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Healing through art: My practice

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Doctor of Philosophy (Visual Art) by Research

July 2020

Victorian College of the Arts

The University of Melbourne

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Visual Art) by Research

Abstract

Many issues affect the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. For more than a decade we have experienced many strategies implemented by governments to address the disparities experienced in our health and wellbeing. It has been recognised that new approaches are required because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are seeking culturally appropriate services. New approaches are required because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are sick of culturally inappropriate services. We have had enough.

This thesis describes my healing journey and the journeys of the people I have worked with as a visual artist focused on healing. It is a story of resilience, of strength and of drawing from our culture and kinship structures to interrupt the intergenerational trauma that continues to impact on my people. I use my art to describe my journey as I write this thesis, as art is the way I best express my thoughts, my feelings and my own journey of healing.

This research demonstrates the importance of applying an Indigenous lens in developing different approaches to healing through the intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It explores the questions:

- What is meant by healing through arts practices within an Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context?
- What are the foundations of my healing through art practices?
- How does my art bring together the expression of my culture and my strong Christian beliefs?
- How does my artwork and my art teaching heal in my community?
- What can others learn from my art practice and its relationship to healing?

Declaration

This is to certify that:

- (i) The thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy except where indicated.
- (ii) Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material uses.
- (iii) This thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length.

Signature:..... date

Ngardarb Francine Riches 17th July 2020

Preface

During my candidature I was privileged to be supported by a number of scholarships and grants:

- Ambooriny Boroo Foundation through the Kimberley Land Council
- Scovel Gardner Family Bursary – Scovel Gardner Family Fund
- Faye Mayles Scholarship
- the Australian Government Research Training Program
- STUD-L Is a lump sum graduate research studentship.
- STUD-RHD Studentship for research higher degree faculty/VCA x 3
- STUD-RHD Studentship
- STUD-S Studentship faculty/VCA x 2
- STUD-RHD x 2
- VCASE (a Victorian College of the Arts funded studentship).

This thesis has been copyedited by Cathy Edmonds, a freelance editor and member of the Institute of Professional Editors. She has extensive editing experience in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies. The work was approved by [my supervisor].

Acknowledgments

This research has enabled me to explore the real meaning of the visual arts world and the healing it contains. As a practising visual artist of some 35-plus years, I felt that there were so much in-depth qualities about making art. I saw the spark that fanned the flames within people's lives, enabling them to have a second chance in life after much trauma and hardship. It was during our art classes that I noticed a refreshing freedom of expression by our Aboriginal Elders and community – the release of much pain and mental anguish was evident while making art together. It was here that I felt a strong desire to explore the therapeutic properties of what art can do. Having lived a full semi-traditional life as a Bardi/Jawi person, I gained so much knowledge on the cultural ways of making traditional tools and artefacts and the body paints used for dances. This has been a lens that contributed to my research.

I acknowledge the God of creation who has embedded in me the natural artistic skills and the empathy I have for people. My family has been a strong supporter of this journey and they have always been available through the tough times. My husband, Tony Riches, has been my strength, mentor and as an artist he knew exactly what I needed to do when I struggled. My sons Bill, Luke, Daniel and Mark gave me inspiration to do this and this research belongs to them too. I know my grandparents are looking down and would be proud of what I have achieved in my life. I can still feel the excitement of my grandfather so many years ago when we were finally getting our first school started down the beach where we lived in Ardyaloon in the Kimberley of Western Australia. I am privileged to carry forth our history in a modern world. My other mother Violet and Uncle Brian Carter, all our family in Ardyaloon, the Bardi/Jawi and Karajarri Elders have been an endless source of enrichment with all their passing on of cultural knowledge. I am a custodian of the Bardi/Jawi and Karajarri people and keeper of our ancient knowledge.

I want to acknowledge and thank the Kulin Nation, Traditional owners of the land on which I wrote my thesis; particularly the Boon Wurrung tribe where the Victorian College of the Arts stands. Had it not been for the help and encouragement I received from the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development, Murrup Barak, Melbourne Institute for Indigenous Development including Dr Sally Anne Treloyn and

VCA (Victorian College of the Arts) this research would not have happened. Special thanks and appreciation go to Head of the Wilin Centre, Tiriki Onus and student support staff John Wayne Parsons. Appreciation goes to the Footscray Community Arts Centre for hosting the Scattered Tribes Art Exhibitions.

Thanks, must go to my primary supervisor Dr Elizabeth Presa, who understood my artistic expressions, and to co-supervisor Associate Professor Jane Freemantle OAM, who supported me during this time. Thank you both for helping and guiding me through this PhD journey. Special thanks to my two tutors, Dr Rachel Orzech and Ruth McConchie, who have been helping and guiding me very closely with this thesis. I would never have completed this without you two. Your extra willingness to spend time with me during these last few months has been extra special and I am forever grateful to you both.

I would like to thank all my friends and work colleagues for their support during my years of running the Scattered Tribes Art Group. People like Liss Gabb, who believed in me, and Crystal Harris, Virginia Sitzler, Amie Talagi and CoHealth for providing a space for us to do art. To Arun Munoz and Rick Randle for the video work with our art group. To all the Elders and community members who came every week and made art together.

Uncle Roy, you have taught me so much about helping people through their trauma. Thank you so much for allowing me to journey through your healing years. It was very tough, but we learned so much along the way. To Uncle Denis and Auntie Maureen Atkinson for being my role models in the Christian faith and for allowing me to tell a little of your great life journey. Thanks to Auntie Isobel Loy who told us her story and her family who is a part of our Melbourne Indigenous Church Fellowship at Footscray. Thank you to everyone who has been with me during this journey most of all, thank you Lord Jesus for giving me life and may you bless our next endeavours.

Table of contents

Abstract	ii
Declaration	iii
Preface	iv
Acknowledgments	v
Table of contents	vii
List of figures	x
Copyright material	xiv
Chapter One: Introduction and background	1
Introduction	1
Background	2
Cultural challenges	4
Kinship	5
Healing and trauma.....	8
Background to intergenerational trauma	11
Closing the Gap initiatives.....	15
Spirituality and other activities of wellbeing	17
Caring for Country programs: the Bardi/Jawi Rangers.....	23
Chapter synopsis	24
Chapter Two: My artistic practice	28
The beginnings of the Scattered Tribes Art Group	29
The Stolen Generations, legislation and intergenerational traumas	30
The significance of a possum skin cloak.....	33
Making the possum skin cloak	33
My paintings in the exhibition.....	35
Gunangundja Nganga- Emu Story.....	35
Nga Ngajana My Mine (Identity).....	37
Untitled	39

Progression of recent public art project and history of public artworks	41
Articulating and incorporating the art design in the CoHealth building	42
Design.....	43
Concept for the glass wall waiting areas/courtyard.....	46
Perspective	51
Outcomes and what the exhibition achieved.....	54
My exhibition	55
It will take all of us	58
Moongarr-sugarbag.....	61
Gararr	63
Ancient Signatures.....	64
Karajarri Desert.....	66
Solidarity Statement.....	69
Wellness Dreaming.....	71
Chapter Three: Narratives from the Stolen Generations	74
Uncle Roy's story: a victim of the Stolen Generations.....	75
How I met Uncle Roy	75
Assimilation, 1957–70	79
The river.....	80
Aunty Isobel's story.....	86
Aunty Maureen Atkinson's story	92
Uncle Denis Atkinson's story.....	93
My story.....	94
Chapter Four: My art as a model for healing.....	99
What is healing through the arts?	99
Deep listening, art therapy and my approach	101
Scattered Tribes healing journey.....	101
Journey towards healing for Uncle Roy	102
The mural healing.....	103
Uncle Roy film project.....	105

Sculpture (my sculpture and public art)	107
Possum skin cloak making.....	107
Aunty Maureen and Uncle Denis	108
Chapter Five: Conclusion	110
A framework of art practices	112
Final remarks	113
Reference list	115
Other references not cited in written work	121
Appendix A: Framework’ Our Story: Finding Hope Beyond Grief.....	123
A proposed framework to run Creative Expression activities.....	123
Appendix B: Videos.....	126
Video 1	126
Video 2	126

List of figures

Fig. 1. Davey, Uncle William (Bardi man). [Carved boab nut]. [1970s]. Carved boab nut, 11 x 20cm. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig. 2. Scattered Tribes Art Group. [Possum skin cloak with designs and stories]. 2017. Possum skins, thread dyes, burn marks, 3 x 2.5m. Barkley Street Gallery, Kulin Nation, Footscray, Melbourne.

Fig.3. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri *Gunangundja Nganga- Emu Story*. 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60cm. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig. 4. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Nga Ngajana My Mine (Identity)*. 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 5' x 4'. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig. 5. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Untitled*. 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 5' x 4'. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig. 6. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Untitled*. 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 5' x 4'. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig.7. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches. *Wominjeka* and major public art commission on CoHealth building. 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 5' x 4'; Architectural render. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig.8. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches. Entry to the CoHealth Building. 2016. Digital Photograph. 11.15 x 16.51cm.

Fig.9. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches. Fish designs on the CoHealth Building. 2016. Digital Photograph. 12.38 x 16.51cm.

Fig.10. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches. Leaf designs on the CoHealth Building. 2016. Digital Photograph. 16.51 x 22.01cm.

Fig.11. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches. Water designs on the CoHealth Building. 2016. Digital Photograph. 12.38 x 16.51cm.

Fig.12. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches. Exterior view of the CoHealth Building. 2016. Digital Photograph. 16.48 x 16.48cm.

Fig.13. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). Interior view of the CoHealth Building with droplets, 2016. Digital Photograph. 12.38 x 16.51cm.

Fig.14. Ngardarb Francine Riches. [The artist during the installation of the exhibition]. 2017. Digital Photograph. 11 x 14cm.

Fig. 15. Ngardarb Francine Riches. Installation view of exhibition. 2017. Digital Photograph. 11 x 14cm.

Fig.16. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *It will take all of us*. 2016. Installation of printed sticker, 150 x 120cm. Braybrook Community Hub, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig.17. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). Reconciliation sticker floor design launch for Maribyrnong City Council. 2016. Digital Photograph, 12.38 x 16.51cm. Braybrook Community Hub, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig. 18. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Moongarr- sugarbag*. 1994. Gouache and charcoal on paper, 77 x 100cm. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig. 19. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Gararr*. 2001. Acrylic on canvas, 4'x 3'. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig. 20. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Ancient Signatures*. 1999. Acrylic and sand on canvas, 30 x 20cm. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig. 21. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Karajarri Desert*. 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 20cm. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig.22. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Solidarity Statement* (side one). 2016. Acrylic on MDF, 4' x 3'. Commissioned by Churches of Christ VIC/TAS.

Fig.23. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Solidarity Statement* (side two). 2017. Acrylic on MDF, 4' x 3'. Commissioned by Churches of Christ VIC/TAS.

Fig.24. Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Wellness Dreaming*, 2016. Triptych, Acrylic on canvas, 9' x 4'. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig.25. Uncle Roy and Ngardarb Riches with Uncle Roy's mural story, 2014. Digital image. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig. 26. Shepparton Interfaith Network, *The Flats*, 2015. Digital map.
<https://sheppartoninterfaith.org.au/?p=1038>.

Fig. 27. Phillip Noyce (Dir.) and Doris Pilkington Garimara (Martu) (story), *Rabbit-proof Fence*, 2002. Promotional image. Rotten Tomatoes website.
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rabbitproof_fence

Fig. 28. Phillip Noyce (Dir.) and Doris Pilkington Garimara (Martu) (story), *Rabbit-proof Fence*, 2002. Screenshot. Rotten Tomatoes website.
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rabbitproof_fence

<https://www.sbs.com.au/movies/article/2015/05/26/rabbit-proof-fence-cheat-sheet>

Fig. 29. State Archives and Records Authority of New South Wales, *Cootamundra Training Home for Girls – front view*, c. 1911–40. Digital Photograph.
https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/image/4346_a020_a020000148

Fig.30. Aunty Maureen and her story, 2020. Digital image. Atkinson Collection, Bangerang Nation, Cummeragunya.

Fig. 31. Grandmother's daughter Annie being sent away at the age of four, 1941. Copy of government documents, Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig. 32. Annie's removal documentation, 1940. Copy of government documents, Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Fig.33. Didgeridoo player with Uncle Roy's mural story, 2014. Artwork by Tony and Ngardarb Francine Riches. Acrylic paints on side of transportable tin building 7m x 2.5m in Melton Victoria. Digital image. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

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Shepparton Interfaith Network, <i>The Flats</i> , 2015. Digital map. https://sheppartoninterfaith.org.au/?p=1038 .	p. 81	N
Fig. 27 & 28. Phillip Noyce (Dir.) and Doris Pilkington Garimara (story), <i>Rabbit-proof Fence</i> , 2002. Promotional images and screenshots. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rabbitproof_fence	p. 82	N
Fig. 29. State Archives and Records Authority of New South Wales, <i>Cootamundra Training Home for Girls – front view</i> , c. 1911–40. Digital Photograph. https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/image/4346_a020_a020000148	p. 89	N
Fig. 30. Aunty Maureen Atkinson with her painting, 2020. Digital image. Artist’s Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.	p. 93	Y
Appendix B, Video 1. Arun’s Film	p.126	Y
Video 2. Uncle Roy’s memories		Y

Chapter One: Introduction and background

In this chapter I set out some background to the need for my practice, where it comes from, and what it sets out to do. I first set out some details about health and wellbeing issues in the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, focusing on the Kimberley region of Western Australia. I also address key issues beyond health and wellbeing and they include cultural challenges, 'kinship', healing and trauma, intergenerational trauma, Closing the Gap initiatives and Caring for Country initiatives. I then describe some approaches to addressing and supporting wellbeing in the Australian Aboriginal community.¹ Finally, I describe my approach and the significance of the study. The chapter ends with a brief synopsis of the remaining chapters.

Introduction

My Aboriginal name is Ngardarb and I am also known as Francine Riches. I am a Bardi/Jawi and Karajarri woman from the West Kimberley coast. My journey with art started when I was just a child, watching with great interest as my uncles crafted their artefacts and decorated themselves with ochres for ceremonial purposes. The cultural history behind these activities still intrigues me every time I paint or do sculpture.

Over the years, my artwork has included the use of watercolours or acrylics on canvas, and more recently the crafting of sculptures. I have been commissioned to do many public art installations using various media. I have also illustrated children's books. Looking back, I feel very blessed that I have had opportunities to create so many varied works of art. I have had the opportunity to use my art to work with young people in schools, with primary schoolchildren, women in prison, refugee groups, members of the Stolen Generations, remote communities and Elders' art groups. I have created several

¹ Throughout this thesis I use the term 'Aboriginal' to describe myself and my work. I use the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander', or 'Indigenous', to describe both nations as a whole. Most of the people or participants in my art practice are Aboriginal but I would like to acknowledge the Torres Strait Islander peoples by including them in my thesis as well.

installations in Melbourne's west, and have taught art and researched healing through art. Exhibitions of my work have been held both in Australia and internationally.

I began doing public art projects in the 1990s in Western Australia, and this became an important aspect of my art practice. My first public artwork collaboration began with a commission by the Western Australian Health Department and Multiplex construction company in Broome in 1996. This work included designing initial concepts that were incorporated in the structure of the new Health Campus in Broome. Other works for public art commissions in Perth involved redevelopment of parklands, involving stories of the Aboriginal people who once inhabited their lands there. Main Roads Western Australia commissioned works along new highways, which saw eight-metre steel sculptures of kangaroos erected in one area along the highway. Local governments also commissioned works that were scattered around the city of Perth.

Background

My first project started in the Kimberley.

In 2014–15 on a trip to the Kimberley with my husband, Tony, at the beginning of my PhD journey, I first started exploring the therapeutic effects of doing art. It began in a tin shed Aboriginal Church on an Aboriginal community named Bayula, 20 kilometres from the town of Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia. A group of 12 Aboriginal women came together to do some drawing. This facilitation of basic artmaking in a small Aboriginal community confirmed in me the need to do more research and explore the therapeutics of doing art. I saw firsthand the emotion that was produced with simple art materials like a piece of paper and crayons. On the concrete floor of this tin shed church, tears flowed as each woman shared her sad stories of heartache and trauma. It was here that I first discovered the anguish and suppressed trauma associated with the first recorded Kimberley suicide. The woman shared her great grief for the loss of her son through suicide. For 20 years she held on to this grief, not really understanding that art can bring about expression of the trauma she carried.

Many of the shared stories by those women were heartfelt and we all cried together.

This is where the idea for an art healing program was birthed. ‘Our Story: Finding Hope Beyond Grief’ was then developed (Appendix A). This project was later sponsored by the Anglican Deaconess Ministries in Sydney and through a joint Memorandum of Understanding with the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship (AEF), of which I am a member. Keren Masters – a clinical counsellor – and I came together and developed this project, which we are currently running as a pilot program. The members of the AEF Women’s Fellowship generously contributed their time, experiences and ideas to the design of the project. The focus of the pilot project was to address issues of loss, grief and trauma in a biblical-guarded healing outcome, through a combination of counselling, biblical understanding and art practices.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women – indeed, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – continue to experience profound loss, grief and trauma associated with their history and current experiences. There is a need to address multiple issues: on a personal level this may include family violence, substance abuse, removal of children into care, incarceration, suicide and unemployment. At a community level it includes experiences such as intergenerational grief and loss; dispossession of land, culture and language; Stolen Generations; racism; and legal exclusion. We placed these experiences of loss within a Christian theology with the ultimate hope that in the radical love and healing of Christ, women can experience a deeper, holistic healing that brings hope for the future (Anglican Deaconess Ministries 2016, 5).

In collaboration with Keren Masters, who contributed historical and clinical content on the Aboriginal experience of loss, grief and trauma in a biblical foundational context, I developed a healing method. Keren and I began holding workshops in the old tin shed church in Bayula in 2014–15. These workshops focused on women who had strong faith and were leaders in their own churches and communities.

My contribution to the workshop was based upon how I did my art and the materials I used. I talked about Creative Expression, which is a term I use to describe healing through the arts in this context. Through these activities we are caring for the whole

person in Jesus's name. Our goal is to be intentionally sharing with – rather than preaching to – women in need.

Churches do a lot of things other than hold church services. Some examples of services for people in need include homeless shelters, schools, sports teams or clubs, op shops and charities, hospitals and youth groups. The purpose of these activities is to reach out with the love of Christ by demonstrating care and compassion for the whole person.

Jesus left us an example that demonstrates this when he washed the disciples' feet (John 13:12). Feet washing might not seem very spiritual, but Jesus said, 'If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet' (John 13:12). Jesus was not preaching, praying or even talking. He was serving, and it was done to make other people's lives better by serving them. These sentiments are at the core of my process for healing through art.

Creative Expression is a great way to help people to slow down, open, share personal burdens, respond to advice or even commit to change. Some of the social benefits of activities of Creative Expression include making friends, networking and growing the community, and sharing information on other available support. Creative methods are focused on improving creative skills, but they have the whole person in mind and the art outcome is less important. Christians who offer to share their lives in the community in a non-judgmental way make it easier for their friends to come to church events or services and hear more about the goodness of God. Christians doing Creative Expression bring their knowledge of the true spiritual life, as revealed in the Bible, to serve others. Creative Expression can raise sensitive feelings and memories, so care needs to be taken that we do not claim to be operating a professional service of therapy; however, we do refer people on to appropriate services.

Cultural challenges

In discussing my approach to my research described in this thesis, it is also important to consider challenges I have come up against both as a researcher within my own tribe/clan and within university settings due to academic protocols and expectations. It has been challenging working with protocols within our cultural confines when doing fieldwork with my Elders and community members due, in part, to the significant

imperative to keep everyone's *Liyan* (heart, emotions) happy. Cultural mores that defined my research field trips back to country were automatically in play.

Even before I arrived back home, my other mother – my mum's sister – did the initial engagement with my senior Uncles and extended family. These people are the next generational knowledge holders who are the heads of our kinship structure. My generation is placed under them for now and we carry responsibilities within those confines. I was able to meet with my senior Uncles, Aunts and community people because of what my other mother organised. This can be challenging at times when ceremonies or sorry business is happening in the camps. I am at times restricted as to how and to whom I ask questions or what my questions are. This is where our language plays a large part in keeping us safe within our own protocols. In the past, not so much now, I would never walk in front of my senior Uncles or speak in a way that might be too direct. This keeps our *Liyan* happy when we all agree and work together to pass on our knowledge. This is where a researcher needs to appreciate and be informed that doing field trips for research can have limitations and challenges. One can appreciate the significance of rich dialogue that references my ancestors' history, heritage and experiences of family.

Kinship

I am now the knowledge holder of my people's history, heritage and experiences; I am the keeper of our ancient stories, some of which I can include in these pages. In Bardi we say, '*Jiiba Nganman Jawal*', which simply means, 'here I am putting down our story' (Bardi Milon-time).² It is important that the academic world understands and acknowledges the significance of my journey in this research within our cultural mores. My research represents two-way learning and the cultural significance of my research

² In this thesis I have used Chicago B style, 17th edition, however this style has been adapted to appropriately acknowledge and be respectful of my ancestors, my country, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations and people. This is done by acknowledging Nations, the cultural authority of Knowledge custodians and cultural understandings of time in language. Milon-time means a long time ago when our ancestors lived and roamed.

journey must be acknowledged. Together we can progress to the future, adapting new cultural settings and so forth. I am often reminded of how my grandfather and the other Elders in my tribe held statuses within the community that were earned. They were not given responsibilities lightly, they had to prove themselves to be called leaders, which is another ancient tradition.

Kinship in our culture is a governance structure so it is important to explain kinship because an understanding of kinship is central to everything we do and who we are, and it plays a significant part in our lives and our healing (Bardi Milon-time). In my 2014 Master's thesis (Riches 2014), I describe the kinship structure of the Bardi/Jawi in detail. I explain where I am automatically placed within my family structure.

It seems that most people think only of kinship back in the times of our ancestors. But in fact, it remains the very core of our family structural existence today (Riches 2014, 18). The inspiration to paint evolves around my identity as a Bardi/Jawi and Karajarri person. The stories I paint are echoes of the past, of my ancestors. These stories come to life again as I retell their ancient meaning. During my ancestors' era, kinship was very much embedded in our lives, unlike today, when the essence of kinship is unknown to many of my people. Despite this, our kinship remains alive: some of our tribes may not practice it as it was practised in ancient times, but it remains the very essence of our bonds that keep our family structures operating. In our modern world our kinship bonds may be challenged and, of course, there are added adjustments within the kinship laws due to current contexts. These changes tend to be accepted by the various tribes in accordance with their family traditions and mores.

