

“science fiction double feature”

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I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are on, and paying my respects to elders past, present, and future. This presentation was written on the land where the State Library of Queensland resides, whose traditional owners are the Jagera and Turrbal peoples.

At the State Library of Queensland, SLQ, our Acknowledgement of Country includes future elders as well as paying respect to the past and present. SLQ is under DSITI, Queensland's ministry of science and innovation. Our current minister, Leanne Enoch, is a member of the Quandamooka people - the first Indigenous woman elected to the Queensland Parliament.

I can't promise that the words I say to you in November will be the words you're reading off the page or screen right now, because as I type them it's August 2016. They asked me for a keynote title back in April and I said "Liminal, Littoral, Literal"; a few months later and I'm calling it "Science Fiction Double Feature"; by the time we meet in late November it'll be something else again, no doubt.

You're still pretty far in the future for me - not so far that we have flying cars and are wearing tinfoil jumpsuits, but still only just coming over the horizon.

Before I even get to you, we have [Fun Palaces](#) on the way on the 1st October, we have [Brisbane Writers Festival](#) before that in September, and assuming events have rolled out as planned, I've just spoken at the Crawford Awards in Adelaide before arriving at SWITCH for this preso.

But that's good, because what I'm really concerned with today is the future and who gets to talk about it, who gets to shape it.

1: back to the future

A few years back, the problem was the present, not the future. It felt like libraries around the world were [pretty much on the back foot](#) when it came to explaining what they were and why they existed, to themselves, to their funders, to their wider community. Were they makerspaces or digital hubs? Were they facilities of children's play? Should they be doing cultural programming and events? How important were the collections? Did libraries still need shelves? Never mind asking what did *good* librarianship look like, the profession seemed to struggle even to answer: what did *librarianship* look like?

Those debates seemed fierce three or four years back, especially for those of us frustrated by conservative tendencies in the profession. There were still a lot of people who wanted to shelve books and serve people in the old way, who feared self-check out machines as job-stealers, who didn't have a good answer to skeptics questioning the need for libraries in the age of Google and Kindle.

Today, [libraries are a bit more sorted](#). The future of libraries probably does involve 3D printers and maker technology, coding and robotics. There's space for play and programming, because we know that access to culture and information in 2016 includes live experiences. There will also be new literacies, and libraries will address and embrace them.

When I delivered three days of training for Townsville Libraries in North Queensland this year, staff from across the ranks freely brainstormed buzzwords like creativity, innovation, evolution, change, and provocation. Those words might seem broad, but they aren't stagnant or stuck in the past. More and more librarians are speaking the language of a future-facing, flexible institution.

Which is great, and assuming I've stuck to the script this far, I'm probably doing a happy dance for you on stage right now.

As we can't reproduce that in this write-up, why not enjoy [Gregory Hines and Mikhail Baryshnikov showing how it's really done, in *White Nights*](#).

Got to love that Twyla Tharp choreography.

One of the things we've started to recognise is that we're not just doing things to people - inflicting our programming choices, our ideas and protocols and priorities on them - we're making sure that the community can work with us to design and shape the services they need and desire. It applies to hospitals, and museums, and government departments too – and if you are a library, it applies whether you're a neighbourhood branch or a state institution or a university library.

Few things have made me happier this year than seeing the University of Southern Queensland encourage students to make Harry Potter wands in their makerspace, or Queensland University Technology assign a team of Master's students to run a Fun Palace for the general public. Even in academic settings, the library is the place where you come not just to pass tests or fulfil other people's goals, but to learn, explore, and play on your terms. The priority for library staff is working with the communities we serve to shape the things we do.

And that, I suspect, is part of the reason SWITCH invited me to speak here this year. Because “co-curation” is a buzzword now, and at this conference last year, you heard from Mark Hynes, Director of Corporate Affairs at the London Borough of Lambeth, about "Libraries In The Age of Austerity".

Mark spoke of a place in South London where communities and librarians worked hand in hand. He [exhorted SWITCH attendees](#) to move away from negative "save our library" entrenchment and "focussing on cuts".

These are laudable words, except that even as Mark was saying these things, [his borough was the battleground for library cuts and a highly controversial plan for libraries' future](#).

