples. It demonstrates that mundane everyday spaces of culturally diverse and socio-economically suburban areas of Darwin, a small city in a white settler society can be transformed by collaborative art practices. Art as a performative event provides the possibilities for people with otherwise very different lives to be brought into a momentarily shared space-time and engage in ‘gentle activism’ that is regenerative (Hawkins et al., 2015: 335). Using insights from non-representational theory and feminist approaches to encounter, I have argued that this form of activism entangles bodies and affective spacetimes

through a quiet politics (Askins, 2015; Hawkins et al., 2015). This is a politics that transforms space and makes it possible to invoke different futures and the crystallisation of experimental publics through methods that go beyond 'talk'.

The paper contributes to pushing the boundaries of research on geographies of friendship by showing that when agency is distributed in spacetimes that are always more-than-human, fragile affective moments of immanent potential emerge. These moments are productive in moving us beyond paternalism, tolerance, conflict, tensions, self-interest and self-maintenance that maintain hierarchical relationships of friendship. For women such as Charlene, Nasim and me, art opens our bodies and minds to an affective world of connections, flows and becomings – to others' spaces such as Alice Springs, Isfahan, Shiraz, Jaisalmer, for example. For asylum seeker bodies, art allows their bodies and minds to be carried away and sometimes escape the pressure of habitual and ruminative thought that defines their life in Darwin.

The paper contributes to new insights that can strengthen understandings of the creative city, in particular, the cultural vitality of suburban areas and art practices that are rarely valued within cultural policy discourse. A small investment by government/non-governmental organisations and the commitment of a few art practitioners provides the opportunity for newcomers as well as longer term residents to come together and express their shared passion for creativity. These 'cool places' on the margins are in contrasts to creative clusters in inner cities where gentrification by the 'creative class' often results in the displacement of those who are most marginalised (Gibson et al., 2012) When surface places are sites of injustice in Darwin, the underground car park functions as 'creative milieu' (Hawkins, 2012: 530) that produces affordances and

affective intensities that have reach and resonance when bodies are attuned to a more-than-human world.

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