Bardi kinship is based on the division of kin into two named generation levels (Bardi Milon-time). A man's own generation level (*djandu*) includes his actual classificatory siblings, first- and second-cousins, grandparents and grandchildren. The alternate level (*inara*) contains actual and classificatory kin in his parents' and children's generation levels (Bardi Milon-time; Robinson 1973). In other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes across Australia this may vary according to individual ancient laws. Some of these tribes have more than two kin divisions (Robinson 1973, 29).

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, our ancient laws filter down through the ages. Our ancestors were able to keep our sacred Lore intact for thousands of years through oral history, which we continue to benefit from in this modern changing society (Bardi Milon-time). Our kinship family law was and is the rock that enabled the continuity and survival of families when everything around them seemed to be crumbling. While the removal of children has fractured many families, just knowing where you came from has been able to strengthen those family ties to some degree. Stolen children who were not able to reconnect with their parents who had died while they were away were able to link up with their kinship groups that still existed back in country. The authenticity and systems of kinship bonds and structure are detailed further in Chapter Four.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, historically our cultural practices have involved holistic teachings that reinforce the whole health and wellbeing of our communities (Bardi Milon-time). Indeed, many generations ago our peoples were well aware of the importance of what has more recently been called the ‘social determinants of health’, which encompass learning, health, justice and economy (Carson et al. 2007). Kinship laws and structure are the foundations that established the boundaries that ensured the survival of our cultural knowledge in a continuing cycle spanning thousands of years.

As well as detailing past experiences, my art has been guided by the many connections and ideas that are further explored in this thesis. The continuation of relational working processes, started by our peoples, inspires me to continue to investigate best practices in my art, and to apply them to the different groups with whom I work. I describe these processes in a form that will enable others to introduce similar practices into their communities.

As a young Elder from the Bardi/Jawi community and a leader among the Aboriginal Christian communities across Australia, I carry and take my responsibilities seriously, as did my leaders and Elders before me. What drives my work is embedded deep within

my soul and it comes from who I am. ‘Who I am’ will unfold throughout my writing of this thesis and the interpretation of my artistic expression.

Healing and trauma

Research provides evidence of the impact of social justice issues, effects that lead to dysfunction in and dislocation of families. The declining health and wellbeing of our Aboriginal Nation across Australia over many generations is reflected in the national statistics that describe our peoples’ long-term suffering. One of the most significant issues that we currently face as a nation is the increase in youth suicides. These suicides reflect the significant proportion of mental health issues, the feelings of hopelessness and depression that are reported within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth population. Recent news reports reveal that in the six months since January 2019, 77 young people took their own lives (Shine, Tomlin and Collins 2019).

In the Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, 13 children and young people took their lives in less than four years (Shine, Tomlin and Collins 2019). The findings of Coroner Fogliani, who conducted a coronial investigation in Western Australia in 2019, were described in the ABC:

Western Australia’s coroner has described the deaths of more than a dozen young Indigenous people aged as young as 10 as ‘profoundly tragic, individually and collectively’. She went on to say that the deaths had been shaped by ‘the crushing effects of intergenerational trauma.’ (Shine, Tomlin and Collins 2019)

I must point out that even researchers like myself and others have to take precautions when looking back at historical traumas. I remember some years ago going through my own family documents, which was painfully hard to do. My family, like thousands of other Aboriginal families, was subject to strict and totalitarian law enforcement and experienced state control of their lives. Reliving my family’s trauma causes me much pain and stress.

There are several mainstream systems that can provide support for those who have suffered and continue to suffer from past trauma. However, the focus in this thesis is on

describing how traditional art practices can contribute to resolving some of these issues, and it describes how the development of culturally relevant art healing services have the potential to help my people heal from the atrocities of the past. In order to appreciate how art might assist in healing, one must first understand the impact of these atrocities on our health and wellbeing today and how these atrocities continue to be manifested through memories of the past that permeate daily living. In *Trauma Trails*, Judy Atkinson (2002, 24) states that:

Experiences of colonial violence are traumatic and that trauma, if unhealed, may compound, becoming cumulative in its impacts of individuals, families, and indeed whole communities and societies.

As a visual artist with many years of experience, I am positioned to verify that the process of practising art promotes a release for emotional trauma. It is interesting to note that within our Aboriginal communities, our people have always tended to refrain from using a lot of words, feeling more comfortable in silence and with hands-on activities. Aboriginal peoples also use body language as another form of communication.

When working in a group setting, I have often encouraged non-verbal art activities through my art practice. This enables participants to communicate through their artwork rather than the spoken voice, creating a silent non-verbal language. Additionally, for many in the Aboriginal world, we tend to feel more confident in non-verbal activities. This is perhaps because for many of us English is not our first language and we are required to 'swap' between our languages and English. Bardi people often refer to Aboriginal English as broken English. In parts of the East Kimberley and the Top End, it is widely known as Australian Kriol. In both instances, it is an adaptation of English.

The outcome of a piece of work done during healing through art is a person's unspoken language. It does not matter what the artwork looks like, the important thing is what the person gained from the process. From experience, this is where the healing starts to take place. What drives my work is encouraging people to understand their own grief and loss, putting it in its place and then moving towards resolving their traumas. This approach to healing comes from my cultural foundation and Christian faith and relevant

research on this topic. This belief underpins the wider field and practices of healing through art.

The body remembers. It remembers its injuries and traumas, but it also remembers its needs, its instinct to survive and to heal. (Elbrecht and Antcliff 2014, 28)

My experience of doing art with older people who have experienced childhood trauma revealed that years of trauma have somehow been suppressed. However, art expression creates opportunities for expression of those abuses. I am reminded of one of our Aunties who came to my art group back in 2011. Initially, she just wanted to sit and observe and after many weeks she slowly drew her story of being taken away from her family during the Stolen Generations years. This was truly amazing for me, especially when she revealed to us later that she kept what happened to her hidden inside of her for nearly 60 years. In *Healing Trauma with Guided Drawing*, Cornelia Elbrecht (2018, 87) refers to memories held in our bodies that hold us hostage and that can ‘gradually be down-regulated’. Aunty Isobel’s suppression of trauma is a classic example of how she held those memories in her body, which kept her hostage. Her trauma was also affecting her family and her children were always fearful, which prevented them from trusting people. Members of her family are still members of our church and it is clear to see that their mother’s trauma was down-regulation of their mother’s trauma.

This thesis emphasises the importance of continuing to use our art-based healing practices. It describes why it is important to preserve the knowledge of our Elders and maintain the practices that they used so many years ago to sustain and heal their people. The knowledge of our Elders provides us with methods of healing that create a culturally safe practice, that engage with the unique cultural context of participants. (Bardi Milon-time) The thesis also describes how I use the cultural practice of my people effectively within my own practice with my art groups. The thesis demonstrates the importance of the positive awareness of one’s cultural heritage, how it acts as a connection to the past and how it contributes to promoting health and wellbeing.

Background to intergenerational trauma

While there have been some improvements in the life expectancy and health of our Aboriginal people, significant disparities in health outcomes continue among our Aboriginal communities, despite living in a modern wealthy Western country (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018). Intergenerational trauma still ravages us since 1788, when our lands were invaded by the British colonisers and declared *terra nullius*; the sovereignty of our lands was never ceded. The land was actually a living, breathing landscape inhabited by more than three-quarters of a million people with more than 500 language groups representing different tribes and clans (Dudgeon et al. 2010, 26). This was and still is our homeland. Our ancestors lived in small extended family units and language groups were governed by complex kinship laws (Bardi Milon-time). In 1788, colonisation brought disharmony and dislocation to our ancestors as they were forced off their traditional lands and denied their traditional way of life. We are still seeing the effects of those days in our time. Atkinson (2002, 88) explains:

trauma trails [of the Stolen Generations] run across country and generations from original locations of violence as people moved away from the places of pain. These trauma trails carried fragmented, fractured people and families.

These are the very factors that influence and underpin my research as an Aboriginal woman who is a strong survivor of intergenerational trauma. My life story is no stranger to, and in part reflects, the atrocities that were imposed upon my ancestors, family and tribes of people in the Kimberley.

The impact of this trauma on the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of our people today is widely recognised. In *Social Determinants of Indigenous Health*, Carson et al. (2007) have reported on the long-term health impacts of the Indigenous experience of dispossession, colonial rule and racism. Their ground-breaking work with the help of Aboriginal health professionals and researchers brings to light the issues that affect our people, including history, racism, poverty, housing and policy.

It is important to understand the root causes of intergenerational trauma and how this plays a major part in our lives. The impact of colonisation and the colonisers' policies of segregation followed by assimilation continue to have an impact on my people today,

which is so often reflected in their art. Government policies were developed specifically to control and structure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives. Assimilation, one of the strategies used, had a significant impact on my story and that of my tribe. Our independence was taken away and the consequent negative impact on our wellbeing has had long-term consequences. Bardi/Jawi people were forcibly removed from their country. The following quote from my master's thesis describes the impact of and trauma resulting from these policies:

We did not anticipate history's ugliness that was thrust upon us. I was born into this situation that started to exist. Members of my family were stolen from Sunday Island years before I was born, because they were of mixed descent and the policies of the day made this eventuate. I was often hidden in the camps by my grandparents; to me it was just a game. (Riches 2014, 24)

My story continues in Chapter Three, with other narratives describing the Stolen Generations. My grandmother's daughter was taken away as a four-year-old because she was 'coloured' (Western Australian Government 1938). The images show written statements by the Sunday Island Missionary Superintendent and the Commissioner of Native Affairs of the Kimberley region of Western Australia. These statements were about the removal of Annie, my grandmother's daughter, from Sunday Island to Derby hospital, where she spent some time. It was then agreed by the Commissioner of Native Affairs to send her away to a government station called Moola Bulla near Halls Creek in the Kimberley. This process is further documented in the following:

They picked up all the half-caste kids from all over the east Kimberley area and the west Kimberley and put them all in that settlement ... They were picked up from all the cattle stations around this area, and even the towns, any half-caste kids. They didn't care much for the full blood, only for the half breed. Anyone that had a bit of colour was put in there. (Annual Report of Department of Aborigines/Natives Affairs 1954, cited in Rumley and Toussaint 1990, 94)

No dialogue was ever made with my grandmother regarding her daughter's future. No news or correspondence was given back to my grandmother regarding the whereabouts of her daughter. Her daughter simply vanished after she was taken from them on Sunday Island Mission. My grandmother often spoke about this to me and said that 'she

was taken like a rag doll without permission’, ‘they had guns’ (as told by my Grandmother Dolly Davey, 1990s, meaning the police who accompanied the Commissioner of Native Affairs; see Figure 31 and 32).

My people, the Bardi/Jawi, and many other inland tribes were forcefully removed through the assimilation policies made by the so-called Board of Protectors. Michael Robinson (1973, 240), in ‘Change and Adjustments among the Bardi People of Sunday Island’, writes that ‘Assimilation is considered only as a descriptive term to refer to a specific welfare policy which advocates the destruction of Aboriginal culture and the “Europeanization” of people of Aboriginal descent.’ Even after A. O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines, retired in 1940, his successors continued their harsh governance and control over our people (HREOC 1997, 137–140). The *Bringing Them Home* report (HREOC 1997, 88) – the report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families explains that ‘Following the founding of the Swan River Colony in 1829 relations between the British settlers and local Indigenous peoples in Western Australia became characterised by conflict.’

This was the beginning of the government/colonial atrocities against Aboriginal people in Western Australia. In other states and territories, approaches, policies, and practices were similar. The widely known Pinjarra Massacre was deeply disturbing. In 2018, I, along with several other women on a women’s conference, gathered at the memorial site of this horrific murderous place. We were taken there by one of the Elders from that area of Noongar country. The Elder paid homage to the memory of those who were killed there and for the takeover of their tribal country (Noongar, Time Immemorial/2018). Such violent government responses had a significant impact on stifling any response from the traditional landowners in seeking to regain their traditional lands, as the following quote describes – any opposition was simply killed off.

On the Swan and Canning Rivers all opposition by the Aborigines had ceased by 1832, while the Murray River tribe gave no further trouble after it had been decimated by a posse of settlers and soldiers in what became known as the battle of Pinjarra. (Biskup 1973, 7)

It is clearly seen through the *Bringing Them Home* report that policies were made into law for the purpose of taking over Aboriginal lives. Such policies began in 1837:

Following the report of the 1837 British Select Committee into the condition of 'natives' in all British colonies, protectors were appointed in Perth and York. By 1850 the protectors had become firmly aligned with the colonists against the Aboriginal population. So successful were they in securing the settlers' interests that the office of protector was abolished and not revived until 1886. In the interim police and magistrates were assigned the protective role. In reality settlers took the law into their own hands. (HREOC 1997, 88)

Such policies soon spread to the rest of Western Australia's north. By the 1860s, the colonisers' pastoral frontier had expanded like a blanket covering lands that were already inhabited and owned by the original Custodians. This takeover reached the Kimberley in the 1880s, encompassing large areas of traditional lands. Our lands were being taken away from us and we were being driven off our ancestral lands.

I must acknowledge that public outcry did move the British rulers in the treatment of Aboriginal people. This led to the appointments of a select committee to initially review and address the conflict and government response. However, those in power took the laws into their own hands and used their authority to create the laws to suit themselves and the non-Aboriginal population. Even religious mission stations such as our mission on Sunday Island, run by the United Aborigines Mission (UAM), had to abide by governmental rules and regulations.

During past conversations with old missionaries, I was told that the rations that were supplied to them for the purposes of the people were stringent and used more often to dictate their control of them and the people. In the case of our mission on Sunday Island, to assimilate us, the UAM was forced to support the governing authorities to move my tribe away from their tribal grounds, their homeland. This was done by ceasing all rations to the Island and placing immense pressure on the UAM to move the Bardi/Jawi people into Derby. This forced assimilation did not last too long. Our Bardi/Jawi Elders, with the help of a missionary friend, fought long and hard with the Native Welfare system (Drysdale and Durack 1974). In Western Australia, the Department of Native Welfare (1955-1972, previously Department of Native Affairs

1936-1954) was the government agency that was responsible for the forced assimilation. In the 1970s the Drysdale family who were former missionaries on Sunday Island funded the return of my people to Sunday Island with their own funds by selling their property in the Northern Territory, where they lived in their retirement. The people needed to convince the Native Welfare authorities that they were able to sustain themselves and their return to their tribal homeland. More of this story is told in ‘My story’ in Chapter Three.

Trauma and ugliness did have a significant impact on us as a tribe of people who were forced to move from our homeland. For one thing, most of our uncles’ and aunties’ generation had an abrupt halt to their continuity of tribal practice. This included cultural events and ceremonies. Most notable was the loss of speaking fluent Bardi language. For my generation, it was more significant. I was born in 1964 and most of my brothers, sisters, cousins and countrymen struggle to speak Bardi at all. We can only understand when someone speaks Bardi and we can say Bardi words here and there. However, like our Elders who resisted assimilation and found a way to go back home, we too can be resilient and relearn our language. The only health care available was that which had existed on the mission before it was forcibly closed down.

Despite these challenges, we began to set up the community of Ardyaloon in the 1970’s which is on the mainland of Western Australia near Sunday Island. Our cultural events resumed and life went on again for us, even our church services continued on the beach meeting place. So, while previous events in our lives had caused so much trauma, returning to our homelands was healing. It was not the same as living back on the Islands and on the mission, but we were all together as a tribe resuming our way of life and preserving our cultural continuity.

Closing the Gap initiatives

To understand approaches to supporting wellbeing in our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the ‘whole story’ must be described. In 2005, the *Social Justice Report* identified the disparities that existed between Aboriginal people and other Australians’ life expectancy, child and infant mortality rates, literacy and numeracy, school completion, and access to training and jobs (Australian Human Rights

Commission 2005). This was preceded by the 2004-2005 report Indigenous Languages and Culture in Northern Territory Schools and 2007 Northern Territory inquiry report, Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle; “Little Children are Sacred”. In 2008, the federal government designed the *Closing the Gap* policy to ‘reduce disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with respect to life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, educational achievement, and employment outcomes’ and formally committed to achieving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equality within 25 years (COAG 2009, 5). In 2018, the Council of Australian Governments refreshed its strategy to focus on ‘community-led strength-based’ empowerment and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (COAG 2018).

Targets were put in place to monitor these commitments and gaps. The targets set by COAG to monitor improvements in the health and wellbeing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population were as follows:

- close the gap in life expectancy within a generation
- halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade
- ensure all Indigenous four-year-old children in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years
- halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade
- halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020
- halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade. (COAG 2009, 8)

Sadly, the goals have not been achieved in the ten years following the introduction of the Closing the Gap initiative (Brennan 2017). Former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared that the ‘Gap’ was widening, that ‘Some of the targets covering health, education and employment have stagnated and others are going backwards’ (Brennan 2017).

In 2013, in the Kimberley, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide

Prevention Strategy was rolled out in response to the increasing numbers of suicides still occurring in remote communities; the objective of the strategy was to reduce the

cause, prevalence and impact of suicide on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, their families and communities (Australian Government 2013, 8). Anecdotal evidence from my recent discussions with community members suggests that the program has not been effective.

Attempts to close these gaps in the social determinants involve a continual cycle of challenges, and new approaches are needed to address both the social determinants of health and ill health in Australia. This is where I believe that a focus on utilising the arts, whether visual, performing or music, deserves more attention. In Chapter Four, where I outline my art as a model for healing, I address the findings that identify art as an important tool that can assist in healing those suffering trauma: ‘Wherever the soul is in need, art presents itself as a resourceful healer’ (McNiff 2004, 5).

Different approaches are clearly needed in addressing wellbeing and trauma in Aboriginal communities and there are many projects initiated by Aboriginal people. In the following sections of Chapter One, I outline some of these approaches. I first look at the practices of old people (song, language and kinship), then current Caring for Country programs. I also include my personal faith-based influences entwined with my cultural values.

Spirituality and other activities of wellbeing

Atkinson (2002, 160) refers to songs as vehicles for expression of built-up trauma. In our many Aboriginal cultures, singing has always been associated with storytelling and as an expression for learning, passing on deep spiritual meanings and expressing grief and pain. One example is the Ngarinyin/Wunambal tribe, who use the practice of *junba* to contribute to health and wellbeing in their community (Treloyn and Martin 2014).

Ngarinyin/Wunambal Elder singer Matthew Dembal Martin, from the northern Kimberley, has discussed how the practice of *junba* dancing and singing contributes to the wellbeing of country.

Across Australia all tribes have had singing and dancing practices that have attributed to health and wellbeing. It is the expression of storytelling or laying down the lore to

young men going through the tribal lore. The passing on of ancient knowledge was part of the ceremonies. This was usually done by dancing or singing it. In Western art therapy, artistic expression encompasses all of these practices.

Visual art is very much used as a tool as well. In my experience as a visual artist, I have found that painting puts you into your own world where you are free to be creative.

Many of my clients who have attended my art classes have said that they have felt relief and relaxation after doing art. It is not about what the actual art piece turns out to be but the moments of being in that space. McNiff (2019, 162–165) claims that ‘We must hold steady in the belief that people can relate to these healing aspects of art directly and insightfully; that it communicates across disciplines, concepts, cultures, languages, and various divides.’ McNiff found that the most therapeutic work was done within groups and communities, with his supervisor, a psychiatrist, sensing the same thing.

Throughout this thesis I refer to my Christian beliefs, which require some explanation. To me and many other Aboriginal people across Australia, receiving the teachings of Christ and becoming Christians has allowed us to find hope and peace deep down when the world around us was crumbling (Korff 2019). It has changed us spiritually in a way that one cannot really understand until it happens to them. It is not just the religion, but a walk of faith and a real relationship with God. It is like a rebirth, which is why we often refer to it as being born again spiritually. That is why it is quite important to detail how my faith plays a large part in who I am and why it is reflected in my paintings and sculpture.

This thesis argues that healing needs to take place from the traumas and atrocities of the past that have filtered down through the ages as intergenerational trauma. I include my faith journey as one of those tools that has given me healing and a hope for the future. Others, like Stan Grant, have similar perspectives. Stan Grant, a Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi author, broadcaster and journalist, describes the impact of Christianity on his family as ‘enormous’, but in a positive way:

They embraced it. It was a wonderful adaptation and innovation on our traditional society. It allowed them to regather a spiritual sense of themselves after the devastation of the frontier [wars] ... It also gave them a strong moral compass and a survival mechanism. (Grant, cited in Law 2019)

Grant's family was first exposed to Christianity on the missions in outback New South Wales, where many were forced to live after losing their traditional lands (Law 2019).

Christianity was embraced by many Aboriginal tribes because many were forced to live in missions as their tribal lands became inhabited by settlers and the government wanted to monitor their movements. There is controversy over missions forcing Christianity upon the people, which has happened in the past. People knew that it was a condition of most missions to listen to the Christian teaching. If you refused, you could be killed for just roaming in your country, living your life. Early settlers or pastoralists usually influenced the government to control the people while they took over the land. The Bardi/Jawi saw this differently: Christianity may have been forced upon them, but they saw beyond the natural world and linked it to the spiritual. So, it is important for me to elaborate a bit further on these statements. There are many debates that present an opposing view, but this is my belief and my viewpoint, which shapes who I am.

All Aboriginal tribes believe there is a higher big spirit (God); however, many have the view that God was unreachable prior to the arrival of Christianity (Bardi, Senior Lore Man, Moochoo Davey, Milon Jawal, conversation with Ngardarb Riches).³ When scripture or God's word through the Bible came, the old people would say, 'We know now we can speak to him.' My grandparents and old people from my Bardi/Jawi tribe would often speak about this (Riches 2014, 44).

For Bardi/Jawi people, songs and dance from ceremonies are sacred and as a Bardi/Jawi woman, it is forbidden for me to speak of such things (Bardi Milon Jawal). In and around the camps *ilma* is danced and sung but still belongs to the men folk and certain older woman can participate. My upbringing was a mixture of cultural practices with Christian influences, which came from the time when Sidney Hadley (an ex-pearling boss) converted and started the mission station to help make amends to the people for his previous treacherous dealings with the Bard/Jawi people. His remorse was then shown through the protection of the women and children from the violence and hardship

³ Milon Jawal refers to long time ago message or talk by our ancestors

related to the pearling industry. Bardi people saw the difference in his life – specifically, his remorse after having been such a terrible man. This played a role in Bardi/Jawi people taking on Christianity. He tried to shield people and supported them to continue to practise language and culture, before returning to England in the early 1920s. The mission eventually became the United Aborigines Mission. Music was a part of the mission, both hymns and choruses, and what the old people sang (Riches 2014, 36–37).

