

YARN: THE ART OF CONVERSATION

COBY EDGAR INTERVIEWS WARREN ROBERTS, CEO OF YARN AUSTRALIA



by Coby Edgar | June 2018

ASSISTANT CURATOR OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ART AT THE ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES.

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Warren Roberts is a Thunghutti Bundjalung man and the founder and CEO of YARN Australia, a social enterprise organisation that collaborates with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. The aim of YARN is to unite all Australians through the sharing of stories in safe and respectful spaces, with events and programs held in Sydney and Melbourne.

Coby Edgar___Why did you decide to establish YARN Australia?

Warren Roberts___Back when I was a student at UNSW there was a moment when I realised there was something important missing in Australian society. One day during one of my Aboriginal Studies tutorials I was listening to my non-Indigenous classmates respond to the lecture questions, the discussion was about Aboriginal history.

I could hear a lot of enthusiasm in the students' voices, but it reminded me of my experiences growing up in the community where our mob would often hear lots of good ideas from non-Indigenous Australians about creating changes for Aboriginal people, but the problem was that often these people had little to no relationship with or understanding of our people. They were getting their ideas and answers without talking to us directly. The other thing I was reminded of was the way in which our community had often felt like it had a revolving door with people from the outside coming in with big solutions, then next minute they're gone, all good intentions but no action.

In this class I realised that the opportunity, the key, lay in relationship building. What Australia needed was opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous peoples to get to know each other, where communication with one another could take place so both cultures could be heard and be understood.

At the end of the class, I put a question to the whole group. I asked everyone in the room if the reason for their enthusiasm for Aboriginal issues was based on getting a good participation mark or if they actually wanted to do something long-lasting for our community and build a positive future for Australia. The students each expressed their sincere desire to create positive change, so I asked them all to join me for "YARN" after the tutorial.

This after-class gathering was the first ever "YARN" meeting, it was the beginning of relationship building, sharing each other's stories and talking respectfully about history. This simple method of having a yarn has been the same ever since.

Since YARN's establishment, you have worked in collaboration with artists, actors, musicians, dancers, poets, and film-makers from a variety of different language groups, ages, and sexes. Why have you chosen to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists in this way?

In my work with YARN over the years, I've lost count of how many Australians said to me that they've never had the opportunity to hear stories from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and that they never had a chance to learn about our history and culture in school.

At YARN we strongly believe that stories hold the key to building an understanding of each other's experiences, and so we always invite artists and storytellers to come to our events. We've been fortunate to work with some truly incredible Elders and artists from First Nations communities across the country. Each artist has their own unique creative expression for telling their story whether that be through song, dance, poem or film.

From your observations, over the last 11 years, are the conversations different in corporate, universities, schools and community-based events that you hold? Are there particular arts platforms that you use across the different divisions?

At YARN we have the same mission no matter where we are working, we want to build relationships and understanding between the cultures. We find that no matter where we are working, non-Indigenous participants in particular express their eagerness to hear more Aboriginal voices and get to know First Nations peoples. Depending on where the yarn takes place will influence the types of stories and histories we explore, but ultimately the goal is the same, giving all people the chance to understand First Nations culture.

Do you believe Australia is ready to talk about assimilation, dispossession, intervention, genocide and the stolen generations or is it still too traumatic for Aboriginal people? How do the artists you employ assist in having these conversations?

I believe that many Australians are ready to talk about these topics but what's been missing is safe and guided spaces in which to have these types of conversations. At YARN we build our spaces with respect, so participants and guests speakers and artists feel confident to share their stories no matter how traumatic they are. The artists that come to YARN events are vital to allowing us to explore the hard topics. Australia has a painful history particularly when talking about things such as the stolen generations, dispossession, intervention and genocide, but sharing these stories is part of our healing as a nation, and often we find there is healing for the artists themselves when they get to share their stories in the yarn circle.

YARN is a social enterprise organisation that works from grassroots all the way up to the government. Taking into consideration the political climate of today with the rejection of the Uluru Statement, Survival Day—still a day of national celebration—and more recently the risk of changes to child welfare policies to make it easier for non-Indigenous families to adopt Aboriginal children. How do you see the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and groups of non-Aboriginal people you work with helping to facilitate progressive changes? Do you think YARN Australia plays a role in decolonising the minds of Australians?

I truly believe that all the problems and misunderstandings we see in Australia in 2018 have come about because there has never been a strong enough relationship built between blackfellas and whitefellas. We have been living together for 230 years but we still haven't created the proper spaces and places to get to know one another. First Nations voices have been overlooked and our people have not had the opportunity to decide their own destiny. It is the artists and the non-Indigenous people we engage with who are giving voice to these unheard stories. Our events are creating a new dialogue, one where we embrace all cultures and inspire all Australians to take responsibility in influencing the future of what Australia values as a nation. Political change comes from the civil society, we hope YARN can play a part in shaping a country where all cultures are valued, one we can all be proud of.