

## **Reflections on A Cross-Cultural Working Group on ‘Good Culture’ and Precariousness with Victoria Gallagher and Mary Graham**

Matthew Johnson, summarizing the thoughts of [Victoria Gallagher](#), a Community Organiser from Ashington, Northumberland, and [Mary Graham](#), an Aboriginal Traditional Owner from Southport, Queensland and Chairperson of Murri Mura Aboriginal Corporation on [A Cross-Cultural Working Group on ‘Good Culture’ and Precariousness](#)

### **Victoria Gallagher’s thoughts**

At first sight a former pit village in Northumberland and the Aboriginal communities of Queensland seem a world apart – both geographically and in the challenges they face.

Ashington, my home, once described as the world’s biggest village and home to the ‘pitman painters’, has struggled with economic and social problems since the demise of the coalmining industry.

In so many ways we are so very different. But looked at closely, it becomes clear two groups of people on opposite sides of the world face some similar economic and social challenges.

Our pit closures had a terrible impact, not just economically but on our sense of identity and community. The hurt and harm is still here today.

Aboriginal Australians living in the suburbs of Brisbane had their relationship with the land severed when it was taken from them. Again the hurt and harm remains.

The project we have developed involved groups from both communities visiting and living among each other to examine how they are facing these challenges and what they can do as communities to shape their own lives.

We looked at a whole range of issues affecting both communities including social problems around employment, health, education, environment and relationships in order to understand the obstacles to our living better lives.

Having done that, we then focused on the ways that our communities have traditionally dealt with challenges, particularly with regard to their concern for collective action which contributed to a strong community spirit, an ethos of looking after one another and avoiding social isolation.

There is an argument that many of today's major problems, such as poverty, social disintegration, alienation, loneliness and ill-health arise from the absence of 'good culture'.

We spent a month in Brisbane, talking and listening – seeing first-hand the challenges the Aboriginal communities face - and how they are trying to tackle them. We shadowed our Aboriginal counterparts at their places of work, including employment and health centres, arts collectives and land management centres, and were also able to talk to community and political leaders.

There were also visits to sites of traditional cultural importance, and places where Aboriginal people suffered under colonial rule. Perhaps the most emotive experience was attending the protests against the [closure of Aboriginal communities in Western Australia](#) which showed just how badly Aboriginal people are treated in Australia. What became crystal clear from our visit Down Under was that there are dedicated people who are working hard to overcome the difficulties they face and are committed to making a difference.

Our five counterparts from Brisbane visited the North East in June. They saw how we live, what projects we are developing, look at our work in the community, be able to talk to local people and get a picture of who and where we are. It allowed us to learn from each other, developing themes that will hopefully aid us in meeting our challenges and making life better for the people who live in both communities.

At a time in which Parties committed to austerity are in government in both countries, we both want to make positive changes but there is a feeling that there are barriers we just can't overcome. The hope is that the exchanges will help us, in the future, to think differently as we try to shape a future that in many ways will be better than both the present and the past.

**Mary Graham's thoughts**

Like most school children in Australia, the knowledge we were provided about Great Britain focused mainly on the monarchy and its empire. Rarely did we learn about the ordinary people from the British Isles, let alone the treatment of coalmining communities in the northern parts of England or the land that they inhabited. Except for having to memorize wonderful poetry about the English countryside, we learnt almost nothing about the complexities of the notion of Englishness.

Aboriginal people knew that, historically and to the present day, English people's knowledge of our people and culture, was to a large extent, very sparse, focusing on the poor mistreated natives of colonial times or the modern activists struggling for land rights, human rights, justice and recognition.

The cultural exchange between Aboriginal people from Brisbane Queensland and people from Ashington in the North of England, opened the eyes of both our groups to features of each other's lives and histories of which we were previously unaware.

The Ashington 'mob' learnt of the suffering and damage that colonization in Australia caused our people - land stealing, displacement, deliberate impoverishment and the absence of any treaty between state and Aboriginal peoples, followed by clan and family disintegration, state violence, alcoholism, suicide, intergenerational dislocation, loss of language and erosion of culture.

They also had experiences of the way in which our culture has been upheld in a range of different settings and how we are struggling to continue to uphold our commitments against institutional pressure.

This is what we saw when we visited Ashington and met their people, their town, their history and their Land. They are a people who are/were very proud of their mob, home country, culture and independent spirit. These are some the same qualities we see in ourselves – an inner strength that helps people not to be bitter and resentful – occasionally angry, quite rightly – but enables them to cope with and manage the precariousness of their lives.

In turn, our group learnt more about the Northern English and the English in general than we ever knew, besides particular historical aspects, like the conflicts that happened over centuries and recent history and how that still impacts on life in the North today. The class hierarchy that controlled the whole country, treated the

Northern communities quite cruelly, plunged the region into depression and poverty later and is still very powerful. Socially, groups across the country are quite different from each other, not just in terms of language/accent but character and attitude. The Northerners are very resilient and independent, qualities essential to meet the challenge of an insecure, uncertain and unpredictable modern life. This is like our Aboriginal people too.

What I find with both mobs is the well-grounded feeling of not being entirely in control of our collective lives, environment and goals. We work hard, are creative, keep culture alive and encourage social connection, but the lack of material resources and the changing notion of the nature and purpose of culture creates a host of confusing challenges for people.

With this in mind, both groups have had and continue to have shared discussions, experiences and ideas/initiatives for community development in both countries. In the overall context of cultural sharing, friendships have been made, insightful knowledge revealed and fresh inventive and positive concepts for community wellbeing explored. I believe this is 'good culture' at its core. The social practise of it has still to be worked out. Our group is still talking about our experiences and will for quite some time.