When the government cut off rations and funding in the 1950s as part of the assimilation policy, my mum and the whole tribe had to move to the Derby Reserve, with many other tribes, including Nyigina and inland tribes. From a young age, I remember, we tried to live back on Sunday Island, which is on the King Sound on the islands of the Dampier Archipelago. But it was hard, and my family and Elders decided to start the community at Ardyaloon – One Arm Point. We grew up on the beach there, we had church services, my grandfather sometimes preached, and we continued cultural practices. I remember when I was a little girl, my uncle would play hymns on the piano accordion and it was soothing. I was raised singing hymns and with bible stories as well. I discuss these rich foundations, which helped our wellbeing and are the bases of my healing through art approach, further in Chapter Four.

Other tribes use choir, language and hymns as part of their health and wellbeing practices in other parts of Australia, such as the Ernabella choir and others in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands (see Dunbar Hall and Gibson 2004, 42–45). Singing or songs are also used for wellbeing in many other Indigenous cultures of the world, particularly in the African nations. I refer to Gregory Barz and Judah M. Cohen's (2011) book *The Culture of AIDS in Africa: Hope and Healing through the Arts in Africa*:

[By investigating how music is used] we aim to expand that conversation, showing in this volume the many pathways [through] which music and other expressive art forms gained prominence in Africa as agents for addressing HIV and AIDS, helping individuals and communities address the local and international conversations coursing through their lives in the process. (Barz and Cohen 2011, 5)

It would be interesting to correlate similarities between our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander singing and songs, and the arts more broadly, with other Indigenous nations mentioned with regards to health and wellbeing. I have mentioned previously that dancing and singing have always been a means of expression for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as has storytelling or passing on ancient knowledge.

Another key to wellbeing is language and its use to maintain relationships and society. The old people taught us language and the importance of embedding it into our lives. Our language is the heart of who we are, and our kinship governance is controlled by our language (Bardi Milon Jawal). The language acts as our ‘parent’, giving us permission to live within our cultural compound. For example, my Bardi/Jawi language places me in my inherited position and dictates the way I am allowed to speak to certain members of my tribe. Had I had daughters who married someone from our tribe, who was culturally right for them, our tribal lore would not allow me to speak directly to my son-in-law and I could only communicate with him through my daughter (Bardi Milon-time-Barnanggarr).⁴ This happens also with my nieces and their husbands and partners. So, our relationships are centred on our language, which dictates our mores. In the old culture, a mother-in-law would not be allowed to show her face to her daughter’s husband and vice versa – the son-in-law would hide his face as well.

When tribes were stripped of their languages and forbidden to use the language, it caused catastrophic damage to the oral history practices and the continuity of culture. Thankfully, Bardi was not wiped out, which is why I can also speak my language. Unfortunately, there are several tribes whose languages have been lost. There were possibly 700 distinct language groups in Australia prior to European colonisation. Unfortunately, many of these languages have been lost. In 2016, the Census of Population and Housing identified that a total of 150 Australian Indigenous languages were currently spoken in homes (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016).

⁴ Bardi Milon-time-Barnanggarr refers to long time ago and now or current. For further discussion of the Bardi language, see Aklif 1999.

Detriments to health and wellbeing due to loss of language have been reported and include:

- engagement in high-risk alcohol consumption and illicit substance use
- more likely to be a victim of physical violence
- more likely to experience risk factors associated with poor wellbeing.

(Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011)

Loss of language has been a significant consequence of colonisation and the associated dispossession. Languages were lost and buried in time. Recent work has been undertaken to revive some of the languages and this revival has brought life back to tribes that had lost their languages. One example is the Barngarla language in South Australia, where a project to revive language has recently been undertaken by BLAC (Barngarla Language Advisory Committee) and Ghil'ad Zuckerman at The University of Adelaide. In 2016, BLAC and Zuckerman launched the Barngarla Dictionary App, as a means to ensure that the language is accessible to generations to come. The Barngarla people are from the Port Augusta area north of Adelaide. Some of these families are personal friends of mine and I have followed their journey with interest. According to an article that was part of the SBS network program (Blanco 2017):

A group of linguists and health researchers in South Australia hope to take these findings into new territory, by establishing a correlation between language 'reclamation' or 'resurrection' and the wellbeing of the Barngarla people.

'The hypothesis is that language reclamation results in mental health empowerment,' explains ... Zuckermann, Chair of Linguistics and Endangered Languages at the University of Adelaide

...

Six years ago ... Zuckermann decided to find a specific language and a specific community, and ask them if they would be interested in reclaiming their 'sleeping beauty' or their 'dreaming beauty', the term he used to refer to a language 'killed by colonization'. Since then, he's spent years reviving and teaching Barngarla, a language that was widely spoken until the 1960s in various Aboriginal communities across the Eyre Peninsular, but died as a result of the Stolen Generations.

[Zuckermann said] ‘I asked them, would you like to reclaim your language? They said, ‘we’ve been waiting for you for 50 years.

Caring for Country programs: the Bardi/Jawi Rangers

Recent research demonstrates measurable links between country and health, particularly in Caring for Country programs, across Australia (Townsend, Phillips and Aldous 2009; Burgess et al. 2009).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders may move to another place, state or even another country. However, we belong to our tribal lands. Our spirit and soul is linked to the land. Caring for country is deeply embedded into our souls. The land is linked to our heritage, given to us by our Creator (God) (Bardi Milon-time). Every tribe has a responsibility in tending and caring for the land. Our lands were stolen by the Crown of England and land titles and deeds were offered to early settlers. To this day many of our people do not own their country on paper but the country itself owns us. We belong to the land; that is why we love it and have cared for it in so many ways for millennia to this day. I truly believe that the land was given to us divinely. We as Aboriginal people know how to look after country! The author of *Pastor Doug*, Mavis Thorpe Clark (1972, 4), comments on the balance with nature that the Aboriginal people possess:

Anthropology was a little-known science in those days. Even some of the early Government Protectors, after twenty years work among the Aborigines, were only vaguely aware of the complex and highly developed culture which governed the Aborigines from birth to death.

The Bardi/Jawi ranger program, administered by the Kimberley Land Council, is a classic example of caring for country:

Dedicated in 2013, the beautiful Bardi Jawi Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) is located 160 kilometres north of Broome. Surrounded by sea on three sides, it covers 126,990 hectares of land and sea country. Its Traditional Owners are saltwater people from six coastal clan groups who are based in three communities: Djarindjin, Lombadina, and Ardyaloon (One Arm Point). The Bardi Jawi name comes from two language dialects, Bardi from the mainland and Jawi from Iwany (Sunday Island). (National Indigenous Australians Agency n.d.)

This ranger program has impacted many Aboriginal people in its tribal boundaries. The Bardi/Jawi Indigenous ranger program enables community people to make careers from caring for country. We can blend our inherited knowledge of caring for country with modern compliance and equipment to monitor outcomes. One example is caring for the sea animals by using modern tracking systems placed on animals such as turtles and dugongs. There is also bushfire-controlled burning. This is not new to our rangers – our ancestors did back-burn all the time. I remember times when I helped my grandparents burn off sections of areas where we camped during our nomadic life. This encouraged new growth that was necessary. By working to care for country, the wellbeing of the workers, and their families, is clearly noticeable. There is satisfaction knowing that when we care for country, country cares for us. It is the same for language preservation. In Chapter two and Four, I explain in detail about native honeybees and their links to cultural learning and its metaphoric symbolism to human relationships through listening.

Chapter synopsis

My PhD has two components: my artwork and my thesis.

In my artwork, my method is to explore the many ways we can apply art in its various mediums. This may include any art making, with its huge potential to create a masterpiece or just scribbly lines or working with colours. I use my artwork and art practice to demonstrate how art can contribute to healing. While I reflect upon Western styles of healing, my own artistic journey and related stories and connection to my cultural heritage as an Aboriginal woman is the structural foundation of this thesis. I am evoking my being as a strong Aboriginal woman using both my cultural lens and my Christian lens to describe my art, which I invite the readers to consider as they view and read my work.

Throughout my thesis I refer to existing projects that I am currently undertaking in my own community of Ardyaloon (One Arm Point) and my current work in inner city Melbourne. This thesis consists of five chapters. Here I provide a brief summary of their contents.

In this first chapter (Chapter One) I have provided an introduction and background to the work and thesis, introducing me and positioning me within this thesis as a strong Bardi/Jawi woman, setting out the historical underpinnings for the imperative for healing within my People, its cultural foundations, and its significance for the health and wellbeing of my People .

Chapter Two ('My artistic practice') takes the reader on a journey, commencing with the establishment of my art practice, describing the many opportunities that came with it. In particular I describe in detail in 'Healing through Kinship' initiative and the Scattered Tribes Art Group

As a Bardi/Jawi artist, my work is a combination of my own journey and an exploration and discovery of finer ways of expression. During my childhood, my uncle's artwork inspired me so much that I took that desire further and became a visual artist myself and started painting our stories and lifestyle. Later I moved into other genres like sculptures, public artworks and illustrating children's books.

My ethical framework evolves from my cultural heritage. An ethics application was accepted by the University of Melbourne which was to do with using personal stories by the elders that I have worked with and are mentioned in this thesis. Establishing my practice as a visual artist over the years has the natural affinity to the foundations of my people and how I was raised within the confines of our kinship laws. An automatic tendency wills us to survive and preserve the very essence of who we are, and who we are is not just about individualistic connotations but also our identity as a whole tribe. Our ancestors preserved our cultural heritage through oral history with these same principles.

This chapter also explores and features my own painting styles and imagery and my own use of various techniques. Each painting comes with double meaning, retelling cultural events or history and linking these paintings to my biblical faith. Foundations of my art practice are also set out in this chapter.

I describe the background to the CoHealth initiative which is an important example of the collaborative process undertaken to develop this important art installation.

One of the examples I discuss is how, in 2015, I had the rare opportunity to reclaim one of my uncle's carved boab nuts, which I actually saw him carve back in the early 1970s. My aunty (my mum's sister, who I also call mum) married a Victorian. Her husband's brother, who visited in the 1970s, was given this boab nut as a gift from my artist uncle. I was totally amazed when I was given back the boab nut, which was still in good condition, and I remembered the carvings.



Fig. 1: Davey, Uncle William (Bardi man). [Carved boab nut]. [1970s]. Carved boab nut, 11 x 20cm. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Chapter Three ('Narratives from the Stolen Generations') details what happened to the children (now Elders) who were stolen or taken away from their family. I really feel that just talking or writing about the Stolen Generations is not enough and one does not

really get the full picture of the events that took place. So, what I have done in this chapter is to turn Uncle Roy's story into a short narrative. I have also included the stories of three other Elders (to a lesser extent): Auntie Isobel, Auntie Maureen Atkinson and Uncle Denis Atkinson. I have also told my story which provides a further context to my art practice. Participants in this project have their stories mentioned, but not in the same way as Uncle Roy. References from various sources reveal the true extent of the atrocities that took place.

Chapter Four ('My art as a model for healing') explores the deepening of my own approach towards healing through art, through an account of how healing took place in the context of several art groups and projects that I have run. The arts practices include possum skin cloak making, painting participants' stories/journeys, digital expression, photography and reclaiming language to heal the past.

My approach comes from my experience of working with art groups. Art groups are often focused on improving art skills, which is but one component of the practice of art. However, healing through the arts incorporates and involves the 'whole' person, their experiences and inner selves. The actual art piece, therefore, is less important. It is the process that occurs while making art that enables the healing to take place. When we heal ourselves, we bring back resilience.

Chapter Five (Conclusion) summarises the practice of healing through the arts, using my art practice as the focus. It reiterates the importance of the use of methods of art practice to promote healing that is designed through respecting and understanding Aboriginal culture and history. The drastic casualties from intergenerational trauma are exposed by naming it for what it is. I explain ways of navigating through those troubled experiences towards better outcomes. The underlying driver of my arguments is born from a deep desire to see healing take place within communities. I suggest further approaches and recommend art practices to continue the potential for communities and individuals to heal through art.

Chapter Two: My artistic practice

This chapter describes the artworks that constitute the creative component of my thesis. I describe the makeup of, and development towards, the 2017 exhibition *Healing Through Kinship* – an exhibition of my paintings and my work with the Scattered Tribes Art Group. One of the activities of the Scattered Tribes Art Group was the creation of a possum skin cloak. I explain more about the work of, and collaborations with, the Scattered Tribes Art Group further in this chapter.

The *Healing Through Kinship* exhibition reflected significant personal creative output, while my activities with the art group enabled me to test out my theories on healing through art using practice-based research. There were four main components to the exhibition: my paintings, the making of the possum skin cloak, photography of participants' activity and the personal portraits. Each painting has a story to tell. The imagery, colours and symbols are part of what allows our hearts to heal. It was important to collaborate with Arun Munoz an established photographic artist who comes from a Colombian background. His role was to capture every moment of the art classes from beginning to end on his camera. The collaboration worked to affirm and conceptualise the importance of healing through the arts and its reflection through another person's lens. Arun's work with me was amazingly valuable, as he is a gifted artist with his camera. He was able to capture every creative and emotional setting while we created the possum skin cloak and art images imprinted on the cloak. His part in this project was to take portraits of the members of the art group together and individually, capturing their expressions as they did their art.

Also discussed in this chapter is the art designs featured on the new CoHealth building in Footscray. The development and conceptual integration of artwork throughout the building is explained systematically, working with the building engineers and architectural designers from start to finish. I describe the progression from the initial developmental design stages to the collaboration with the architectural and building teams. I also note that my husband, Tony Riches, worked closely with me throughout the whole commission work. It is important to acknowledge Tony in this particular work as he provided both a tradesman's perspective and an artistic background, enabling the project to negotiate both aspects.

The *Healing Through Kinship* exhibition had four distinct components:

- group activities around the making of the possum skin cloak
- photographic images capturing the making of the cloak and the silent emotions
- individual photographic images taken to express group members' self-identification
- my own works of art portraying my practice.

The beginnings of the Scattered Tribes Art Group

The Scattered Tribes Art Group began in 2010 while I was employed by Western Region Health, which subsequently merged with two other community health organisations to become CoHealth. My work assignment as an Aboriginal Health Worker with another nurse colleague was to start initial engagements with the local Koori people around Footscray, Braybrook and surrounding neighbourhoods. CoHealth wanted to set up culturally competent clinics for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the local areas. We decided to start up an arts group, which operated from the Barkley Street Gallery in Footscray, which CoHealth already used for multicultural activities associated with the arts. After the first few months, we were encouraged to see many local Elders and Koori people coming to the gallery. It became a bridge linking them to essential services at CoHealth. This is where lives began to transform, particularly for survivors of the Stolen Generations.

Initial ideas for my current research were born from those early days practising my art with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The art activity grew significantly during these years and many people from the Koori communities benefitted from the services provided by CoHealth, and this work continues today. Currently, we have a cohort of Aboriginal workers who continue this essential health work.

The name Scattered Tribes was conceived when we began to take our Elders back to country. One of these visits was to Coranderrk, a former mission in Healesville, Victoria, where many Kulin Nations members were forced to live because of early settlers and government policies. Shirley W. Wiencke (1984, 49) writes in her book, *When the Wattles Bloom Again*, 'The Board was compelled to search further for suitable

land, but there had recently been intensive settlement in the area, and no farmer wanted native neighbours.’

Wiencke (1984, 55–57) gives a detailed account of the first settlement at Coranderrk, which was established in 1864 and included many from the five Kulin Nations. On our visits, we often went to the old cemetery to pay our respects to the people of the past. There is a memorial tombstone inscribed with the words ‘Scattered Tribes’, which is a memorial of the number of Kulin people who died there. This caught our attention and as we were all from many tribes, including interstate, it seemed fitting for our art group to be named ‘Scattered Tribes’.

The Stolen Generations, legislation and intergenerational traumas

My research explores how healing can begin to happen through art, in lives traumatised by past injustices experienced by our people through colonisation and the removal of children from their families. Empathy is one way to best understand those hurts, as it is about entering into another person’s life to best understand their stories or journey through life. Art therapy or participation in creative therapies helps people to own their space and express themselves easily. I have intentionally brought together my art practice, the group art activities and archival material to give the reader a clearer picture of why I am doing this research and how doing art can bring about healing.

With my Elders’ art group, we needed to reflect on when these intergenerational traumas began to unfold for our participating Elders. In 1955, the Victorian police were given powers to take children actively and forcibly from their families under the so-called ‘child welfare law’ (McLean and Parliament of Victoria 1957). The ripple effects of intergenerational trauma continue to linger in the lives of our Aboriginal families across Australia.

I recall the day I accompanied my grandmother to a hearing that was taking place in Broome, Western Australia, during the mid-1990s for those people who had been stolen or families of the stolen children who had passed on. It was the first of many hearings that started to take place for the Stolen Generations. Even though my grandmother did not choose to speak up at the hearing, she started to tell me more of her experience,

which was when her eldest daughter was taken away when she was only four years old. (Figures 31 & 32) The trauma that started to engulf me during that time was horrendous and I became physically ill many years later. This was a real example of how intergenerational trauma is handed down to subsequent generations. What enabled me to heal through this time was my faith in God, my art practice and valuing family relationships. This personal experience contributed to my belief in the healing power of the arts. The experience I had with my grandmother's trauma has helped me to understand and recognise the character of intergenerational trauma and to recognise ways to heal from this trauma.

Many of our Elders from Victoria told of their horrific experiences of being stolen in the 1950s. Chapter Three of this thesis gives a further detailed account of these experiences and a special narrative of Uncle Roy's story and the healing journey we undertook with him through the arts program. The traumas of the past were further compounded due to the *Aborigines Act 1928* (VIC). But we know, as Aboriginal people, that these wrongdoings really began in 1788, upon invasion of our country. However, that is a vast topic that cannot be covered in this thesis, so I will focus on more recent events.

In December 1955, the Victorian Premier appointed the retired Chief Stipendiary Magistrate Charles McLean to review existing policy towards the state's 'Aborigines', and to recommend policy changes (McLean and Parliament of Victoria 1957). McLean's report led to legislation, which in 1957 established an Aborigines Welfare Board, which presided over Aboriginal affairs until 1967 (McLean and Parliament of Victoria 1957). According to McLean's commissioned report to the government, 'On these two areas [at Mooroopna] live about 59 adults and 107 children, in most squalid conditions ... many of the children are dirty, undernourished and neglected' (cited in HREOC 1997, n.p.). One of the Elders who is mentioned in my thesis was actually one of the children that McLean saw and made judgments about. His story is part of my narratives of the Stolen Generations in Chapter Three.

Through the regulations of the *Native Welfare Act 1957*, Victoria established a board 'to promote the moral, intellectual and physical welfare of aborigines [sic] with a view to their assimilation in the general community' ((McLean and Parliament of Victoria 1957, 491). History tells us that most of McLean's recommendations were reflected in the

ensuing *Aborigines Act 1957* (McLean and Parliament of Victoria 1957, 6–7). The *Bringing Them Home* report referred to the appointment of McLean and the petitioning of the Aborigines Advancement League to McLean, expressing fears for the physical and cultural extinction of Aboriginal people and advocating self-government for the communities. It recorded that McLean rejected these claims and recommended, instead, a ‘helpful but firm policy of assimilation’ (McLean and Parliament of Victoria 1957, 14). The *Bringing Them Home* report by the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families was released in April 1997 (HREOC 1997). The Victorian Elders of the Scattered Tribes Art Group were affected by this damaging history and many experienced the most horrific abuse at the hands of those who worked for the government. The report also details the assimilation policy’s destructive process with excuses for why this happened (HREOC 1997, 368).

Considering these many past injustices, my people have lasting and deep hurts and trauma that need to be expressed. My work with Scattered Tribes Art Group enabled the healing process to begin as the group explored their inner feelings and trauma, expressing their hurt through their artwork. The following section describes the art activities and the making of the possum skin cloak as examples of how the art group began their healing through their art.

Aboriginal people from various corners of Australia come together in our Scattered Tribes Art Group. This is a unique space that enabled a diverse group to come together, to feel each other’s hurts and express them all together as one. The variations of their experiences and how their trauma was expressed was significant. There were individuals who were members of the Stolen Generations who expressed how their trauma was transferred between generations. Some people had significant chronic and potentially life-threatening health issues. There were those who were experiencing domestic abuse. The one common element shared between the group was the impact of the racism that they had experienced as Aboriginal people. Our work, which demonstrated the use of the creative arts to promote healing, was celebrated at the opening of the exhibition. The exhibition ran through National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week, making it a double celebration for us all. NAIDOC Week is a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander week of

celebration that includes many culturally based projects that celebrate our culture, heritage and identity.

The significance of a possum skin cloak

Once an everyday item for Aboriginal people in south-eastern Australia, possum skin cloaks were worn for warmth and were used as baby carriers, coverings at night, drums in ceremony and for burial. Incised and painted with ochre, possum skin cloaks also mapped the identity of their owner, holding stories of clan and country. Today, possum skin cloaks are of continuing importance to Aboriginal people across the south-east of Australia, with new uses and contemporary ways of making. Worn from a young age, cloaks started out small, with a few skins sewn together to wrap a baby. Over time, more skins were added so that as a person grew, their cloaks grew with them (AIATSIS 2016–17).

Making the possum skin cloak

The making of the cloak brought community together. We invited photographer Arun Munoz to capture moments of emotions and energies while making the cloak. The possum skins had to be ordered from New Zealand as possums are protected here in Australia. We ordered 40 skins, which had to be sewn together by strong twines and large needles. After the cloak was made, individuals in the art group did their own special emblem or totem, representing their story. We drew the designs, then painted the cloak. The attached Video 1 (Appendix B) shows the making of the cloak from start to finish. The personal photographs captured what participants wanted to reveal of themselves. This was a special moment where people felt proud of their Aboriginal heritage and this project certainly enabled this to occur. The activity gave a sense of belonging and security as individuals explored their own heritage. This is where finding yourself within your kinship family structure brings about healing. Projects like these are the beginnings of helping our people to start healing. The cloak was made several years ago with more of our Aboriginal Elders but, sadly, some of them have now left us and passed on.



Fig. 2: Scattered Tribes Art Group. [Possum skin cloak with designs and stories]. 2017. Possum skins, thread dyes, burn marks, 3 x 2.5m. Barkley Street Gallery, Kulin Nation, Footscray, Melbourne.

In 2017 we made a second cloak; the second cloak had a mixture of younger members of our people together with some of the same Elders who worked on the first cloak. This was a two-part project: part one was making the cloak and the other was using modern photography to capture those special emotions. The surrounding parkland and bush at the Pipe Makers Park in Maribyrnong, an outer suburb of Melbourne, added a sense of tranquillity and the stillness to quieten our souls and the freedom to express our emotions easily and safely.