The dubious scheme, which angered a great swathe of the community and drew a lot of press attention, involved [transforming libraries into privately run gyms with a few bookshelves as a token library service](#).

As a result we saw marches against the cuts and even an occupation of the Carnegie Library by brave protestors in Herne Hill. To find out more about that story, google "Hit the Library Get A Drink Start A Riot."

Just a few weeks before Mark's appearance at SWITCH, I'd been working with Lambeth librarians on [Fun Palaces](#) - the international celebration of the arts and sciences which takes place on the first weekend in October each year.

I saw [staff who were easily the equal of any of the brilliant public librarians I've worked with in Australia](#) finding amazing ways to get the community involved in a project whose strapline is "everyone an artist, everyone a scientist".

I met Zoey Dixon, digital champion at Lambeth Libraries and my co-producer on the eleven simultaneous Fun Palaces: bring *her* over for a keynote speech sometime! I also worked closely with Vincia Bennett, presiding genius at Clapham Library; and Caroline Mackie at the now-closed Carnegie Library.

Caroline, in particular, hit the ground running and never looked back, recruiting firefighters, kickboxers, Dulwich Hamlet soccer club, and many more for her library event. There was definitely no need to debate the importance of bookshelves with her. Back in February she'd [won a borough award](#) for staff achievement.

Yet this didn't stop Carnegie being the library which suffered worst at the hands of Lambeth Council, [closed with the intention to hand it over to a gym business as a leisure centre](#). There would be just a room full of bookshelves, not always staffed, as lip service towards its library status. And now we're waiting to see what the future holds for this one hundred and ten year old library.

Now one of the great things about the future is that no one can totally predict it, and everyone has the right to dream of what the future might and should hold. But when it comes to a place like Lambeth, it's clear to see that not all futures are equal!

So what does all this mean for Australian libraries, and an Australian future?

Essentially this: LISTEN.

2: the teardrop explodes

Those fancy words about co-curation and co-creation with communities only mean something if our organisations truly listen - even to the disagreeable, difficult, or challenging voices.

My role as Creative in Residence with the State Library has involved just that - not swaggering in firing off big ideas - "On Tuesday, everyone dresses as unicorns; the first weekend of every month is a live zombie battle!" - but listening to better understand the appetite, ambition, and capacity of both the organisation and the community it serves. It's essentially a form of public engagement - of responsive listening - which might apply to any institution, from a hospital or university to a broadcaster, museum, or gallery.

If you think of any organisation as a series of conversations between staff members and the people they serve, the notion becomes: how can we expand the circle of people with whom we have that conversation? How can we treat the people we serve as fellow participants, not audiences or objects?

I always like the example of Julian Cope.

He was the singer with 1980s pop band The Teardrop Explodes - [here's one of their most famous tracks, Reward](#) - but became increasingly eccentric over the years. ([This 2014 profile](#) describes him as "fabulously weird", with an LSD consumption which is "legendary").

In 1998 he published a book called *The Modern Antiquarian*, a guidebook to hundreds of Britain's megalithic sites - stone circles and hill forts and other legacies of European Stone Age culture.

It got a mixed reception on its release at the end of the 20th century, but one review, by a smart archaeologist called Timothy Darvill, stuck with me when I read it. I think it's one of the most important academic texts I've ever read, even though it is small and humble and obscure.

And it is a text which reminds us to listen.

Darvill writes,

Superficially *The Modern Antiquarian* looks like just another piece of fringe archaeology of the sort that sells well in Glastonbury and through shops with names like 'Enigma' or 'Astral Traveller'. But to assign it straightway to that category is to misjudge it, to miss its message and, it will be argued here, to bury our heads in the sand [...] A quick dip into the text will probably upset most archaeologists pretty quickly, or at least prompt peals of laughter and cries of derision. This is not a book written by an archaeologist, even though the author has made a serious study of his subject.

And yet, Darvill recognises that Cope had enough passion to visit hundreds of megalithic sites across the British Isles. That he was deeply in love with precisely that era of prehistory which Darvill's colleagues seek to understand and explain.