We welcomed Arun Munoz to work with us; he is a renowned photographer with a dance, choreographic and design background. He comes from a large family of strong women who have had a deep impact on his life. These women have manifested in his creative work using archetypal entities of light, shadows, hopes, fears, desires, and frustrations. Earlier in 2017, Arun visited our Scattered Tribes Art Group and immediately connected with our cause for healing, exploring different methods towards achieving that goal. He has a rich cultural and social conscience and a passion for understanding the spectrum of the human condition, something that has been the underpinning fabric of his creative work. Arun was a great person to work with in this project. He captured each of our special moments while making the cloak. Arun

specialises in creating images that challenge creative work, revealing what is encrypted in the human landscape. Arun's work can be seen in the attached video of our cloak-making project (Appendix B). This was the making of the second cloak in 2017, the first cloak we made in 2015 and was not filmed.

My paintings in the exhibition

It is important to mention here that the following paintings are my own works. I have used my art, and particularly these artworks, to retell ancient stories of my ancestors and my own journey as an artist. Each painting retells my lived experiences and those of my family. I am also including for each painting an added iconography symbolism that relates to my Christian faith. Ancient stories and meaning are substantial core values of each piece of work and adding the iconography to each piece is like revealing another side of my person – but something that has always existed throughout my life: my Christian faith existing side by side with my culture and ancestral lore.

Gunangundja Nganga- Emu Story



Fig. 3: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Gunangundja Nganga-Emu Story*. 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60cm. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

This story comes from the mid-Western Australian bush. The Yamaji Elders in Carnarvon told stories about the seasons of the emu. They would say, 'when you see the emu on a nest it is usually the male sitting on the nest after it came back from walk about' (Yamaji, Time Immemorial). The female leaves the nest after she lays the eggs and the male comes back to look after them until they hatch and turn to little chicks. The painting depicts this story and the many colours of the land. Yamaji people would also say, 'when the caterpillars are linking up, the emus are laying eggs' (Yamaji, Time Immemorial).

Tribal meaning: The painting itself depicts a relationship that Aboriginal people have to their land. Each person has a spiritual link to the country. Ancestral lore required a relationship to the care of one's country and the harmony of that relationship was evident. The people tended and cared for the land and in turn the land gave back rewards of its bounty. It was always a balance between harmony and receiving knowledge. The painting describes the knowledge passed on by ancestors to know how to read the seasons and the signals that govern the seasonal generation of vital food sources. The behaviours of plants and animals spoke an unspoken language that our ancestors relayed to us.

Christian meaning: The male and female emu creating another life together. It is about rebirth and continuity of their species: the nest and eggs and how it is to be cherished and protected. Genesis, one of the five books in the Bible that were written by Moses, is where we get our creation stories and where life began for us humans. In chapter 1 of Genesis we read the biblical account of how the world was created by God (Genesis 1:1–2): 'Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky (Genesis 1:20) and let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.' This verse talks about the animals on the land, the fish in the waters and the birds of the air. This was God's dialogue to the first human, Adam, that he should tend the land and look after the animals, which were also food

sources for him and all of humankind. The emu is a food source and its eggs a special delicacy for Aboriginal people. In this painting, there are symbols of Aboriginal hunters with their spears and half shapes, which indicate a camp. The depiction of healing comes when we are reconnected to our cultural beliefs and values.

Nga Ngajana My Mine (Identity)



Fig. 4: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Nga Ngajana My Mine (Identity)*. 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 5' x 4'. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Tribal meaning: Our identity links us to family. Kinship bonds link us to who we are in our cultures. We all have a story to tell and it begins with signature thumbprints. This painting signifies my link to who I am and my mob. I have a place within my Bardi/Jawi and Karajarri kinship system. This is my birthright linking me to my tribe, clan group and generation level. In Karajarri it also links me to my skin group. The signature thumbprint is a metaphor reflecting on the origins of one's life. In this concept, I have used detailed markings indicating my own intricate patterns that are

uniquely individual. Every human being has their own marking traits lined on their hands. Fingerprint analysis, in use since the early 20th century, has led to many crimes being solved.

Christian meaning: Fingerprints, which is another name used so fittingly for this painting, reveal from a biblical viewpoint, which I hold dear to my *liyan* (heart), that God knew us before we were formed in our mother's womb. In the book of Jeremiah, the author gives detailed accounts of the prophet Jeremiah who was given these messages from God (Jeremiah 29:11): “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” As Christians we are placed in this beautiful scene: God knew me before I was born. God knew the very fibre of my being and He had plans for me; this painting reveals buried treasures, which is my identity beyond the physical and the known world. I have the physical make up of my parents, this continuity of reproduction of life, which God holds precious to His heart. The painting itself invokes our eternal personhood from beginning to end in our human form and then in the spiritual it goes on towards eternity in the soul.

Untitled

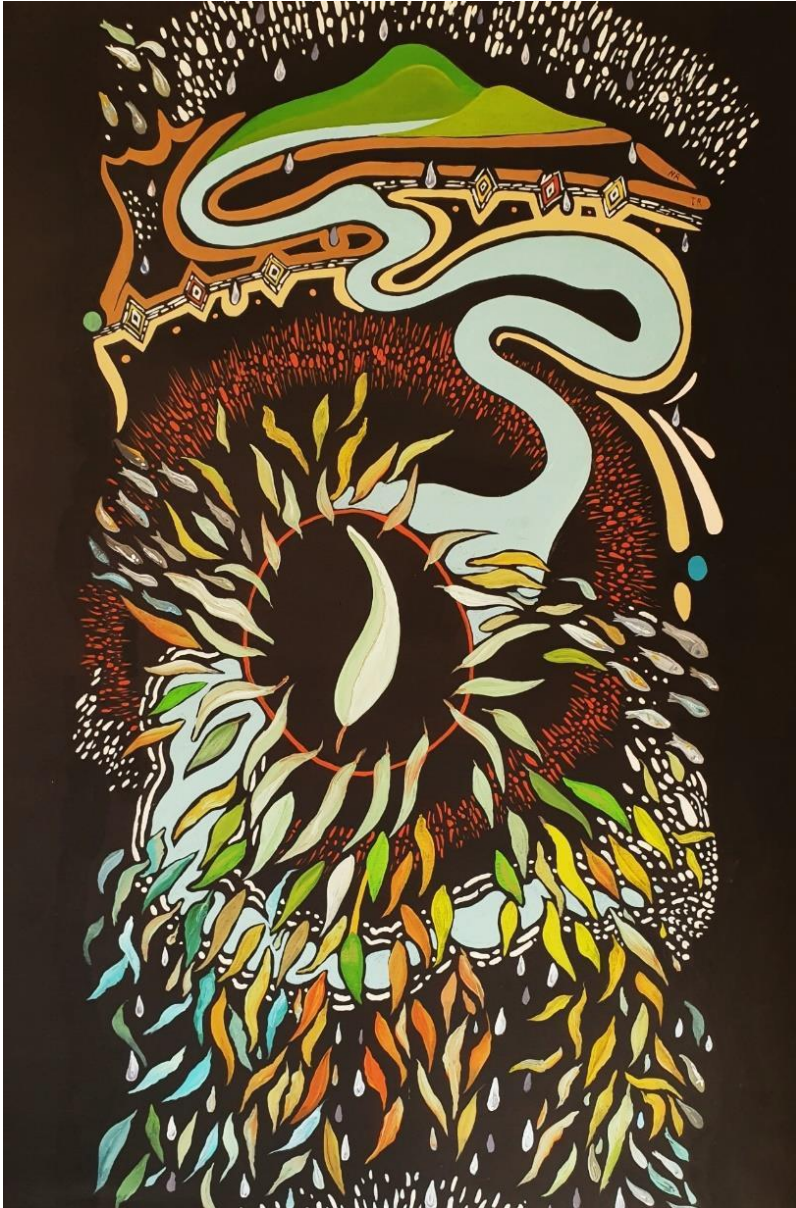


Fig. 5: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). Untitled. 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 5' x 4'. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

This design comes from the CoHealth Paisley Street building in Footscray. This is the original design that makes up the new CoHealth building. The design came about from consultation with the multicultural community in Footscray, Braybrook, Sunshine and Maribyrnong. The long-standing staff of CoHealth also contributed to the consultations for the designs.

Tribal meaning: The leaves represents the ‘*Wominjeka*’ or ‘Welcome’ that the local tribes of the Kulin Nations use. The leaves here appear as they are either falling or being drawn into the centre along with the flow of water and fish. They are also representing the change of seasons with their varying shades.

Water: Water is the source of life for humanity and every living thing placed upon this earth. Waterholes, natural and fabricated, were so special to every tribe and its clan groups. The whole tribe protected the water supply, but they also knew that it was a shared space for all humans and animals alike. In Aboriginal culture, waterholes were sung and danced about in ceremonies. Dancing and singing was how most of our oral history was passed down through the ages. The concept to use water in this painting came from community ideas incorporating the Maribyrnong River, which flows through the local area.

Fish: A food source for many, in the Bardi/Jawi it is a staple diet. In the design, for the CoHealth building, it is emerging from the leaves from the Maribyrnong River, where the local Kulin Nations gathered along the river and feasted from the abundance of the river. Fish, readily identified as a staple diet for many, are portrayed in a very subtle way in this design as they emerge from among the leaves, making it hard to tell if they are either one or the other.

Christian meaning: In the Gospel of John in the New Testament of the Bible, in chapter 4 we read of a story of Jesus talking to the women at the well. However, we need to understand the culture of that day. Jesus was a Jew and he spoke to a Samaritan woman, which was taboo, especially speaking to a woman. There was great hatred between the Samaritans and the Jews. On Jesus’s travels with his disciples, we read the story of Christ’s travels through Samaria on his way to Galilee, which is in modern-day Israel. The story is about a Samaritan woman who was out pitching water at an hour where the other village women would not be there. She was a woman who was criticised for loose living with multiple men. She was an outcast, so she came to draw water from the well alone. Jesus, it seemed, already knew her story and intentionally reached out to her. This is when he told her, ‘Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the

water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life' (John 4:13 and 4:14).

What Jesus spoke figuratively, she took literally. Christ shows that the water of Jacob has yielded a very short satisfaction. Whatever waters of comfort we drink, we shall thirst again. But whoever partakes of the Spirit of grace, and the comforts of the gospel, shall ever want that which will abundantly satisfy his soul. (John 4:12 commentaries)

The symbolism of water in my painting reminds me of this passage in scripture and it is useful for physical needs and has a symbolic meaning spiritually according to the Bible. The story is one of healing and acceptance: Jesus's words brought comfort to her soul in their conversation about water. The story goes on to say that God forgave the woman and her whole family found faith in Jesus's teaching.

Progression of recent public art project and history of public artworks

I have explained in detail my paintings and their meaning in Aboriginal symbolism and iconographic concepts and how my Christian beliefs have influenced my art. In what follows I outline the progression of recent public artworks with the conceptual and iconographic underpinnings used in the development of a public commission. One of my many artworks incorporated into the building was a project in which I collaborated with my husband, Tony (artist and pastor of Melbourne Indigenous Church Fellowship). This was a contract with CoHealth and the nominated architectural and building companies. The following paragraphs give a more detailed articulation of how this project was carried out. It is important to reveal the graduated steps that underpinned the art project and the process of our collaboration with other contractors.

The CoHealth Paisley Street building plans started in 2014. Community consultation regarding the ideas for the artwork began soon after. These communities included my own Scattered Tribes Art Group, the mixed young nationalities group and the Vietnamese Buddhist senior citizens group, as well as long-term staff and the COAG CoHealth committee group. This art project was a major part of my current research on art and healing as it has contributed significantly towards my main concepts of working and engaging with our communities in our local area. It is important to detail the whole

process of this large-scale work to clarify the enormous amount of work needed to do public artworks.

Reflection on my journey as an artist in many and varied art genres enables me to define my current position as an artist researcher. These works mirror the very foundations that structure my aspiration to develop positive methodologies of healing through the arts, through my own experience of healing through my art. In the next paragraphs I explain the steps used in order to develop art in public places and the processes required to work with collaborators. They also capture my career and experiences and demonstrate my capabilities as an artist. I provide a living example to those I am constantly working with that nothing is impossible when you set your mind to whatever your goals are.

Articulating and incorporating the art design in the CoHealth building

In May of 2014, Tony and I were successful in our tender to create artworks for a new building. This project was a major public art commissioned by CoHealth on Paisley Street, Footscray which employed ClarkeHopkinsClarke to design the building. The purpose of the building was to replace the existing medical centre and the purpose of the art was to make the medical centre more inviting and more appealing to clients. The theme of the artwork was called 'healing place.' Tony's part was mainly concerned with the technical requirements needed for the fabrication of the artwork as it was transferred from a single painting design into digital formats and then making sure the design was appropriately transferred into building materials. A very close working relationship had to exist between Tony and me, the building contractors, and the architectural team to enable this special artwork to be successfully transferred onto the fabric of the building. This will be made clearer as you view the various panels with the artwork on the outside of the building and the areas throughout the building where the art was applied. I also describe the necessary step-by-step action taken to ensure the work was suitable and kept within the safety standards but did not lose its originality as an art piece. During the design phase of this artwork, we undertook significant community consultation.

Relevant key themes raised by those involved were identified after discussing the outcomes of a comprehensive community consultation process with the design team and working through the architectural plans. The key themes were people, relationships, wellbeing, water and a sense of welcome. The role of the artist was to provide expert strategic and detailed design advice to CoHealth in the façade, way finding and courtyard artwork. Due to the large scale of the work, there were challenges to create imagery that addressed the brief while respecting and incorporating these themes. The design team for the building was CoHealth and ClarkeHopkinsClarke. “The brief was to work with the consultation team to provide artistic input into the building façade, and design creative way finding that reaches across gender, age, cultural groups, and literacy levels.” (Appendix 3) There were many complexities, but they were resolved with a good working relationship and making sure that everyone understood each other through extremely good communication.

Design

There are many challenges that arise where good graphic and Indigenous art principles interact. Creating a design that is both literal and symbolic does not pose a conflict to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artist. Resolving a design composition within a framed space is not a priority, neither is uniformity of colour or shape etc. The main priority is the story, but the expression of that story can take almost any form. This contrasts with the graphic artist who minimises the narrative to find a condensed resolution of image in relation to space etc. Expressing art in this process sometimes can be difficult but by working together we can contribute to resolving any challenges of the work with the story while remaining true to our own style/s, as well as to the community input we have received through the consultation process. The following artwork has been previously explained using the dual lenses of culture and Christian belief. The explanation below explains the Aboriginal iconography including in the artwork. This painting is an example of the gum leaf, water, and fish motifs.



Fig. 6: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Untitled*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 5' x 4'. Original painting. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Gum leaf/leaves: The story that the gum leaf is intended to invoke is the original use by the Kulin Nations, which is to offer a welcome to the visitor by passing one on to indicate acceptance of an invitation to be present on the land and share in all its benefits. Therefore, the main feature of the work is a single leaf to represent that symbol of 'Wominjeka' or 'Welcome'. A single background line around the central motif implies an inner invitational circle. It is slightly off centre and not symmetric. The Tanderrum ceremony had arrangements and order that would be part of the welcome celebration. "A tanderrum is a ceremony enacted by the nations of the Kulin people and other Victorian aboriginal nations allowing safe passage and temporary access and use of land

and resources by foreign people (Ilbijerri Theatre Company n.d.). Towards the top of the artwork, there are several diamond patterns. This is a homage to the first people and their artwork of cutline designs on their traditional weapons.

Additional leaves of various shapes, sizes and colours spread out from the centre. They are smaller than the central focal point mentioned. Their colours range through natural tones of all primary colours. It appears they are either falling or being drawn into the centre along with the flow of water and fish. They are also representing the change of seasons with their varying shades.

A faint circular shape around the central image was created using red-coloured patterned lines emanating from the centre. These represent the delicate red flowering of the trees.

Water: The concept to use water came from community ideas about incorporating the Maribyrnong River, which flows through the local area. In this design, there are three components to suggest the cycle of water.

- A bold stylised river flows throughout the image. It disappears at the top into the hills in the distance. This is captured in a graphic way to hint at the source being one of idyllic environmental health. The river flows into and out through the central gathering point in the middle.
- The droplets of rain throughout the other design elements of the picture.
- Highly stylised clouds forming at the top above the hills.

Fish: Fish are readily identified as a symbol of health, being a staple that residents, particularly of multicultural backgrounds, enjoy regularly. They are portrayed in a very subtle way in this design as they emerge from among the leaves, making it hard to tell if they are either one or the other. Subtle colours are used to create the blending of the two. The species are non-descript and only shaped to imply smaller types that school together. Colour highlighting implies different types are abundant in a healthy ecosystem.

- The top layer is from an original painting incorporating the feature elements mentioned above, along with some subtle imagery that binds the design together.

The detail is painted as block and graduated block colour. Edges have not been feathered to blend with the background.

- The middle layer was created digitally. It was used to broaden the overall design using graduated colours that are transparent to varying degrees over the background. Creating this on screen gave us options that were not achievable using paint. It meant that we were able to portray a subtle colour change throughout and cover all of what was likely to be a 12-metre x 6 metre digital image. This layer reflects water to earth shades that we had the option of manipulating right up until the last stage before fabrication.
- The background. The original design used a very dark background but some experimentation with replacing this colour with textures of stone were worth further exploring. It was created digitally as well. Original images of stone merged with block colours to create a natural effect without being busy or overbearing on the featured motif and, at the same time, creating a more natural finish on the walls.

Concept for the glass wall waiting areas/courtyard

An additional design needed to be done that would emerge quite easily into the original conceptual works already being applied. Another painting style was developed, which I explain in the following pages.

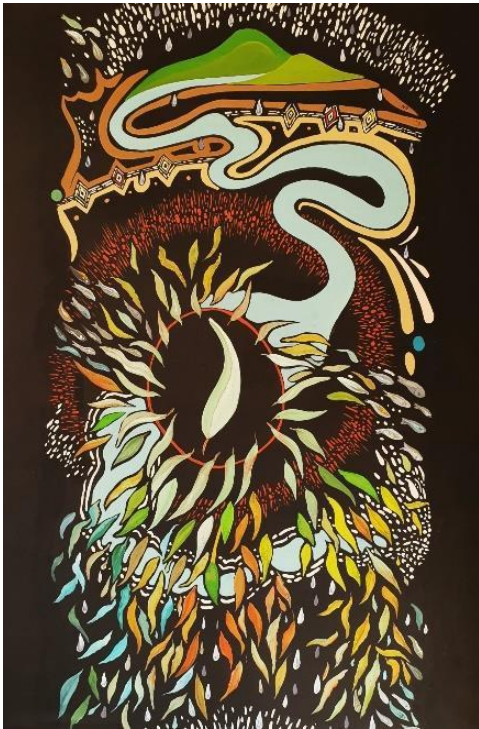


Fig. 7: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches. *Wominjeka* and major public art commission on CoHealth building, building project design 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 5' x 4'; Architectural render. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

The themes from figure 6 and 7 are reflective of those used in the façade.

The original design features non-concentric oval rings rippling out from a central point and expanding ever wider. Each ring increases in width and is textured, tapering to the edges where transparency is used to both soften the edges and enhance the features. Central to each ring is a design that comprises multiple lines which are graduated over the levels of the building. Different levels (floors) were colour coded as per previous discussions with the design group.



Fig. 8: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches. Entry to the CoHealth Building. 2016. Digital Photograph. 11.15 x 16.51cm.

Fish: I usually paint fish in an X-ray style that, although decorative, shows every part of the fish joined by its skeletal makeup. Fish are usually found in formation, which is a protective practice. The symbolic use of fish in this way symbolises strong family kinship structures representative of the unified multicultural community in Footscray. In every culture there are family kinship systems in place. For example, Asian

communities are one of many communities in Footscray who place strong emphasis on family values. Kinship is emphasised throughout the chapters of this thesis.

Asians tend to be highly group-oriented people who place a strong emphasis on family connection as the major source of identity and protection against the hardships of life. The family model is an extended one including immediate family and relatives, and loyalty to the family is expected. (Carteret 2010)



Fig. 9: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches. Fish designs on the CoHealth Building. 2016. Digital Photograph. 12.38 x 16.51cm.

Leaves: As with the façade, these components of the design are expressed in this work in a swirling pattern. The three adjoining (essentially glass) walls facing one another allow for a continuity of design that is seen by the viewer throughout the building. The leaves reflect movement in this situation and a passing of seasons with the exaggerated changing colours. In this application, the welcome narrative is not the key purpose for this motif.

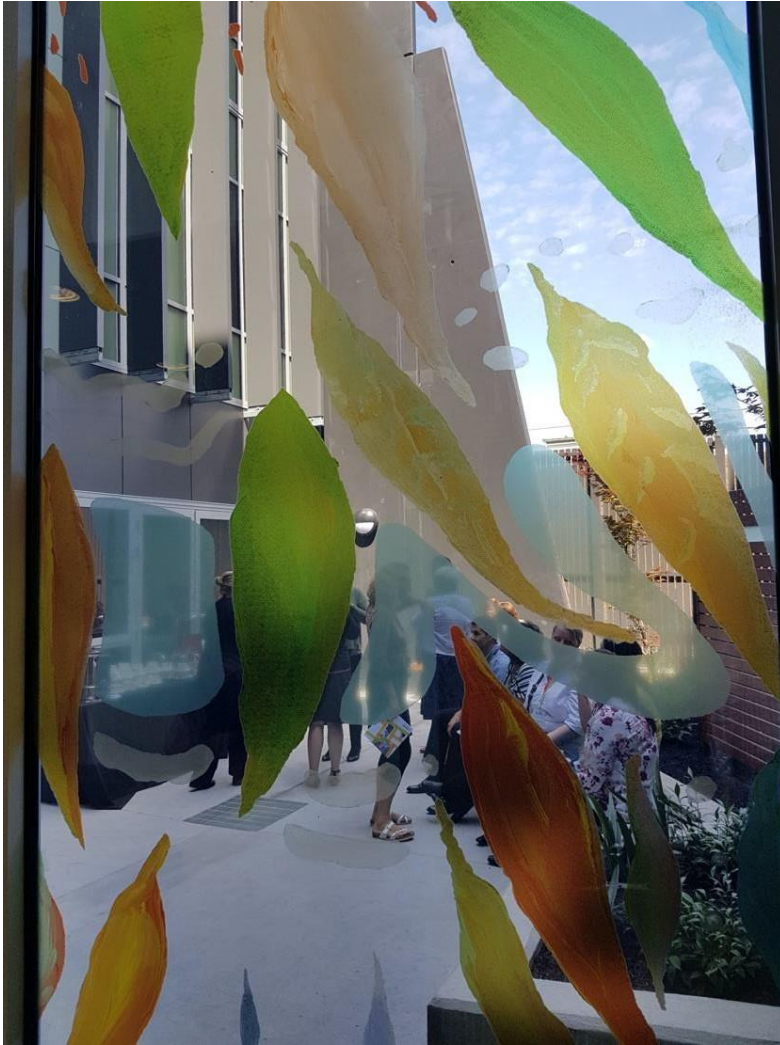


Fig. 10: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches. Leaf designs on the CoHealth Building. 2016. Digital Photograph. 16.51 x 22.01cm.

Colours: The palette used in this work expresses a more vibrant mix than the earthen tones used in my paintings. Work incorporated into the glass created an opportunity to play with the light that influenced this installation. Brighter coloured originals compensate for the transparency so as not to lessen the visual impact.

An initial design used throughout the glass had variations in the colours, size and orientation. This original design was scaled up and had variable base colour tones as the repeat image was linked to generate a freehand style which became an integrated design.

Water: The ripple effects of the base tones indicate water as a base element. It is necessary for survival (health) and it cleanses. It is the essential link between all the elements and indeed all life.



Fig. 11: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches. Water designs on the CoHealth Building. 2016. Digital Photograph. 12.38 x 16.51cm.

Perspective

To be able to step back and view the work you would be able to see that around the three walls there is an arch consisting of several interlocking oval-shaped rings, each of which has details of fish, leaves and water. Some of these are interlocking as well. These oval shapes are different sizes and there is variation in their horizontal orientation. Overall, there is a gradual change in colours from the top to the ground floor of the building. The features have a distinctive Indigenous styling, but it is neither a dot painting nor x-ray painting with heavy ochres. It is much subtler but clearly has a

deeply natural Australian heritage. The detail invites curiosity whereby young fingers may trace the flowing lines of the work.



Fig. 12: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri) and Tony Riches.
Exterior view of the CoHealth Building. 2016. Digital Photograph. 16.48 x 16.48cm.

Transparency: Solid colours are ideal for producing a strong artwork, but this situation required a lot of natural light into the building with the need to have some screening to enhance the area from both inside and outside. Tony and I as artist were seeking the balance between art, privacy and light. For this reason, the transparency of the image

was experimented with until we found the right level that the design group found appropriate.



Fig. 13: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Kanjarri). Interior view of the CoHealth Building with droplets, 2016. Digital Photograph. 12.38 x 16.51cm.

Concept for the Way finding: One element of the motif features a marker for each pathway, visually drawing the clients towards the significant points at the entry.

- Reception – fish motif
- Greeting Station – leaf motif
- Information hub – water droplets.

Each of these have markers laid out to form pathways leading to them. These were cut from vinyl to contrast with the flooring. They were made individually for originality and laid out to create an organic flow to create a centre for these pathways.

Outcomes and what the exhibition achieved

The paintings discussed in this section appeared in a collaborative exhibition organised by me, Arun Munoz and the Scattered Tribes art group called 'Rising Smoke' which was held in the Footscray Community Arts Centre in 2017.

The duration of the exhibition coincided with NAIDOC Week celebrations, which made it even more special. This is a time when most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and local councils make every effort to recognise and celebrate our cultures. Flag-raising ceremonies are attended by many people and a week of celebration happens, with many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people holding special events. One major event is the NAIDOC ball, which is held in high esteem. National prizes and recognition of achievements are given out to people nominated by their local communities or organisations. Our exhibition was advertised by the Footscray Community Arts Centre electronically and on noticeboards, which attracted people to the event. Many great and encouraging comments are listed below by visitors to the exhibition.

Each of my images painted on canvas are my original works, with a few exceptions in one print. The paintings tell tales of an era gone past. They relate and connect me to my ancestors and their stories, which were passed down to me through experience of my family and then to me. My children and many Bardi/Jawi young people are the next generation to carry these stories when I am gone.

The Moonga (Sugar bag) gouache painted on French paper is a unique educational tool about two things. It is a lesson on deep listening to find the native bees and their hives, which can inhabit rocks or hollow branches. The other instruction is being aware of the seasons and reading the surrounding changes to bush blossoms to enable you to know the exact time to look for the Moonga. Bardi/Jawi have six seasons in the calendar year, which we are taught to take notice of. Each season brings about changes to weather, the ecosystem and sources of food available in the bush and in the ocean. The sea brings about an abundance of sea foods, which Bardi/Jawi continue to feast on. Many of my paintings portray this sea life of turtles, dugongs, fish and seashells, which are painted in x-ray styles. The exhibition did achieve what I had hoped for and more. It mirrored

the underlying connection between art, practice and self-reflection that can produce quality artwork and self-achievement by the scattered tribes living in and around Footscray.

Work towards the exhibition started in late 2016. Weekly gatherings, however, really did not intensify until February 2017, when the Scattered Tribes art group started to gather to discuss and formulate our ideas to make the possum skin cloak and plan how we would do a digital component that would mingle the ideas of identity and our stories. Arun Munoz was then asked to join us and work towards capturing our journey making the cloak and taking the portraits of individuals in their expression of themselves.

I have felt that it is important to also explain the iconography for each of the paintings, which links my work to my Christian faith. My beliefs and values come from my cultural upbringing and the Christian faith that my old people held from the teachings of the early missionaries. It is also important to mention that ancient spirituality included a great God figure that my Elders often mentioned around our campfires. We would listen intently as children around the campfires as our grandparents, aunts and uncles told stories of the past. They would say '*Milonjun*', meaning a long time ago. Our ancestors told tales of their ancestors who knew about the law of Galalang.

'Galalang' lived a long time ago. He came from far away to the country of the Nimanboor on Disaster Bay. (Durack 1969, 100)

The Nimanboor people are from the south-eastern parts of the Dampier Peninsular facing the King Sound, on the western Kimberley coast north of Broome. Bardi/Jawi are connected through marriage to these tribes but have the same lore and spiritual beliefs.

My exhibition

The exhibition was held at the Footscray Community Arts Centre in 2017. The exhibition was a major success, with many visitors viewing the works. My personal collection was displayed with the possum skin cloak and photographic display by Arun Munoz. The exhibition was launched by Richard Frankland, an Aboriginal man who at the time was director of the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development

at the University of Melbourne. He is also an Australian playwright, scriptwriter and musician. A representative from CoHealth also attended to help launch the exhibition.



Fig. 14: Ngardarb Francine Riches. [The artist during the installation of the exhibition]. 2017. Digital Photograph. 11 x 14cm.



Fig. 15: Ngardarb Francine Riches, Installation view of exhibition, 2017. Digital Photograph. 11 x 14cm.



Fig. 16: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *It will take all of us*. 2016. Installation of printed sticker, 150 x 120cm. Braybrook Community Hub, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

This artwork was a digital design commission for this project by the Maribyrnong City Council in its 2016 Reconciliation event. The painting was sent digitally and made into a large 3.6 metre x 2.8 metre floor mural that was placed at the newly refurbished Braybrook Community Hub. The painting represents the many totems from our mob at the Braybrook Hub and, again, the Maribyrnong River is also featured. The painting enabled different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to tell their stories about their totems. Uncle Roy's long neck turtles represents his Yorta Yorta country up in the Murray and Goulburn rivers where he lived as a young boy before he was stolen by the government in 1952 (Yorta Yorta Time Immemorial). Aunty Vivienne is represented by her butterflies from the Gubbi Gubbi tribe in Queensland (Gubbi Gubbi Time Immemorial). A sister-girl from the Torres Strait Islands contributes with her dragonfly.

A young Arrernte man from the Central Desert gave his story about the black cockatoos with red on their tails (Arrernte Time Immemorial). Another uncle who has passed since, reminisced about his memories of pelicans in his country when he was a young boy. His story was a very sad tale; he was taken, possibly adopted out, and taken to England. He was taken away from his family and never really reconnected to his people when he eventually came back from England. As saltwater people, my fish and eagle represent my tribe's totems (Bardi/Jawi Milon-time-barnnanggarr). Collectively, we all contributed to reconciliation by sharing our stories and allowing this design to emerge as one piece.



Fig. 17: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). Reconciliation sticker floor design launch for Maribyrnong City Council. 2016. Digital Photograph, 12.38 x 16.51cm. Braybrook Community Hub, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Tribal meaning: Tribal meaning from this painting would be the connection to the various totems that are linked to individuals who are mentioned. For example, Uncle

Roy's long neck turtles represented on the painting refer to his Yorta Yorta tribe or language group in the Mooroopna area of country Victoria. Uncle Roy features throughout my thesis and more of his story is told in other chapters. Totems are best described by Uncle Graham Paulson (n.d.) on the Australians Together website:

Aboriginal Spirituality is Totemic. A totem is a natural object, plant or animal that is inherited by members of a clan or family as their spiritual emblem.

The Christian meaning: Reconciliation plays a large part in the Christian beliefs and values. The significance of Jesus dying on the cross for mankind is a powerful message of reconciling humanity to divinity, which also allows reconciliation between people, nations and kingdoms. The Gospel of John 3:16 in the Bible is a profound message of God's love to the world by sacrificing Jesus to atone for our sins. According to Christian beliefs, Jesus was the sin offering from God to humanity:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

It is a commitment for all of us to reconcile our worlds. The design for this work involved reflections of what reconciliation really means. Our contribution towards reconciliation was our stories infused in this painting given back to the Maribyrnong City Council as part of our agreement to journey together for reconciliation. The contribution from the Maribyrnong City Council was the actual commission by them for me to consult and create this artwork, which was launched at the 2016 Reconciliation Day and placed on the floor at Braybrook Community Hub.

Reconciliation is a commitment by all to come together and commit to making mutual efforts to work and live side by side in respect and peace. Reconciliation should have elements of truth, justice, forgiveness, healing, reparation and love. In Australia, the word 'reconciliation' is a commitment by Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and other Australians to come together and make respectful relationships. Supporting reconciliation involves making working resolutions to overcome the divisions that exist. This is often referred to as 'the gap' and inequality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities and people. Differences are biggest in income, health, living

standards and life expectancy, but also prejudice and racism. Patrick Dodson's summary of the meaning of reconciliation sums it up clearly:

The river is the river and the sea is the sea. Salt water and fresh, two separate domains. Each has its own complex patterns, origins, stories. Even though they come together they will always exist. Our hope for Reconciliation is like that.' In its broadest sense 'reconciliation' means 'coming together'. (Dodson cited in Korff 2020)

Moongarr-sugarbag



Fig. 18: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Moongarr- sugarbag*. 1994. Gouache and charcoal on paper, 77 x 100cm. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Moongarr-sugarbag (2017) is one of my original paintings. It is a story about how we go out looking for our bush honey, which is called Moongarr (Bardi Milon Jawal-Barnanggar). The bees are tiny and have no sting but are very hard to find. You need to stand very still and listen for the buzzing to enable you to find the honey. I use this painting to tell the story about how we find the Moongarr. The honey is about health and wellbeing and listening to the sounds of the bush, which is healing and therapeutic for us. This way of collecting honey is an ancient practice passed down to me from my grandparents, which was also given to them from their ancient people (Bardi Milon Jawal- Barnanggar).

Tribal meaning: The painting creates two dialogues; one is the gathering of natural honey as a food source and the other is the deep listening that is required to find the tiny bees. To understand its purpose, one must first learn the behaviour of the tiny native bees and its adaptive living styles. I have precious memories of my grandfather being a natural beekeeper. His honeybees had hives attached to hidden rock cavities that produced an abundance of honey. These same tiny bees move their hives around rocks and hollow trees and can only be found by silence and then sight. As with all my artworks, paintings or sculpture has depth way beyond its simple understanding of the design. My work is a conduit of our lifestyles, experiences and inherited knowledge passed to the next holder of our stories.

Christian meaning: In Psalm 81:10, the Lord invites Israel to receive the very best of his blessings: “Open your mouth wide,” he says, “and I will fill it with good things”. To receive this bounty, God’s people need only to listen to His words and walk in His paths (Psalm 81:13). Then, the Lord promises, ‘I would feed you the finest wheat. I would satisfy you with wild honey from the rock’ (Psalm 81:16). It is the honey from the honeybees that provide food and sustenance in the bush.



Fig. 19: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Gararr*. 2001. Acrylic on canvas, 4'x 3'. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Tribal meaning: Mermaid Island, also called *Gararr*, is one of the many islands in my country. My ancestors lived and roamed these islands. They are also called the Buccaneer Archipelago in the Kimberley. In recent years we have travelled to *Gararr* to collect the Trochus shell. On one occasion one of my sons went hunting along the edges of this big lagoon and lost his spear chasing a turtle. It is a special place and country for one of the Mayala clan groups I am related to. There are stories connected to this place, but they belong to those people. My pallet of blues and earthy tones tries to match the perfect expression of reality that exists in this special place; however, I am convinced that very few artists may be successful in capturing those colours.

Christian meaning: The iconography for this piece is the beauty of creation that I believe the Great Spirit (God) created in this special place. The colours show the fusion of aqua shades in the tropical waters surrounding this special island and the colours in

the reef as the tides subside in their usual patterns of tidal changes. The island itself shines brightly in the sun and offers the viewers a spectacular brilliance of God's creation.

And God said, let the waters under the heaven be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. (Genesis 1: 9)

Ancient Signatures



Fig. 20: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Ancient Signatures*. 1999. Acrylic and sand on canvas, 30 x 20cm. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Tribal meaning: Our oral history is passed down through the ages by many forms. One of these involves markings and drawings on the caves and rocks. Our stories and way of life is captured in images painted on the walls of the caves and sacred rocks. This painting represents an ancient method, which is a link to our past ancestors and tribal heritage. Travellers passing through the land would identify the markings and would acknowledge those custodians of that land. The colours capture the familiar sites dotting the landscapes and rocks in my country. The hands in this painting depict the unfolding of history for our people. A succession of stories and tales inhabited these areas by the local custodians of their country.

Christian and tribal meaning: I am reminded of an island off the mainland that we as Bardi/Jawi people uphold as a very special island. As a child growing up around this island, which we call *Jooloom*, I often felt a special reverence to this island. My grandmother would tell tales of people in the past who went to the *Jooloom* and accidentally broke a branch of the trees or trampled and broke off rocks, which would cause a storm to come. In this special island I am told that embedded in the rocks are the print marks of Jesus kneeling, as he prayed. There are archived recordings of old Bardi/Jawi people who speak about Jesus appearing to their ancestors and telling them that the land is plentiful and full of fish and sea foods for them to eat. They go on to say that Jesus told them where the waterholes were as well. This is where ancient signatures or markings on the rock in *Jooloom* give this painting its connection to the Christian meaning of this painting. The Bardi/Jawi people often refer to these markings on the rock as ‘Jesus kneeling to pray’. This passage is found in the Gospel of Luke 22:39–42:

Coming out, He went to the Mount of Olives, as He was accustomed, and His disciples also followed Him. When He came to the place, He said to them, ‘Pray that you may not enter into temptation.’ And He was withdrawn from them about a stone’s throw, and He knelt down and prayed, saying, ‘Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done’. (Luke 22:39)



Fig. 21: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Karajarri Desert*. 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 20cm. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Tribal meaning: My Karajarri heritage comes from my father's people who mixed with the desert tribes who had to leave the desert sands when the waterholes dried up. This painting depicts their stories of survival by sadly moving from the Desert country to the sand dunes of the coastal areas near Bidyadanga, south of Broome in Western Australia. The many desert tribes were then merged into the one tribe but still held on to their language and song lines. Karajarri is now the dominate body that represents all the merged tribes. In 1935 a writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald* described the desert tribes:

The natives are a wonderful race of desert animals. Little, as sinewy as trained greyhounds, they can travel when hard pressed for 100 miles after their last water. They are not in such an advanced state as the coastal natives. The barbs of their spears are still of shattered stone or bone. Some of them

still use the spear point hardened in the fire. They live mostly on roots, of which there is a surprising variety. After the in-frequent storms, grass springs up and game from the coast and the north goes out into the desert country after the sweet grass. Then the desert natives have the time of their lives, because there is plenty of meat. When the grass withers, the game goes back. (Sydney Morning Herald 1935)

The language describing my ancestors was uncalled for and quite nasty and was used by people who have never been out there. My ancestors survived this harsh land and I am a descendant of these people through my father's side. These people all live near the coastal areas now and have joined the Karajarri tribe in a community known as Bidyadanga.

As mentioned, the desert tribes have merged as one tribe with the coastal Aboriginal people and are together looking after country, as indicated below with the Indigenous Protected Area project. My painting *Karajarri Desert* is symbolic of our desert stories. In May 2014 Karajarri Traditional Owners declared an IPA (Indigenous Protected Area) 'across their country to manage biodiversity hotspots and protect some of the Kimberley's most vulnerable and threatened species' (Kimberley Land Council 2014, 1). This was an initiative of the Australian Government and Karajarri Traditional Owners working with the Kimberley Land Council, the Native Conservancy and Pew Charitable Trusts to develop the Healthy Country Management Plan. This plan sets out the long-term conservation targets and strategies for the management of the IPA. Senior Karajarri Ranger Jessica Bangu said

Protecting and enhancing cultural knowledge is our number one priority. Our culture can be passed down through many different ceremonies, but it is also present in our everyday life. The best way to keep our culture strong is by being out on country and telling stories, hunting and speaking language. Our IPA will enable us to do more of this ... (Kimberley Land Council 2014, 1)

Christian meaning: This painting reminds me of the numerous stories in the Bible of survival. One such story is of Hagar, a concubine of the great patriarch Abraham. In the Book of Genesis (21:17–19), Abraham sent Hagar with food and a skin of water into the wilderness with her son. After many days, their food and water were all gone, and the

story continues to tell us that God heard the cries of the young boy in the wilderness with his mother Hagar. God showed Hagar water and nourishment and promised that this child would make a great nation. The Arab nations of today are descendants of this child of Hagar. The other children of Abraham are Hebrews, a nation known today as Jews.

And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, ‘What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation.’ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the lad a drink. (Genesis 21: 17–19)



Fig. 22: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Solidarity Statement* (side one. 2016. Acrylic on MDF, 4' x 3'. Commissioned by Churches of Christ VIC/TAS.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have Christian beliefs and values and this painting reflects that connection. Many ask why? To me, my ancestors always believed in the Great Spirit. In my tribe he is call *Galalang*, who was before time. In Chapter Two I mention this great spirit and quote from Mary Durack's (1969) *The Rock and The Sand*:

Galalang lived a long time ago. He came from far away to the country of the Nimanboor on Disaster Bay. (Durack 1969, 100)

Christian and tribal meaning: Side one is about reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians in our great country Australia, under the Lord Almighty. It is about coming together, respecting each other, and serving the One True God.

Jesus is the centre of our lives. He became one of us, so we could be one with Him and one another. He is the one that gives us true reconciliation in our hearts to Him and then that should spill over in our relationship with each other.

Large circles on the edges, with a pathway between them, represent different tribes around Australia connecting with one another. However, they have a need for true reconciliation with God. The lines from the centre, where the church is, are to show that we must go to them and reach out to them with His love. The dots across the landscape represents the many colours from God's palette. His creation is the vast landscape with its vibrant colours.



Fig. 23: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Solidarity Statement* (side two). 2017. Acrylic on MDF, 4' x 3'. Commissioned by Churches of Christ VIC/TAS.

Side two has been painted as the design was made to be installed for viewing from both sides. The focal point is the cross, a symbol of the source of life through the completed work of Jesus Christ. While the other side represents Him bringing us together into one family, this work tells two stories together.

1. The many leaves on the vine represent the fact that from the cross we are called to abide in the vine, the creator and sustainer of life, Jesus Himself (John 15:5): 'I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.' The leaves show many colours representing all the tribes and people of Australia.
2. The many fish represent the promise and power of God among the branches when He said in Matthew 4:19, 'Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."' They immediately left their nets and followed Him. He has called us to do this together, united with Him and with each other. Everyone is called to do their part for this one purpose. Again, the dots across the landscape represent the many colours of God's handiwork with its vibrant colours.

Wellness Dreaming



Fig. 24: Ngardarb Francine Riches (Bardi/Jawi, Karajarri). *Wellness Dreaming*, 2016. Triptych, Acrylic on canvas, 9' x 4'. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

This work was a major commission to mark the merger of three community health services, which became CoHealth. The painting reflects and acknowledges the rich

heritage of the ancient people of whose land the health services were situated on, which is why I have called it Wellness Dreaming. They are North Yarra, Doutta Galla and Western Region Health. These are Community Health Services located in the northern and western parts of Melbourne. My personal connection to these services is mentioned previously in this chapter. I started working with Western Region Health initially as an Aboriginal Health Worker.

This merger is represented by the three individual pieces, which maintain a flowing style that binds the story of the work together. Different tones and animals portrayed in each of the paintings also signify the uniqueness of each area.

Tribal meaning: Central to the story is the relationships of the people in harmony. The figures show them relating to this land and the essentials for life, which are the rivers and animals and the fire, which provide warmth and cooking uses. The fire was used also to gather the families in for family meetings and storytelling. From the lower level, this painting depicts the ancient signatures of the Kulin people and their land. Above this, the presence of the First People is captured by the people being continuously connected. Traditional grasses are dotted along the edges of the two big rivers, the Maribyrnong and the Yarra.

People came from other nations and cultures and have also become a part of this land, which is still happening. They have subdivided and cultivated the land by modern practices introduced from their homeland influences. This is shown above the hill country at the top of each piece.

Just as the rivers flow and merge throughout the triptych, there is a connection between the autonomous services and the communal reliance on traditions, nature and one another to maintain a healthy balance in life. It is important to give a descriptive summary of this work and how it is all linked together:

- the divisions made in the land and the fences surround each block
- mountains and hills in the area
- the many people who have come to this land and made it their home
- they have connected with the land and have roots here
- the rivers – Maribyrnong and the Yarra – which join up and fill the bay

- leaves, which are a symbol of welcome and are also used when cooking in the traditional way
- possums were highly prized as food and clothing – people would travel and trade for these
- the people were connected to each other and the natural world before others came to this land
- ancient signatures (handprints made using ochre).

Christian meaning: This ancient land we call Australia was given by the Great Spirit, who I believe is God of the Bible. Each Aboriginal tribe was given their ‘country’ to tend and look after, and this painting relates to the Kulin Nation here in Victoria.

Chapter Three: Narratives from the Stolen Generations

This chapter describes stories of the Stolen Generations aunts and uncles with whom I have worked in the past and who have told me their stories during my facilitated art workshops. This chapter reflects these times and tells their stories. These stories are the heart of this thesis: they are what inspired me to explore the therapeutic potential of art, focusing on the traumas experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In this chapter I tell the stories of Uncle Roy, Aunty Isobel, and Uncle Denis and Aunty Maureen, as well as my own personal story. I tell them in my own words. Uncle Roy's story is in a longer, more detailed narrative style because I worked more intensively with him as his experiences and trauma needed more healing.