He goes on:

Cope is keen and able to set out debates and alternative interpretations in his book, yet does not seem to have found some of the main components to lay before his readers. Why is this, we might ask? The reason is plain to see: we as archaeologists have also let ourselves down by not going that final mile -we have not taken our work out into the wider world and a public hungry for our thoughts.

[...] If Cope can be regarded as a barometer of the wider expectations of what archaeology should be doing, and I believe he should, then we must sit up and take note of the implications of this book and others like it. We need, at the very least, to realign our public outputs - to listen up and get real in what we present to the wider world. We need to move away from descriptions and stories of who did what, when and where. Instead we can focus on engagement, relationships, meaning, perspective and understanding.

Darvill urges the archaeologists of human prehistory to expand their conversation to include the people most passionate about their topic - including the acid-casualty psychedelic rocker.

And we too, should be expanding our conversation - whether we work in public libraries or specialist ones, whether we are in a big city or a tiny rural town, whether we're in a big palatial State Library or a single room full of shelves out on the Torres Strait.

3: starship / nothing's gonna stop us now

Trying to listen to the voices we've overlooked doesn't even have to mean being drawn to the bizarre or eccentric. There are much graver omissions from the public library conversation in Australia, ones that urgently need to be addressed.

[Many of you will be aware of Alex Byrne's work](#) encouraging libraries to redouble their efforts to engage with Australia's Indigenous communities.

As I said at the start of this presentation, acknowledgment of country at SLQ is about acknowledging elders past, present, and future. For that to be more than a rhetorical gesture, more than lip service to an Australia better reconciled with the suffering in its past, that means changing the way we do business - and the way we listen.

I was born in 1980, not 1788, but every time I stand in front of an Aussie crowd or run a workshop here, most of the people speak the language of the place where I was born. And many of the people look like me too, and share many of my habits and customs and assumptions. And those things have come to pass because of a history of colonisation which is almost unspeakable. It's so painful and brutal that we barely ever look it in the eye. And so if I say that the place of a Creative in Residence, or the place of any cultural institution, is to listen, it includes listening to that part of our history. And trying to understand when to help, when to intervene, when to be present in solidarity, and when simply to butt out.

One of my jobs this year was to help State Library of Queensland supercharge its Fun Palaces offering across the state. Last year there were just under a dozen across Queensland; at the time of writing we're on course for around fifty-five, including the work of institutions like the University of Southern Queensland, Griffith University, and Queensland University of Technology - expanding the conversation from their scholarly expertise to the world where [everyone is an artist, everyone is a scientist](#).

And again, it was less about the London bloke bringing over his bright ideas than listening to the opportunities which were already out there -- for example, Titui Gul.

These two words mean "Starship" in Mabuiag language and they come from a project devised and delivered by Thursday Island's librarian, Mavis Bani.

For Fun Palaces 2015, she devised an event where aliens and robots visited the Torres Strait to learn about the islands there. Local kids taught the extraterrestrial visitors about their country, their lives, and their world. Fun Palaces was not the impetus for Mavis to deliver this project, but it was an opportunity for her to share this concept worldwide.

She now hopes to create Titui Gul as a physical space - a pop-up spacecraft with different compartments to represent different forms of knowledge and culture - with visiting kids and teens taking on the roles of the crew. An Indigenous-devised, science-fictional take on "Everyone an Artist, Everyone a Scientist" which respects the fact that long before Fun Palaces rolled onto the scene, the traditional owners of the Torres Strait already blended learning, play, craft, science, story, and performance.

And going out and listening to these communities brings to life some of those more elevated conversations about public engagement in academia.

For example, a [crucial lecture by Beth Nowviskie](#) at a Columbia University symposium in April this year questioned the whiteness of digital humanities initiatives in the English-speaking world. Drawing on traditions of Afro-futurism and non-white speculative fiction, Nowviskie told her audience:

There's a pervasive whiteness in librarianship—a profession, by our last, imperfect measure, 88% white—that is unbearable, paralytic, oppressive. And yet we're working at a moment of great opportunity, when technologies and practices are truly beginning to align for the creation of coherent, interconnected, sustainable digital archives and 21st-century knowledge infrastructure.