The chapter describes the personal stories of being taken and the personal impact of being taken. It describes the art projects and cultural activities we did together, including taking these members of the Stolen Generations back to their country where the hurt began, and revisiting those traumas. In 'Being touched through touch', Cornelia Elbrecht and Liz Antcliff (2014, 26) write, 'The body remembers. It remembers its injuries and traumas, but it also remembers its needs, its instinct to survive and to heal.' As I further describe in Chapter Four, I have chosen to retell these stories in narrative form because that is the way we do culture, through storytelling. I have fictionalised parts of Uncle Roy's story; it is my imagination retelling his story. Empathy is a big factor in understanding those hurts, as it is about entering another person's life to best understand their life stories or journeys. In this case it involves the reader entering the traumas from the past, to really capture the realities of the pain experienced by these members of the Stolen Generations. I have chosen to take this approach because I see it as a contribution from our cultural practices to academia.

As mentioned in previous chapters, my work began with these Elders in a community health setting, where I instigated art classes and eventually developed personal friendships with them. I also speak with authority on my own faith and cultural obligation. In the writing process it became important to distinguish the different voices used in the chapter, including my voice as an art practitioner, my researcher voice, my own storytelling voice and Uncle Roy's voice in his story.

Uncle Roy's story: a victim of the Stolen Generations

How I met Uncle Roy

The art group I ran while working with Western Region Health, later becoming CoHealth, started in 2010, which was when I first met Uncle Roy. I was given his name by one of my colleagues and asked to meet him. He had recently discovered that he had Aboriginal heritage and I was the only Aboriginal worker at that time who could try and help him learn a little about the Aboriginal culture. At first, I wasn't in any hurry to meet Uncle Roy as we often had many people in the same situation, and we were short staffed at the time. When I finally had spare time, I went and met with Uncle Roy with a nurse who I worked with. To me, this meeting was almost magical. The first time I shook hands with Uncle Roy there was an instant unexplained connection. It was like our souls became instant friends. He later told me he had the same feeling. He said that he felt he could trust only me with his story. To me, it was like meeting a long lost relative: an uncle.

¹When I first met Uncle Roy, he was broken, but for some reason he wanted to trust me, and he began to tell me his story (Yorta Yorta, Uncle Roy, Time Immemorial).

Uncle Roy's story begins in 1955 as an eight-year-old happily playing on the banks of the Goulburn River with his little mates and siblings. The birds were particularly quiet this day, as if they already sensed something in the wind.

The mothers and family members were busy collecting twigs and branches for their fires, others sat around in groups, spinning yarns or just quietly doing chores. The laughter of the children and their playful sounds gave the mothers ease that the children were okay and up to their usual antics by the river. Family members took turns to glance towards the children, just to keep an eye on them. Days were filled with adventure and fun for these children here at the camps known as The Flats. This was one of many dotted along the banks of the Goulburn River near a small town called Mooroopna in Victoria.

¹ In Art Therapy the word empathy is used to describe how a therapist or art practitioner journeys with their clients to enable a better understanding of the client's world. With the approval of Uncle Roy, I developed the following dramatized account of his experience to help the reader journey in empathy with Uncle Roy back to those trauma years which help him to start his healing process. He is supportive of me telling his story this way to try and help those who are still struggling with their past.

There was a school they all attended together. Roy and his older sister were part of this group, although Roy, being only eight, had just recently started going. The children from The Flats had to huddle up together in one

classroom, despite different age groups. They were not allowed in class with other white children, but the children were oblivious to the meaning of this and were just happy to be together. They did not have possessions, and shoes were not owned by any of the children or most of the adults. This was the 1950s, a hundred years after the settlement of Melbourne, one of Australia's big cities.

'One of the many places Queen Elizabeth went through during her visit to Australia in 1954, was country Victoria.' (*The Argus* 1954, 5)

The news of Queen Elizabeth's visit brought a flurry of preparation and excitement from the local community. One of the places she was to visit was country Victoria, passing through The Flats, en route to Shepparton, and this is where Uncle Roy's story begins.

The area known as The Flats had become home to many Aboriginal people after the Walk Off from the Cummeragunya Mission at Barmah on 4 February 1939. The first ever mass strike of Aboriginal people, the Walk Off was due to the increasingly restrictive controls upon the movement and activities of the people, the poor rations and cruel treatment they received, and the increasing removal of their children.

Jack Patten, with the help of William Cooper who like Jack was a Cummeragunya resident and an important Aboriginal leader, encouraged the people of the mission to leave, therefore resulting in the walk off to The Flats. Jack Patten received a jail sentence for his part in enticing the Aboriginal families to leave the Cummeragunya reserve (*The Argus* 1939). Both Jack Patten and William Cooper were spokesmen for the dispersed Aboriginal communities of central Victoria and western New South Wales.

There was excitement in the air in the main town area. Hessian bags were put over the nearby bridge that linked their camp across the river. Little Roy and his band of mates were curious and were drawn to the excitement and noise across the river. There were people with cars wearing suits and nice clothes, so the children crept closer. Suddenly a man's loud voice from behind made them all turn around.

‘Go home you dirty little urchins,’ said the man after he kicked some of the children in the backside, with Roy taking the worst of it.

The children ran home with speed and told the adults what they had seen. It was then realised that the hessian covering the bridge was so the Queen would not see their camp on the edge of the river.

I invited Roy to attend an event we were having at the Braybrook Community Hub in the western suburbs. This led to other invitations, including our church, which we hold on Sunday evenings. I remember his reaction clearly: ‘I am an atheist; I don’t believe in God.’

The Sutherland Homes in Diamond Valley, where he lived from the age of 8 to 16, was a non-denominational church-operated facility, which later became the Berry Street Homes. I am sure most of the people would have been humane Christian people, but a monster or two lived among them in their roles as administrators of the Home and many children were traumatised and victimised by these people. Uncle Roy was abused in the most indecent ways. It was no wonder he hated Christianity and those people who abused him.

Months passed after the excitement died down and life went on for little Roy and the people of The Flats. The children loved their home on The Flats: neighbouring clans dotted along the river often visited and told stories of what was taking place in other areas with their cousin tribesmen and women. There was once again trouble in the air, but little did the people from The Flats know that it was heading towards them.

It was a beautiful normal day down by The Flats, with the adults (mainly women, as the men went off to work) going about their daily business. The children and little Roy headed down the river – it was going to be another happy day, so they thought. Just not very far, the children noticed a medium-sized rowboat heading towards them. The children would often see boats go past them now and then, so it was not anything new, so they stopped and watched as the boat came near.

‘Would you children like a ride on this boat?’ came a voice from men wearing black suits.

Excitement erupted, and little Roy and the others moved quickly into the boat as it moored on their riverbank. The children were so excited that they were going for a ride on this boat – they had never had this kind of opportunity before. Before the mothers and adults could reach the riverbank, the children were already seen on the boat but it didn’t look harmful, so they were not alarmed – boats often passed by and the children were not in any danger, so they thought.

Mothers sat on the banks, anxious to see the boat turn around, but it never did. A black car was seen on the other side of the river a few hundred metres away by passersby ...



Fig. 25: Uncle Roy and Ngardarb Riches with Uncle Roy's mural story, 2014. Artwork by Tony and Ngardarb Francine Riches. Acrylic paints on side of transportable tin building in Melton Victoria. 7m x 2.5m Digital image. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Assimilation, 1957–70

In 1955 the newly elected Victorian Premier Henry Bolte commissioned Charles McLean to review and recommend changes to Victoria's Aboriginal Affairs policy. McLean reported on the conditions under which Aboriginal people lived (McLean and Parliament of Victoria 1957). It was reported that 59 adults and 107 children lived on the flats near Mooroopna, and that most of the people lived in squalid conditions: their 'humpies are mostly constructed of old timber, flattened kerosene tins, and hessian' (McLean and Parliament of Victoria 1957, 6). The report also described the conditions as being 'very primitive' (McLean and Parliament of Victoria 1957, 6). It seems a very biased viewpoint from the governing authorities. So instead of trying to help the people by providing much-needed essential provisions, the consensus of the authorities was to remove the children from their families.

The river

People of the river country flourished with provisions of crayfish, red fin, yellow belly, cod, turtle and their eggs, and eggs from swans and ducks. Possum and rabbit were eaten as well. The river today is very muddy, very unlike how it was back then. Then the river water was clear, which made fishing and collecting crays easier. The women would collect most of the fish while the men would hunt for rabbits by smoking them out of their burrows and then hitting them with a *boondie* (club).

The river was also serviced by several springs which ran down the banks. The river was also used for bathing and washing clothes. Pulleys were used to haul water up the steep banks from the river.

The people of The Flats often moved during the floods to what is known as Dashes Paddock. There were those who chose to remain in Dashes Paddock after the floods and Uncle Roy's family was one of them. This site is now home to Kids Town Adventure Playground (River Connect 2011).

Figure 26 shows the exact areas where the Aboriginal camps were situated, known as The Flats. The Goulburn River runs through it. This area holds very significant memories for Uncle Roy. This is where the boat came from across the other side and took him and his sibling away from their family.

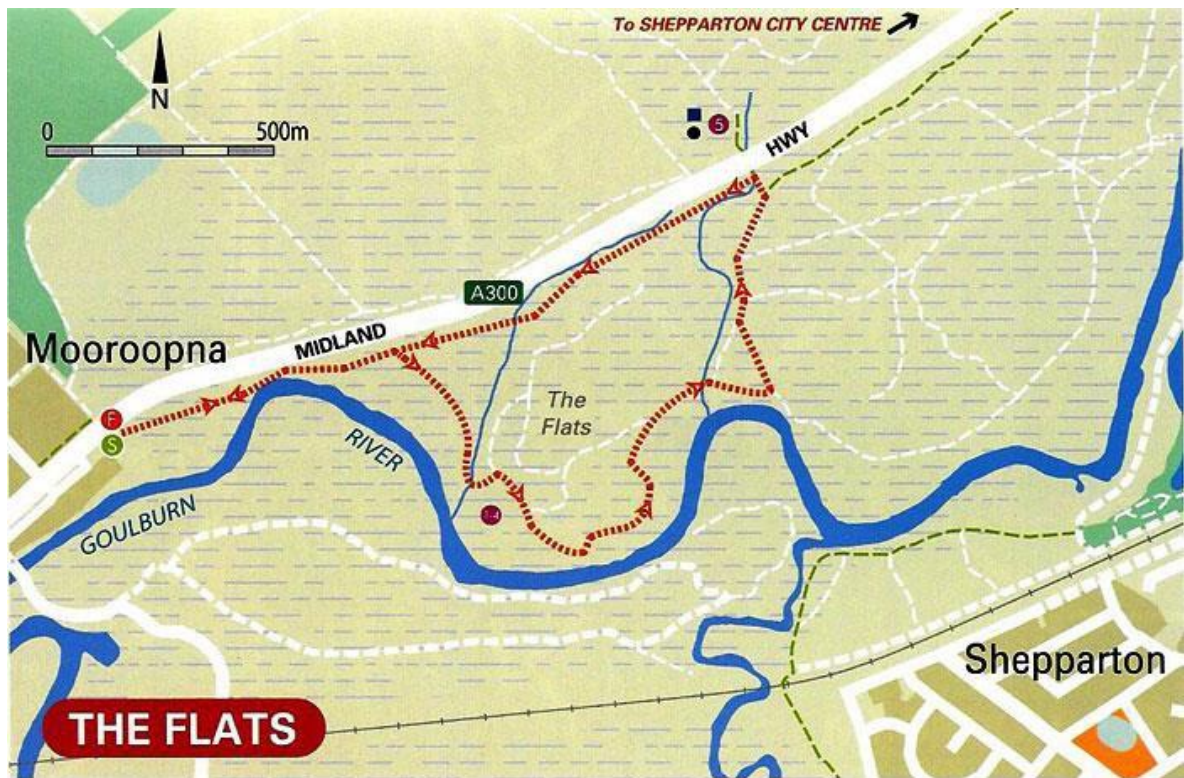


Fig. 26: Shepparton Interfaith Network, *The Flats*, 2015. Digital map.

<https://sheppartoninterfaith.org.au/?p=1038>.

The black car memory remained extremely traumatic for Uncle Roy and he is still coming to terms with the experience, the hurt and its sequela even to this day. A worried look and a sickly feeling came over Uncle Roy as he continued to tell me his story. The black car is not unique to Uncle Roy's experience; it appears in many memoirs of others who were taken from their communities. This memoir *Follow the Rabbit-proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington (Martu) (1996) (see Figures 27 and 28), and subsequent film, includes a storyline that portrays a similar black car being driven by people in suits who are observed going into an Aboriginal camp in Western Australia to remove the children in that story. The scene is one of many that portrays the realities of what really happened in the stealing of the children back then and how this occurred. The story of Molly, Daisy and Grace in *Rabbit-proof Fence* captures the essence of the time when children were being taken and thus the beginning of the traumas that they and many others suffered subsequently.

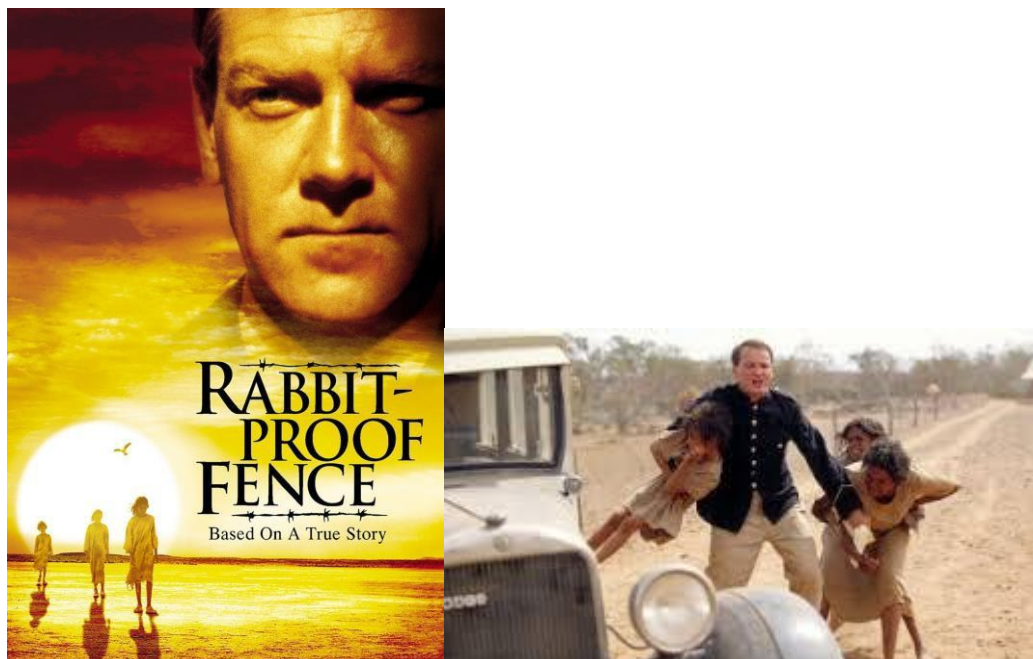


Fig. 27: Phillip Noyce (Dir.) and Doris Pilkington Garimara (story), *Rabbit-proof Fence*, 2002. Promotional image. Rotten Tomatoes website.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rabbitproof_fence

Fig. 28: Phillip Noyce (Dir.) and Doris Pilkington Garimara (story), *Rabbit-proof Fence*, 2002. Screenshot. Rotten Tomatoes website.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rabbitproof_fence

‘We travelled it seemed forever!’ said Uncle Roy.

The children were excited to be riding in a lovely car, but the driver kept going further away into unfamiliar territory. Hours passed, and the children then started to feel something very wrong was happening to them. This was supposed to be a short ride, but it was turning into hours of travelling.

We were all getting quite scared now but afraid to ask the question which occupied our minds. The thoughts of home brought welcome relief from this sickening feeling seeping through the children. Anxiety turned into panic quickly.

‘I want to go back home,’ said Nancy.

This is when fear and anxiety turned into flowing waterworks on the faces of each child seated in the black car. Our cries fell on deaf ears it seemed as we continued our journey down to Melbourne, which went on forever.

We eventually arrived at some processing facility. Large groups of children were already there. Days later my older sister Betty, younger brother Bob and I were placed in a family cottage, but Bob was then taken and placed elsewhere. The homes we were put in were called Sutherland Children's Homes in Diamond Valley on the outskirts of Melbourne.

The abuse and horror started at this supposedly safe home for many of us children.

The Royal Commission commenced its investigation of the Stolen Generations in 1995. *Bringing Them Home* is the report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (HREOC 1997). The report marked a pivotal moment in the controversy that has since come to be known as the Stolen Generations.

Aboriginal organisations pushed for a national inquiry as early as 1990. The Secretariat of the National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC 1992) resolved at its national conference in 1992 to demand a national inquiry. Other state Aboriginal organisations were also active in demanding an inquiry during this period.

In 1994, the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia (ALSWA) began soliciting statements from Aboriginal people who had been removed from their families as children or who were parents of removed children. ALSWA interviewed more than 600 people during this time and produced a report titled *Telling our Story* (ALSWA 1995).

This was the beginning of the darkest hours for Uncle Roy. A year later, as a nine year old, he wanted to end his life, so he climbed a high tree, way up to the top, and allowed himself to drop, hoping this would take him away from the pain, loneliness and uncertainty that was now his experience being in this home. Every branch of that tree caught him gently, he recalls, and not a single bone was broken. The horrors continued;

Uncle Roy felt abandoned by his family. He was told his family did not care about him and, worse still, was told his mother had died.

I told Uncle Roy that there was no pressure for him to come to our Aboriginal church. Unseen forces tried to stop him from even approaching the building; he also had a card with our number to call. Uncle Roy said, 'I walked around that block four times trying to get the courage to approach the building' (Yorta Yorta, Uncle Roy, 2010/11, conversation with Ngardarb Riches). He eventually retrieved our number and called my husband's mobile. Surprisingly, he got through to us (we believed that we were out of mobile range). Both Uncle Roy and I saw this as divine intervention!

That weekend, Uncle Roy entered our church building very courteously, still not sure that this was the right thing to do. He sat at the back of the church wearing a black t-shirt that had tombstones and an inscription with these words: *I am nobody's child: died as an eight-year-old*. Uncle Roy felt that he had died as a result of his experiences.

He later revealed that he had been very nervous about coming, but he somehow knew this experience was going to be something different. He heard for the first time that somebody loved him. He heard my husband Tony say the words 'Jesus loves you' and he describes the impact of those words, that they 'penetrated his soul'. Somebody loved him but how could this be, as this was a church like the one he was forced to attend for so many years while living in the home? He had been filled with hatred then and no love had ever been allowed to enter his soul or mind (Yorta Yorta, Uncle Roy, 2010/11, conversation with Ngardarb Riches). It is no wonder that Uncle Roy had so much disregard for the church – he was a victim of one of most trusted workers, a man who effectively had 'disguised himself in sheep's clothing', so to speak. There were other instances where Uncle Roy wanted to end his life. Later during his adult life, the trauma still plagued him so much so that he attempted to electrocute himself by walking on live wires, but he lived to tell this story. Other instances included taking an overdose of medication, but he woke up. Hanging himself was another attempt, but the rope broke. Lastly, he parked his car on a railway crossing but the train stopped! I believe, and Uncle Roy agrees, that something supernatural had kept him from successfully taking his life.

At the age of 16, Uncle Roy was given a small bundle of food and clothing and told he could leave. The uncertainty of his future did not overshadow the feelings of freedom he finally had when he walked out of that prison, he had been forced to live in. He recalls this freedom could have come earlier when nice-looking families came to adopt children from homes. He was told to stay in his room or out of sight when these visitors came. He wondered why even these people were not interested in adopting him. He later connected that those reasons were to hide the abuse he was enduring.

His freedom soon brought the realisation that life on the outside also had its challenges. He was homeless, never told about where he could go to try and find his family or kin. He did not know if he was Aboriginal – whiteness was drummed into him. Uncle Roy survived on milk money he had to pinch from doorsteps of homes nearby. His camp was under bridges and anywhere that felt safe and warm. The milkman's income dwindled dramatically and he eventually caught up to Roy, who was taken to the authorities and was made to work on farms and anywhere he could. He worked hard for food and at times generosity popped its head up and he saved until he could afford a place to live.

Uncle Roy remembers living and working on a farm out near Wallam, outside of Melbourne. He was given a room near the barn, which was not that comfortable but better than living out in the elements. Loneliness crept in often and he missed his family dearly. At least in the homes he often saw his sister Betty. One Christmas felt particularly hard – the family he was working for on this farm gave him a tin of baked beans while they lavished themselves with scrumptious delicacies on their table. Laughter and happiness spilled out of their home while this lonely teenager sat under the trees eating baked beans for Christmas.

Later as an adult, Uncle Roy discovered that his mother had never stopped looking for him – she ended up in an asylum in Melbourne, traumatised by the many years of searching unsuccessfully for her children.

Uncle Roy went looking for his mother's grave in 2014. He was told she was buried in the Coburg Cemetery, so he decided to make the trip over there with a lady friend. It was a cold and rainy day, he told me. When they got to the Coburg Cemetery, they looked everywhere in the place they were told to look. After a while, Uncle Roy and his friend started to get discouraged and a thought came into his mind, which I am sure was God's way of talking to him. 'Turn around,' said this voice in his mind and there, just behind where they stood, was a plaque on the wall that said MAVIS. This is when the tears just flowed out of his body like a river. 'Mum!' he cried. The emotion was overwhelming. He poured out his heart and wept. Sorrow replaced the hate he had for his mother. He had listened to all the lies about her not wanting him and his older sister and younger brother, and about abandoning them: 'Little did we realise it was just the opposite. She went insane looking for us!'

One of our healing methodologies at CoHealth was to physically take a few of our Stolen Generations Elders back to country. It was in 2012 that the trip back to the river country near the great Murray and Goulburn rivers took place. We took two Elders, one being Uncle Roy and the other was Aunty Vivienne Huston. Aunty Isobel, who was also taken from that country, was supposed to go with us, but unfortunately, days before our planned trip, she died. Aunty Isobel, who was a lot older than Uncle Roy, had lived with her parents and family down by the river. Uncle Denis Atkinson, who also told his story to us, remembers living with his family around the corner of the river bend from Aunty Isobel's home.

Aunty Isobel's story

Aunty Isobel told of events that happened when she and her siblings were taken away from their parents from where they camped down by the Murray River (Yorta Yorta, Aunty Isobel, Time Immemorial) This also happened to Aunty Isobel where her own children were also taken. Aunty Isobel recalled being visited by official-looking white people who offered to take her out shopping for food and other stuff. Her response was,

‘I have the children in pyjamas ready for bed,’ as it was after dark when these people came to her home.

They proceeded to say, ‘We can leave someone here with them while we take you.’ Oblivious to their evil intentions, she agreed because they seemed nice. Once she was taken out shopping, the children were all put into the black car and taken away. The realisation gripped her when she came back home to an empty house.

For years, with an aching heart, she never stopped looking for her children. She somehow got news that her eldest daughter was sent to the Cootamundra Training Home in New South Wales, the exact place she was placed in care when the authorities stole her from her own Mum and Dad.

Eventually Aunty Isobel went and lived in the town of Cootamundra, just to get a glimpse of her daughter when the children from the homes travelled to school and back each day or on odd occasions when they were seen around the town with their workers. If she could, she wanted to go and grab her daughter and run as fast as she could.

Years passed and after countless letters to and from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, she was finally granted the children for holidays. In conversations with Aunty Isobel in 2010, she told me that her determination to keep her children made her run away with the kids from the authorities and remain with them in hiding, travelling through various eastern states (Yorta Yorta, Aunty Isobel Loy, 2010, in conversation with Ngardarb Riches).

I first met Aunty Isobel in 2010 when she came rushing into our church service at the Footscray Church of Christ building on Gordon Street, which we used for our services at night. Her first reaction was when she entered was, ‘What’s going on here?’

She saw our Aboriginal flag stuck on the window, which was easily seen from the bus window when the bus drove past. We – my husband and I, who started the church – wanted our mob to see the flag and feel free to come in. Our people are very cautious when it comes to church buildings because of the past experiences and tales of ancestors being taken to missions and settlements by religious organisations with whom the

government used to place children and, later, families. She wanted to know more about us and what sort of church service we were conducting. Aunty Isobel and her family became regulars' members of our meetings until she passed away in 2012. She found a home in our gatherings every week: 'This was no ordinary church, this was "our church,"' she often said.

Before Aunty Isobel's death, I received a call from her while travelling back to Melbourne from the country. She said she was looking forward to our planned camping trip back to her country as part of our arts program. She sounded so happy and joyous that morning, little did I expect that would be the last time I spoke to her. We received another call in less than five minutes from her family, saying that she had a heart attack and was not expected to last long.

The next day Tony and I were called by her family to come to the Intensive Care Unit at Footscray Hospital. They had all gathered there to say their last farewells. I felt privileged to be asked to go in and say my last goodbye. As I held her hand, I said that she was not to worry now, we will take care of her family and that she needed to take Jesus by the hand and go ... tears rolled down her face, which was the only acknowledgment she gave.

Aunty Isobel lived her life always looking over her shoulder. It is no wonder she kept her family close. She had to steal her children back and was on the run, often travelling between states to hide her children. The family had no permanent dwelling place – they were always on the go. Her family is still part of our lives and the ones that still lived with her are regular members of our Aboriginal Church.



Fig. 29: State Archives and Records Authority of New South Wales, *Cootamundra Training Home for Girls – front view, c. 1911–40. Digital Photograph.*

https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/image/4346_a020_a020000148

Aunty Isobel's life story was so full of sadness. The following paragraphs give a clear picture of what life would have been like for those young Aboriginal girls who were taken from their parents and sent to the Cootamundra Training Home (Figure 29).

Cootamundra Training Home was established in 1911, in the disused Cootamundra District Hospital, which had been built in 1889 and occupied a prominent position on a hill near the town (Find & Connect n.d.). Cootamundra Girls' Home was mentioned in the *Bringing Them Home* report (HREOC 1997, n.p.) as an institution that housed Indigenous children removed from their families.

The home was unique, as it was the only government-run home designed to train girls for domestic service. It was only for Aboriginal girls and has a significant place in the history of the Stolen Generations in New South Wales (HREOC 1997).

The literature describes a government home administered under the Aborigines Protection Board policies. As with similar situations, there is always an underlying factor for the establishment of such institutions in which the true reason for the initiative gets sugar coated. This was the case with the Cootamundra Home, which boasted of educational opportunities for orphans and neglected children. However, the true purpose of this institution was as a training school to change the behaviour of girls who had grown up on Aboriginal reserves. This would make them acceptable for ‘apprenticing’ to white employers (Find & Connect n.d.). In reality, this could more truthfully be seen as a move to remove the young Aboriginal people from their families and communities and to make them live as white people. Research also reports that most of the girls who went to live in Cootamundra were aged 13 or older and had living parents, and that few of the young girls attended school. Cootamundra continued to train girls for domestic service long after the practice had been abandoned for non-Aboriginal girls. It also mentions that non-Indigenous girls were sent there too at first.

There was a perception among the white population that all Aboriginal girls were falling victim to preying assaults by non-Aboriginal men and that they needed redeeming from their fallen souls. In hindsight the motivation of care for Aboriginal girls could be accepted as honourable. However, the perception was that if you were not assimilated into white society, then you were already tainted. In Mr Maloga, Cato (1993, 54) states that there was a need for protection of young Aboriginal girls who were falling victim to white men. Cato (1993, 54) went on to say that the Cootamundra girls slept in two dormitories, holding up to 25 girls each, and did all the cleaning, laundry and gardening work in the home. The regime at the home was hard, and former residents report being terrified at the thought they might be punished by being locked in a storeroom that they believed had been a morgue.

In 1940 the Aborigines Protection Board was replaced by the Aborigines Welfare Board. The regime at the home became slightly more liberal, although it must be said the Aborigines Welfare Board instigated these changes to provide opportunities for Aboriginal girls to assimilate with white mainstream culture (Find & Connect n.d.).

The Aborigines Welfare Board was eventually closed down in 1969. This was then taken over by the New South Wales Department of Youth and Community Services and

run as a girls' home. In 1975 the buildings were sold to the Young Aboriginal Land Council and renamed Bimbadeen. In 2014 Bimbadeen was still in use as an Aboriginal-run Christian training centre.

It was not long after 1975 that the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship (AEF) of Australia took over the lease of the property on 10 February 1979. I first visited Bimbadeen in 1985 with my husband on a Christian ministry tour. The recently published book *A Celebration of God's Faithfulness* (Naden et al. 2017, 5), to which I contributed as one of four editors, talks about the founding of the AEF and the training at Bimbadeen:

It is about 50 years since the AEF Constitution was drawn up and part of the Statement of Purposes reads:

'To bring together Evangelical Christian people of Aboriginal and Islander descent from various parts of Australia for united fellowship and service.'
(Naden et al. 2017, 5)

In summing up, the bad situation that happened at Cootamundra, was, many years later, turned around and used by Aboriginal people for good. The name Cootamundra Girls Homes will always have a lingering sadness but when some of us Aboriginal people look upon it now, we see it as a negative turned positive. It became a Bible College and life skills centre in 1979. By 2004, the Bimbadeen Bible College closed its doors and became a campsite that catered for youth, family and women's ministry. I take a bus full of ladies from our church in Melbourne for a long weekend camp annually. It is now a beautiful and relaxing campsite that can still be used for life coaching and training. It is even used for families of the Stolen Generations to revisit those trauma years. A well was dug in front of the old buildings and has a picture of some of the young girls standing around the well. One of those girls seen on that picture is Aunty Isobel Loy! Aunty Isobel was planning to make a trip with us one day back to Cootamundra and Bimbadeen, before she sadly died but her two daughters-in-law made the trip with us on her behalf. At first it was confronting for them and it was very emotional for all of us attending. It did ease some of those painful memories, as the daughters-in-law returned and shared information about their experience there.

Aunty Maureen Atkinson's story

Aunty Maureen Atkinson, who was born Maureen Dare, is a descendant of the Barngarla people who call Port Augusta their tribal home. Port Augusta is situated 310 kilometres north of Adelaide in South Australia (Barngarla, Aunty Maureen Atkinson, Time Immemorial).

Over the years Aunty Maureen often spoke of her mother, Edna Dare. In later years, Aunty Maureen said, her mum was known by family as the Barngarla Queen.

Mum's great-grandfather ... was a senior, and much respected, tribal man and it was part of his role to meet and welcome people moving into yarta (country). If I were to greet you in those days, I would have said, 'Ninna Yoowa' Meaning 'Are you good?' (Naden et al. 2017, xii)

Aunty Maureen Atkinson, who I have personally known for more than 30 years, has shared her story in church gatherings and conferences over the years. In our casual conversations she has often reflected on memories from long ago. She was one of the children who were taken to the Umeewarra Mission run by the Brethren Assembly in Port Augusta (Barngarla, Aunty Maureen, 2015-2018, conversation with Ngardarb Riches). She recalls being sent to this mission because life at home was difficult – her father was an alcoholic. She talks of fond memories living at the Umeewarra Mission and felt loved and cared for. However, the years away from her family did mean that she was not able to practise her language anymore, which has been a great loss to her. When she heard about her Barngarla language being revived, she started to feel that something was being put back into her life.

When the Barngarla people started to get involved in reclaiming their language there were opportunities for the group to start doing art therapy with a trained therapist in Adelaide. This ran for many weeks on and off as people found time to do it. Aunty Maureen and some of her family members started to paint their stories, which included their culture and language. This was healing to her body and soul which, she remarked on several occasions. Figure 30 shows Aunty Maureen with an artwork that she created at this time. The painting is about her life's journey.



Fig. 30: Aunty Maureen and her story on canvas that she painted 2020. 48"x36"
Digital image. Atkinson Collection, Bangerang nation, Cummeragunya.

Uncle Denis Atkinson's story

Uncle Denis Atkinson's story was not about being taken like the other Elders mentioned in this thesis. He remembers living on the banks of the Murray River as a child with his family (Bangerang, Uncle Denis Atkinson, Time Immemorial). I wanted to add his memories because it reinforces the stories of what happened to the other Elders. Uncle Denis is a retired Aboriginal Pastor who my husband and I worked closely with over the years, and we have heard his experiences of living not very far away from Aunty Isobel and her family. In lots of ways, he and his siblings were lucky that they were not affected by being removed from their family. Uncle Denis has mentioned in the past

that he knew Aunty Isobel because he remembered as a young boy seeing her walking past daily with her siblings to get to school. Like Uncle Roy's story, as they attended a local school, it must have been the same for Aunty Isobel and her brothers and sisters.

My story

I include my personal story of being hidden in our camp in Derby, in the north-western Kimberley, in a reserve on the edge of town. This is when the Department of Native Welfare assimilated our whole tribe from the pristine white beaches and crystal-clear waters of the Dampier Archipelago when it forcefully closed our mission (Riches 2014, 9).

I was born in 1964 in Derby, Western Australia. My mother gave birth to me a kilometre away from where we lived on the reserve, on the other side of town where the so-called 'Native Hospital' stood: this was a facility managed by nuns, who delivered me into this world. Although a district hospital was operating in the town, it mainly serviced the local white population and surrounding pastoralists and their families. Our families did not feel welcome to seek medical attention at the district hospital. It was only if an emergency required them to have extra care, and even then the patient was isolated on the far perimeter of the wards, away from the white patients.

The assimilation of my tribe had started five years previously. The government of the day, under the *Native Welfare Act 1954* (WA), decided that the Bardi/Jawi people of Sunday Island Mission needed to be herded up to Derby and placed together with other tribes in a reserve on the edge of town. As a little girl I was constantly being hidden in and around the makeshift camp of the Bardi/Jawi, who shared the reserve with other inland tribes. My grandparents' greatest fear was that the dreaded welfare workers who constantly patrolled the perimeters of the camps would find me. Children who were coloured were easily seen and taken away by the Native Welfare authorities. So, my grandmother was vigilant in her care for me, having had her oldest daughter, Annie (my aunty), taken away from her on Sunday Island in the early 1940s. Figure 31 and 32).

My grandmother Dolly was taken to Broome when she was 16 years of age by her mother, Annie D'Antoine, in 1929–30. Of course, she needed permission from the Chief Protector of Aborigines, A. O. Neville, before embarking on this venture. Grandmother sought employment with Mrs Chapel, who was a member of one of the white families living in Broome during the booming pearling days. I often admired my grandmother's fine knitting skills, which she acquired while working as a maid for the English women. It was during her time in Broome that she met the father of her first daughter. He abandoned her soon after she fell pregnant. This may have been because he did not want an Aboriginal child, which was not a rare thing in those days unfortunately!

After her daughter was born, Dolly took Annie back to her beloved Sunday Island, where she married my grandfather Moochoo tribally. A formal marriage was later recorded in Watchelum or Kunmunya Mission, which was an old Anglican mission across the King Sound on Worrorra tribal country, where my grandfather has tribal and family links (Jiiba Nganman Jawal 2002). When Annie was seven years old, the Native Welfare came to Sunday Island and took her – just like that, without asking or explaining why. The only explanation was that coloured children were better off being parented by a system that wanted to breed out the Aboriginal race. My grandparents were told that she needed to go to the native hospital for a medical check-up and they did not see her again until many years later.

Annie as a young woman probably in her twenties was seen at a nearby mission by family members who called in there to drop supplies off. She was easily recognised by her striking looks, which mirrored her mother's. When asked who she was, straight away she was found to be the missing child of my grandmother. By then she had been living at Beagle Bay Mission for quite some time and had already a family of her own and took into care other children who needed a family (Figure 31).

30.8.41 Annie was sent to Moola Bulla by mail plane. 3. 12. Annie
 cured returns Moola Bulla Station. 13. 12. 1941 returned to
 Sunday Island

Fig. 31: Grandmother's daughter Annie being sent away at the age of seven, 1941.
 Copy of government documents, Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

22.8.39 C.N.A. does not wish action taken at present regarding the
 removal of Annie: 23.5.40 Inspector McBeath discussed matter with
 Supt. Sunday Island Mission and they both agree on having Annie
 brought to Derby Native Hospital and placed in care of Q/C.
 20.8.40 Annie is now at Derby Native Hospital. Q/C. reports she
 is darker in colour than a quadroon. It is thought the swarthy
 complexion of her alleged father account for this: 16.11.40 A
 smear taken of Annie shows she has positive gonorrhoea and she is
 receiving treatment for such complaint: 18.1.41 On Ins. McBeath's
 suggestion, C.N.A. instructs Annie is to be sent to Moola Bulla when
 cured: Annie's family tree is as follows

```

  graph TD
    A[Frenchy D'Antoine] --- B[Annie D'Antoine H.C.]
    A --- C[Full-Blood Woman]
    B --- D[Dolly H.C.]
    B --- E[Bobby Ah Chu H.C.]
    D --- F[Annie, 1/2 Caste]
    E --- G[Sydney Ratric White]
  
```

21.3.41 C.N.A. approved of Annie being given the surname of D'Antoine

Fig. 32: Annie's removal documentation, 1941. Copy of government documents,
 Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.⁵

⁵ In reference to figure 31 government document does not reflect true reasons for taking Annie away from my grandmother. My family maintains the knowledge that she was a healthy and happy child.

There were days when my grandmother would rub charcoal on me and a bit of oil and hide me in the camp. Unknown to me, it was her way of hiding me from the authorities who had the powers to take me away. However, this charade came to an end because I was eventually seen by the Native Welfare and questions were being asked.

Some of the missionaries who had to move with the people from Sunday Island were also living in Derby at the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) base. Bardi/Jawi people were still strongly connected to the church and some still worked at the Amy Bethel Hostel which was like a boarding house for Aboriginal school children or did gardening at the UAM people's church. The rest of the missionary families were relocated around the Kimberly, where the UAM conducted its work with various other language groups, and some went to different parts of the country (United Aborigines Mission 1994, 31). One missionary family, the Holms, who still worked at Derby and still cared for and connected with the Bardi/Jawi people, intervened when the Native Welfare started to question why I was still at the reserve and had not been sent away, or why my grandparents were raising me. My mother, Gladys Davey, was given away in a tribal marriage to my stepfather, Robert Hunter. They both lived in Broome at that time.

When I was born, my biological father, Norman Munro, separated from my mother. My father's adopted mother denied the fact that I was his daughter because I was fair-skinned. Munro, even though he knew I was his child, did not make any attempts to go and see my mother in hospital to rectify this matter and ease the pain of uncertainty for my mother. Mum said later that she waited for him to come and sign the forms for my birth certificate but fear probably made this hard for him. Also, my grandfather, being the proud Bardi/Jawi boss man, quickly stopped any attempts by Munro to reconnect with me. Grandfather then decided on mum's tribal marriage to my stepfather a year or two later. Mum then moved to Morgan camp in Broome to live with my stepfather's family, who are the traditional owners of Bulgin area near Cape Leveque.

Mr Holms, one of the missionaries from the UAM mission (United Aborigines Mission) had to accompany my grandparents to the courts to seek legal advice for custody of me, which would keep the Native Welfare authorities, and their intentions, at bay. My grandparents had to justify their care of me. It was God's goodness and grace that

turned fate around, and I was granted permission to stay with my family at Derby in the hope that we would one day go back to our home on the islands.

I have told you the stories of our Stolen Generations aunties and uncles who have crossed my path and a strong connection of trust was formed. I also wanted to tell you a little of my story. I have felt the burdensome intergenerational trauma that was unwillingly passed down to me and the traumatic experiences of living in that era (Riches 2014, 24):

We did not anticipate history's ugliness that was thrust upon us. I was born during this sad time in the lives of my people and family members who were stolen from Sunday Island years before I was born.

When I became an artist in the early years of my life, I was able to express those traumas in a subtle way in my paintings. Stories I told on my canvases helped release some of the bondage I carried. What was fundamental also to my healing was the understanding that God was with me through those troubled times. My faith deepened and I felt an overwhelming presence that guided me along my life's journey. It is with this strength I am able to help others along their journeys of life.

Chapter Four: My art as a model for healing

This chapter analyses my approach to healing through art by documenting the healing processes that took place in the context of several art groups and projects that I have facilitated. I begin by explaining what is meant by healing through art, and by elaborating on my personal approach to healing in my art practice. I then provide case studies based on people and projects detailed in the previous chapters. In doing this I consider what is meant by healing in relation to arts practices in the Australian Aboriginal context. I also discuss the foundations of my art practice and teaching as healing and how they heal in the community, as well as what others may learn from this.

Here I consider my practice as an Aboriginal artist and explore all the elements within my art making that pertain to health and wellbeing. I focus on my experience as an art practitioner who has guided many people, young and old, in exploring their own journeys of healing. My focus has been on how we can use the visual arts to help us heal. The projects that I have facilitated, which are discussed below, have given me firsthand experience and knowledge about the complexities of intergenerational trauma that our Elders have had handed down to them and to their families. This experience has contributed to the development of my practice of healing through art.

What is healing through the arts?

Liyan is a word we use in Bardi/Jawi to describe our heart, our inner emotions. This word associated with our feelings is perhaps the linking word that covers everything related to healing. People's *Liyan* was happy and as a child growing up in semi-traditional culture, I was a member of a tribe in which people sang or danced after being painted up, and this gave them a feeling of achievement and pride. The paint that was applied had layers of meaning. A young Bardi/Jawi man must earn respect and must prove his worth at the various levels as he participates in ceremony. As a Bardi/Jawi woman I am forbidden to elaborate on the men's lore, but this example shows the fundamental importance of making art in my culture.

Art brings about a sense of control and creativity, which then enables the freedom to express one's emotions and thought patterns. I have found this to be true in my work as an artist, when I experience a relaxed state of emotions that have enabled me to be myself and have the freedom to explore and express my creative nature. Doing art is being in my own world and having the flexibility to explore my non-verbal parameters of myself.

Jennie Kristel (2013) talks about how we are surrounded by art today whether we realise it or not: art in nature is all around us. She goes on to say that we are often connected through artistic mediums – dancing, playing music or painting. Kristel focuses on art as a primary healing mechanism in the way it can transform our lives. She writes that art therapy can be used to promote positive social change and social justice and that, for many people, it is in fact a form of coping with their world, a way to understand the chaos of their minds and the world around them.

“Artistic expression is increased in expressive arts therapies that use visual art and other modalities like writing, music, drama and dance to help people express themselves in ways that might not be possible in other forms of therapy”. Kristel (2013) emphasises that there is a continuing need for more research into using the arts in various populations, as well as using arts therapies in other cultures. In this thesis I have responded to this stated need by providing insight into the roles of art and healing in my own practices, situated within the Australian Indigenous context. Although this thesis has not been undertaken within the discipline of art therapy, my practice shares with art therapy the fundamental idea that practising art can facilitate healing. I have often wondered why we, as Aboriginal people, have challenges relating to or using Western concepts of learning. From personal experiences I have often felt as though I had a mental block and could not fully engage with the Western learning styles that were normal in mainstream Australia. I have been aware for a very long time of many of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have many times struggled to conform to Western styles of learning and teaching, disadvantaging them in numerous ways. Art offers a way out of this ‘blockage’ and an opportunity to connect and interact on a different level.

Deep listening, art therapy and my approach

Judy Atkinson, whose therapeutic methodologies I refer to throughout this thesis, has developed projects and methodologies that are directly linked to our cultural methods of healing. One of these methods is deep listening, a tool that I acquired quite early in my childhood when my family went hunting and gathering food. Deep listening is an example of the benefits of using and applying an Indigenous lens in developing methodologies for healing. In addition, the practice of deep listening (Atkinson 2002, 98) has been used for generations by Aboriginal people and is influenced by empathy and by entering the world of a person who is present and needing help. I am reminded about the countless times that I have had to stand still and listen very carefully for the sounds of native bees. They are tiny native bees that produce beautiful honey that our ancestors taught us to find and enjoy. The notion here is the stillness and deep listening to the sounds of the bush to enable the discovery of the prized honey. In life it is pretty much the same way. When a person is seeking healing, their lives are usually in a complicated maze. This complicates their lives and in most cases the situation gets out of control and unhealthy habits may form. This is where art can intervene and direct those negative energies towards a platform for expression.

Scattered Tribes healing journey

In Australia the effects of colonisation, dispossession and the Stolen Generations has taken its toll on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The generational hurts are still evident, being passed down through families that have suffered trauma. My Scattered Tribes Art Group used storytelling in a supported environment, where we all journeyed together to explore each person's story. For those who were just beginning their search for their identity, finding that connection to family heritage, cultural belonging and links to their ancestral land is a vital part of this healing journey.

Doing art, whether painting, drawing, creating or simply yarning, enabled each participant to be at ease with their space and the environment we created by simply being together as a group. Expressions of their journey were told using the art techniques that each person felt comfortable to use. I was astounded at the level of depth and detail that was expressed through art. For most, revisiting the hurts of their

ancestors, family members and their own experiences was very emotional, but it did help to do this in a supportive group session or sometimes individually. For others, becoming aware of their Aboriginality for the first time is exciting and new, but also challenging and nerve-wracking. When discoveries revealed traumatic past experiences of families and tribes, this was even harder. Incorporating outings to heritage museums or local Aboriginal heritage centres to do research and gather information about their connection to country was vitally important. Revisiting sites was also an option for those who were taken from family and culture. This was the case for Uncle Roy, whose story I have told earlier. In the following paragraphs I detail his journey towards healing.