What is it that we want to build? What is it that we can build, from that perspective and position—and for and with whom?

[...M]ovements like Afropolitanism and Afrofuturism call on us to build networked, inter-institutional, future-oriented cultural heritage systems: systems that seek to transcend their colonial pasts, even while recognizing that the thought-patterns of knowledge workers, the inherited ontological structures of our archives, and the material expressions of the culture they contain or link to are inescapably shaped by those pasts.

[...] I suspect the hallmark of a digital library or museum that's not just not-racist, but instead actively working against pervasive structures of racism in our society, is that it's organized to promote the design of speculative futures—in as unmediated a way as possible, and by all its users.

Like Beth Nowviskie, I acknowledge that as a white Pom talking on this topic, I risk speaking about issues outside of my expertise and experience. I do so in the hope of publicly acknowledging and recognising those issues, and ensuring that they are at the forefront of our discussions about the future.

In an Australian context, we might ask: what more could we be doing to support people like Mavis who dare to imagine a science-fictional future from the perspective of Thursday Island? What would it mean for such projects to have the attention of State Library initiatives like The Edge or my own Signature Team?

Also at Columbia, anthropologist [Beth Povinelli has been speaking to similar issues](#). Professor Povinelli has been visiting and working in Australia since 1984, seeking to frame an "anthropology of the otherwise" that analyses liberal power from an Indigenous perspective.

She argues that, globally, people and institutions should engage seriously with Indigenous ways of knowing. She says we must:

stop thinking about Indigenous understanding of the world as [merely] cultural [...A] new interdisciplinary literacy is the only hope for finding a way to square our current arrangement of life with the continuation of human and planetary life as such.

Scientists, philosophers, anthropologists, politicians, political theorists, historians, writers, and artists must gather their wisdom, develop a level of mutual literacy, and cross-pollinate their severed lineages.

In this context, seemingly light or playful forms of public engagement like Titui Gul, like Fun Palaces, become part of that crucial business of expanding the conversation around what we know and how we know it. Public libraries become vital mediators between the public and the great cosmos of accumulated human knowledge and culture. Librarians are not there to teach or to preach or to enforce one single way of seeing the world - they should be supporters and facilitators in helping any of us, all of us, to explore what we want to, on our own terms.

And as we listen - seeking to find our future - we will also uncover elements of the past and present, neglected, marginalized, which are overdue for proper appreciation.

If we imagine moving through a sea of digital information, for example, we might connect this metaphor to the [Mabuiag worldview in which the waters of the Torres Strait are themselves a kind of library](#): "What first appear to be undifferentiated patches of coral and salt water are Islanders' exclusive marine domains - a vast, intricate water library where history dwells in places, not in time, and all the sea is named."

And this is not fanciful. This is the knowledge which has endured colonisation and survived. It will endure and find its place in the digital age, too. This is something which as librarians we listen to - fact and fantasy, story and history, metaphor and hard science - and which we share with our community. It's vital that our future involves this kind of careful, patient listening.

final thought

Thinking this way brings us back to Leanne Enoch being the Minister with responsibility for Queensland's State Library. When she talks about "digital songlines" and future generations of elders, it's not lip service: it's meaningful for a Quandamooka woman, as our science minister, to raise these challenges.

2017 will be a year of digital futures at the State Library. Our Signature Team are focussing on programming which questions the impact and implications of technological change. As part of the transition from 2016's theme of Belonging, [this year's Fun Palace will go digital](#). And this year's Brisbane Writers Festival includes [a panel on Science and Belonging](#) which embraces science fiction alongside the work of scientists, a diversity of imagination as well as workforce and worldview.

All of this is in the future for me as I write this -- but not for you.

By the time we meet in Ulladulla, all these things will have happened, and more significantly, the US election will have taken place on November 8th. Barack Obama - the first black President of the United States - will have a successor.

Earlier this year, Muhammad Ali died and the President, in the joint statement on Ali's death which he made with the First Lady, chose to share an important quotation from the famous boxer:

“I am America,” he once declared. “I am the part you won’t recognize. But get used to me – black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own. Get used to me.”

One final thought?

Just trade "America" for "Australia" in that quotation.

And then start to listen.