Journey towards healing for Uncle Roy

Uncle Roy's narrative in Chapter Three gave us a glimpse of his life as a young child living on the banks of the Goulburn River with his family and community. The trauma he experienced after being taken away prompted me to explore avenues of healing that my art and other arts practices could offer. One of these avenues of healing was to journey back to Uncle Roy's country. A camping trip in 2012 was organised with a few staff members from Western Region Health (known today as CoHealth).

The first night we camped at Morning Glory, a camping site with cabins and good-quality accommodation. Unbeknown to us, this was where the old Maloga Mission was located from 1864 to 1902, before the Cummeragunya mission existed several kilometres away. That night each of us settled into our selected accommodation. The next day brought unfamiliar emotions for all of us. Uncle Roy seemed tense and said that he heard the gum trees around him talking. Each had their own stories to tell, he told us. It reminded me of the trees back in Maribyrnong at the Pipe Makers Park that became his family – during his darkest moments he often visited the park and got acquainted with the family of trees that he said became his family. The psychological side of this is something I do not fully understand but I know that the Creator can allow His creation to heal us. After a couple of years, the trees stopped talking to him. He said that when he found God, he did not need to keep talking to them. Uncle Roy learned how to develop coping strategies that enabled him to live a normal life. These strategies can be explored in depth by professional therapist and mental health professionals.

At Morning Glory, Uncle Roy's conversation with the trees flowed about his family the trees: we understood that he was creating his own world to keep himself safe. Just like he had created and kept little Roy inside himself.

After breakfast we continued our journey to Mooroopna but first made a visit to Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative, where we discovered more information about The Flats and how the people lived by the river where Uncle Roy was taken from. We then made our way down to the old camp. The old camp was unrecognisable, but Uncle Roy knew where to go, and he led us to the exact place. There was a calming stillness as we descended towards the river, even three birds stood still as if sensing the emotions between us all. We followed closely behind Uncle Roy and we all sat on some fallen trees and watched as he neared the water's edge on the Goulburn River. He proceeded to take his shoes and socks off and gently walked into the cool water. It was truly a sight to see, almost magical. After a good five minutes of immersing his feet into this waterway, he came out and the relief on his face was evident. He said to us, 'I brought little Roy home!'

What an extraordinary and wonderful experience we all had, sharing his anguish as he led us back to the very spot from where he was taken and to almost see little Roy being put back on his country and feel his relief. I believe this was guarded by a higher source: The Creator of all things (God).

The mural healing

Following on from this trip, we undertook a second project with Uncle Roy: a mural project at the CoHealth mental health site. (Figure 25) The mural was created on the side of a transportable building on the property. Uncle Roy recreated his story by helping us to paint a mural of the events that took place when he was stolen from his home. This project took three months to complete because it had to be done in line with what Uncle Roy could handle – revisiting those memories was still raw and we could only work one day a week. It was an emotional time for him as each week we painted his memory. One day each week we slowly drew or painted a patch as Uncle Roy

described what happened to him and his siblings and friends. Step by step we drew his story and painted it on the walls of the building. The most hurtful memory was the black car, which was the last piece to be added to the mural. The black car will always be a painful memory for Uncle Roy as it was the very object that took him away from his family and country. A treasured memory he also had was of his mother wearing a green army coat. This was included in the mural placed on an old tree trunk. He also remembered a rabbit sitting inside the hollowed-out tree trunk. These memories are further acted out in the attached video. (Appendix B, Video 2))

The mural has two parts done in two styles – Tony, my husband, did the first part, depicting the beautiful gum trees and the river. Closely monitored by Uncle Roy, Tony also painted the black car when Uncle was ready. The other part of the mural was done in my stylised painting style, to which Uncle Roy and members of our art group contributed. When the mural was finished, we celebrated this part of his journey of healing by having an official event and inviting staff and community members. A didgeridoo was played, and it seemed to say to us, ‘It is finished now’ (Figure 33).



Fig.33. Didgeridoo player with Uncle Roy's mural story, 2014. Artwork by Tony and Ngardarb Francine Riches. Acrylic paints on side of transportable tin building 7m x2.5m in Melton Victoria. Digital image. Artist's Collection, Kulin Nation, Melbourne.

Uncle Roy film project

We also undertook a film project for Uncle Roy, which was a collaboration with our Coordinator Liss Gabb who ran the CoHealth Art's Generator, her partner Rick Randal and Crystal Harris, a colleague of mine. This project was a short film using Uncle Roy's memories of his mother (Appendix B, Video 2). He could only remember part of his mother – he could only remember her from her waist down. He remembered the old government coat that she wore and where they spent time together, under the gum trees. The film represents his memory of being with his mother and how it all ended up. It shows her running down the river as the small boat rowed away with her children. Revisiting these motherly memories was a comfort to him but the pain was still there. Our artistic practice used filmmaking techniques to recreate his memories. The film also emphasised the realities of what that event looked like for children like Uncle Roy who were stolen from their families: the mother running down the river as she calls out for her children and the anguish associated with that. This film was screened at the 2017 Scattered Tribes Exhibition as mentioned.

In Chapter Three I referred to the healing process that started to happen for Uncle Roy. I mentioned how Uncle Roy sought help and discussed our connection when we first met. He was a broken man when I first met him and somehow he felt safe to confide in me and let me hear his story. Most of this started happening during artmaking but other times it was when he started attending our church. Uncle Roy reached deep within himself and in his own way reached out to God, like I did many years ago. We all saw a beautiful transformation happen before our very eyes.⁶ His life was changing and he

6 Email message from Liss Gabb to Ngardarb Riches, 2020.

Between 2012 and 2018 I collaborated with Ngardarb Riches and a small group of First Nations community members to explore their narratives as Aboriginal people from all over the country who reside in Melbourne's West. We used a non-oppressive model of practice that saw us meet weekly to talk and listen. Sometimes we experimented with a ranges arts

said on a number of occasions that the deep hole in his heart started to fill up with love, and even the medication that he had been prescribed for more than 15 years by his psychiatrist was no longer needed. He said that all those years of trying to harm himself and end his life did not work because he had a calling from God to continue his life and use it as an example to others. Not all of his troubles went away easily but slowly each day he started to learn to trust again.

modality and sometimes we just walked in the bush and in parklands that held significance for members of the group. Conversation and deep listening was the touchstone of the process we used. We called ourselves the Scattered Tribes after we saw the term on the gravestone of Wurundjeri leader William Barak.

As Scattered Tribes we created a series of works that explored experiences of loss and survival. These included a video work that depicted the moment of forced removal of Uncle Roy as a child from the banks of the Goulburn River on Yorta Yorta Country. Another member of the group played his mother as a young woman wearing a world war two, heavy woolen army coat. In the video we see her body moving through the bush, parting reeds and beckoning to the viewer to follow her. We never see her face, just her hair and hands as the camera follows her as a small child would. Uncle Roy cannot recall his mother's face and until we as a group took him back to country, could not recall the moment of removal. The return of these memories coincided with the return of his ability to read and write which had been buried with the trauma of abusive experiences in the children's home he grew up in.

In my 2015 Master's thesis titled *Agonies in the City* I write about the important role Ngardarb played in the lives of the group. 'Ngardarb is deeply connected to her culture and is the holder of a wealth of cultural stories and Indigenous ways of knowing. She provides an anchor and strong connection to culture that so many urban Aboriginal people have lost, particularly those who are members of the Stolen Generations.' (Liss Gabb 2015 *Agonies in the City*, page 48).

Creating work with the Scattered Tribes group has been a highlight of my life. The amount of personal growth I experienced through the process of engaging with the group has changed me forever. I am deeply grateful for the generosity shown and the trust given to me by Ngardarb and the members of the Scattered Tribes.

Uncle Roy by Liss Gabb 2015

Smoke rising blue across the water
Five black birds watch on high and
wait till we listen to the trees Rush
and roar against a purple sky A
broken boy is returned
Where water's dead body in golden
Tall trees so alive with ache and story
You wade out to where the light is stolen
I see you gather yourself
Into a future that is yours and ours

Sculpture (my sculpture and public art)

As I reflect on the many occasions I worked on sculptures and public art, as introduced in Chapter One and detailed in Chapter Two, I notice a pattern. For example, like with all my work, before I start creating, whether painting or starting a sculpture, the design is linked to more than just an object. It must be a thought birthed out of connection to my identity and where I am placed as a storyteller. Creating art for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comes from layers of being. Those layers could be a person's present story, which was already their family's and ancestors' story. Each piece of work can be created by an individual but its lineage ripples back to our passed-down identities. This is how our culture is carried through the ages.

My art practice contributed to my healing through the way it made me feel connected to my family, my ancestors and the Creator of all these things. As I created each piece and formed its connection to our history, it was like each stroke of brush or splash of colour recognised its place in my history. Likewise, the Elders in my art group who were disconnected or had their lives interrupted by trauma, grief and loss found a connection to their heritage. Their sense of place and of being reconnected to that long line of history with their family, tribe and ancestors brought back a special pride of ownership, of finally being put back in the continuous cycle of life.

Possum skin cloak making

The creation of the possum skin cloak (discussed in Chapter Two and in Appendix B, Video 1) was a joint effort by everyone involved in the Scattered Tribes Art Group. First there was the ordering of the skins from New Zealand. In Australia, our possums are protected but in New Zealand they are regarded as feral animals and companies do sell the skins. The next step was to cut and stitch every skin together with twine. Then each person drew their own designs on the back of the possum skin. This is like quilting, where groups of people, particularly women, participate in making a quilt together and their individual traits are revealed in the communal quilt. Like clay fields or felt work, there is a physical connection between a person and an object. As clay work is therapy for participants, so the feel of the fur and the creation of a cloak was also a great way of soothing the soul, bringing about a calming effect. Once the cloak

was made and each person wrapped it around themselves, everyone said that it was like the cloak was hugging them, which gave them a warm and embracing feeling. The artistic hands-on experience of each participant in the creating of a beautiful possum skin cloak contributed to their own healing. In the accompanying video presentation by Arun Munoz who collaborated with me on this project (as detailed in Chapter Two; see also Appendix B, Video 1), we see a step-by-step capturing of everyone's involvement and the special body language that clearly shows how engaged each person was: the emotional intensity is evident. The cloak has since been used for a number of ceremonies and other functions around the city.

Aunty Maureen and Uncle Denis

As I reflect on Aunty Maureen Atkinson's life experience, detailed in Chapter Three, I am astounded by the way art brought about healing for her and members of her Barngarla people. Resurrection of her Barngarla language happened in stages, and one of the projects that contributed to her healing was doing sessional art therapy with a professional therapist. This is where both Western art therapy and Indigenous healing through art practice came together. Aunty Maureen and her people were able to retell their traumas and life stories on canvas with watercolours. Even though the sessions were facilitated by a non-Indigenous art therapist, the content of the sessions came from within each Barngarla person. The two cultures and methods of doing art came together in producing beautifully created expressions of their stories on canvas with paints. For Aunty Maureen, the trauma and hurt lingered on for almost 70 years, as she was not able to fully express those traumatic times in her life of being taken away or stolen from her family. In the art therapy sessions, she was able to revisit those hurts in a supported environment and those hurts were laid down on large canvases (see Figure 30).

Aunty Maureen's engagement with the art therapy group was the contributing factor that enabled her healing to start. The outcome for her was letting go of those bad memories and embracing the good people in her life and making them her cherished childhood memories. Aunty Maureen would often reflect on the moments of being taken away, which meant that she was not able to fluently speak her Barngarla language, but she also stated that things were not all bad at the mission. She did feel loved and gained a strong faith in God, to which she attributes keeping a balance in her

life while she carried those traumas. She often mentioned that she was able to speak to God and that this gave her comfort.

Uncle Denis Atkinson – Aunty Maureen’s husband – has a different story (retold briefly in Chapter Three). Uncle Denis was not stolen from his family but was constantly hidden by his parents so that he and his siblings would not be taken away. During those horrific times, the family unit kept him safe but this was not the case for many others. The reason I wanted to bring Uncle Denis’s story into this larger context of children being taken away was that, as a child, he saw the effects of those unjust government policies. He noticed the disappearance of many of his friends and I guess this is proof, if ever it is refuted, that the Stolen Generations did happen. His wife was a victim but she survived and together they experienced freedom through having their own family and being in control of their lives.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This chapter concludes my research by reflecting on my initial enquiries and the subsequent process of exploring healing through the arts, my art. It demonstrates the reasons for this valuable undertaking.

I have shown you my own personal artistic journey and that of my tribes, the Bardi/Jawi and parts of the Karajarri. There is a saying among our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that echoes from beyond: ‘when you meet us and become friends with us, you are automatically linked to our families’. For instance, when I become your friend and you enter our tribal country, you are under my family care and protection if need be. In this thesis you have entered the past and have had a glimpse of our history and the atrocities that we carry today because of those past sufferings imposed on our Elders. We carry intergenerational traumas that have impacted and continue to impact on our health and wellbeing. As I have taken you on this journey, it again breaks my heart to revisit past hurts and to see that not much has happened to reconcile our nations. We are still on the margins of societies here in our own country. We still face racism and numerous issues that affect the health and wellbeing of our people. That is why it is so important to seek ways to improve our lives.

In this thesis I have argued that, yes, we as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have suffered such negative experiences, but it is time to turn the tide. I have clearly identified that the practice of art is indeed a form of healing for us. It has always been used in our culture and will continue to be a method of healing for us. I have taken you a little into the past to see the historical injustices inflicted upon my people and presented a way forward towards healing from these intergenerational injustices to a state of wellness.

In the first chapter I provided an introductory overview of who I am, a description of my art projects and the background to my art practice. I described the challenges of undertaking this thesis within a Western academic setting and our own Bardi/Jawi protocols. I described the importance of kinship, languages and cultural practices (including Caring for Country with the Bardi/Jawi Rangers and the IPA Karajarri program as an example) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and previous

approaches to supporting healing in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context, which are often overlooked. I discussed the significance of the intergenerational impact of trauma among my people, briefly describing the continuing impact of this trauma as measured through the Closing the Gap initiative. Importantly, I identified the role of my Christian faith in both my daily life and as expressed through my painting.

In Chapter Two I explained my art practice and described my artworks and their meanings. As a visual artist, I have had a platform that enables me to explore avenues of creating healing through the arts. My art practice has given me resilience to overcome those traumas we carry, and the accompaniment of my faith has added strength and comfort. In this chapter I have described my artwork through both a cultural lens and a Christian lens reflecting my biblical faith.

In Chapter Three I have described the narratives of the Stolen Generations people with whom I worked in my art practice. This was done to allow the reader to take a journey into the lives of those who were stolen from their families and have an insight into the impact of being taken away on their lives. I believe doing this section in narrative style makes it easier to fully comprehend those traumatic times. In Uncle Roy's story, I used my different voices reflective of my engagement with Uncle Roy. Various projects like the possum skin cloak making, the painting of the mural and the photography by a collaborating artist all contributed to the variations of expression. These projects gave us ample opportunities to explore and research how art was used to help move towards healing. The outcome was profoundly and truly magical. The participants of my art group clearly indicated that art gave them a voice and connected them back to their heritage and kinship structures.

Some of those aunties and uncles of the Stolen Generations are still with us today. They continue to navigate through their past injustices and the horrific abuse they endured. I was privileged to have had some of those aunties and uncles attend my art groups over the years. It was then that a strong desire to seek healing for them through the arts began. This is where their stories got told. Expression came in waves of relief, enabling them to tell their stories in those art pieces we created. Generations of hurt and helplessness were gradually being expressed through art. The relief on many occasions

was easy to see on their faces, as well as the freedom to move in that space, knowing there was trust and care for them.

In Chapter Four I described my art as a model for healing. The foundations of my art practice have given me a vehicle to explore in this thesis the healing that takes place when experimenting with arts. When we think of Aboriginal arts, we may think of a huge economic art market with some artists who have become very famous and many others who continue to produce fantastic works of art for Australia and internationally. Many Aboriginal artists travel across the globe to present and display their work. In this thesis, I focus on the therapeutic healing properties of our visual arts. As I demonstrate throughout the thesis, healing is achieved not by producing great works of art but through the simple interaction with the mediums of art that enable an individual or group to express their feelings.

Trauma victims often find it easier to express their inner turmoil through non-verbal activities, which have helped them on their healing journeys. I have realised that all the materials used to paint or create an art piece are essentially the same. They enable the participants to produce a level of expression that is theirs. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people differ in the way we do our art; our paintings have levels of meaning and they usually carry our history within the artwork, as well as including current situations. We have always had singing and dancing, and painting on objects or persons. These things were our own natural ways of achieving continuous harmony and balance. Singing, for example, was relaying a story or events of our ancestors. It was, and still is in remote parts of Australia, a tool used to educate our children. Painting on objects or people had layers of meaning and had local protocols as to who was eligible to get painted up. I argue that we have always had art and healing built into our culture. This was also affected when our ancestors were not allowed to practise culture. Dispossession of land and way of life was rudely interrupted so, of course, it was difficult to continue these practices.

A framework of art practices

The journey forward, towards healing through art, is to further develop a framework of art practices that can be suitably used by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

communities to try and combat the continuous cycle of trauma that is prevalent in our communities. The framework was developed while working with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the Kimberley. The pilot project was a collaboration between the Anglican Deaconess Ministries and the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship women's ministry. Here I was able to frame this work, which can be duplicated by training women to use this framework to train others in their communities with the help of other service providers. The approach can be modified for use in mainstream health and healing programs for all genders (Appendix A: Framework).

Final remarks

The thesis has taken us on a journey back to the past because we have a need to understand our past in order to explore a way forward. The atrocities of our past linger with us, but we can have renewed hope for the future. We have had a glimpse of some of our Elder's stories and their troubled journeys. I have felt the pain again as I looked back at my own history and I felt the impact of intergenerational trauma. I will not allow it to plague me again. The tools of my trade as an artist have given me the strength I needed to look back once again. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we have resilience and strength to draw from our culture and kinship and the many things that give us victory over pain. I have used my art as a tool for healing – indeed, art is medicine for healing.

As I have said before, this research demonstrates the significance of applying our own lens to explore new approaches to healing. This thesis contributes towards health and wellbeing in a society that did not respect the goodness, nourishment and continuity of our culture. It was important for me to explore avenues of healing. I have felt the pain of losing loved ones to suicide. I have carried the traumas of the past within me, and even to this day the struggles from racism have placed a desire in my heart to help others and to use my art as a way forward to healing. This thesis has given me that platform to proclaim that art is a tool towards healing. My faith has been an added strength behind everything I have written. It was not enough for me to sit back and allow the struggles of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to continue. The health and wellbeing of our people is declining compared to the rest of the Australian population. This thesis

is another tool that contributes towards better health and wellbeing for our mob and will provide a guide to others who would seek to use art as a means for healing.

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Appendix A: Framework' Our Story: Finding Hope Beyond Grief

A proposed framework to run Creative Expression activities

The following points describe the elements needed to successfully run the creative expression activities. This framework was developed to train the women in this setting on how to do the creative expression or healing through the arts.

A good environment:

- Enough room inside or outdoors. There may be activities done outside using natural materials like twigs, leaves, rocks, sand and much more.
- Decent tables and chairs.
- Enough materials for everyone to be included in the activity.

A plan for the activity:

- Explain the house rules, e.g. – this is a ‘no put-down’ zone, no swearing, no phone calls, what is shared here is private so no sharing with others outside the group ... (write up your own rules but make them clear at the start and have people agree to them).
- Make the art project, goal or activity clear by explaining and showing what the finished product is intended to look like.
- Make it an activity that people can get involved in without previous experience.
- Not too messy unless everyone knows to expect it to be.
- Consider playing music quietly in the background that the whole group likes.
- A start time and a finish time.
- Provide a new set of skills with an outcome or result.
- Not be overly focused on the results.

A purpose for the time shared:

- Share the learning by developing and improving skills.
- Make something or work towards making something that will be seen.
- Encourage people by celebrating small achievements of others.
- Allow people to be heard.

- Create a safe space for people to share personal stories.
- Find a way to co-operate as a group with positive messages to one another.
- Make referrals to pastors or counsellors as needed.
- Close down conflict with grace.
- Demonstrate the patience and love of Christ in a hurting world.

Things to avoid:

- Good leadership will not let it be too loud all the time.
- Don't allow the group to pass judgement.
- Avoid people oversharing their complaints, criticism and anger.
- Don't push people to act and speak the same as everyone else. Give them space and let them know you are glad they are there even if they are not doing much.
- Keep the group as ONE and don't let participants split into factions.

Group dynamics:

- Try to have everyone feel comfortable and a part of it all. Some will remain quiet and focus on their work. This is fine. They will be listening. Others who are too loud might be overbearing and might need a reminder to let others speak.
- Be aware of conflict and be open in discussing that 'we don't use this time for those problems'. Or 'You can follow those things up later ... It's not what we are here for ...'
- Involve the group in future planning.

Discussions:

- When things get personal and emotional, plan to take people aside to a private space and have your training partner supervise the activity if needed. Come back before the session finishes.
- At the end of the session have a short discussion about what was achieved and what is coming up next.

Spiritual elements:

- The people you meet will all have different spiritual views and are at different stages of their walk with Christ. Your hope is to help everyone move a little closer to Him each time you meet. The Lord will bring the growth.
- You might have liberty to pray at the start or finish of the sessions.
- Be ready to share the Word with those who ask for what it says.
- Offer to pray for people and, if they agree, you might ask if they would like you to pray with them right now. Don't push it. It's important to be available but not pushy.
- You might like to let everyone know what's coming up in your local Church and that they are very welcome.

Follow-up:

- Plan to see people later or make phone contact to further support those who need it.
- Ensure you have contact numbers for health, mental health, financial support services etc. which you can give out to accompany the participants' workbooks, or to those who ask for them.
- Pray and have others pray for the people in the group.

Appendix B: Videos

Video 1

Arun Munoz (director, producer, cameraman), [2017, ‘Making of the possum skin cloak by Scattered Tribes Arts Group’, arunmunozphotography.com, video recorded at [Pipe Makers Parke]Maribyrnong, [suburb], [February to May 2017 Supported by CoHealth—Filming ended May 2017. Music by www.bensound.com

Video 2

Video of Uncle Roy’s memories, [2017], created by Rick Randal (in collaboration with Liss Gabb (Coordinator, CoHealth Art’s Generator) and Crystal Harris), video recorded at [Pip Makers Park], [Maribyrnong Victoria], [July to September 2017]—[month year].