



# A White Woman Stories to Decolonise (Herself)

*Creative meanderings through the cultural abyss*

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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A WHITE WOMAN  
STORIES TO DECOLONISE  
(HERSELF)

THE WHITE WOMAN

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# THE WHITE WOMAN

FOLLOW ME INTO THE CULTURAL ABYSS



# DECLARATION

*I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.*

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Melissa Razuki

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When a mother dedicates almost nine years to full-time university study, inevitably it takes its toll on the family, so I must begin with thanking my husband Ghadir and our offspring Ziggy, Louis, Chester and Lily for sharing me with my academic life, my social conscience and this creative quest. At times it has been challenging, but each of you has joined me on the journey in your own way.

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To my team of supervisors, a moving feast at times, as circumstances changed for us all, I thank you for your guidance and support. I thank Professor Craig Batty, who has been my guide through my undergraduate degree, Honours, and the bulk of my doctorate, for being so generous with his time, energy and knowledge around creative practice research. I thank Professor Barry Judd for his direction and counsel in First Nations cultural and cross-cultural areas and Dr Jessica Wilkinson who introduced me to poetry and poetics and asked all the right difficult questions that I needed to be able to answer. Finally, I thank Dr Bonny Cassidy who knew the areas I was writing into and pointed me in all the directions I needed to go. Her encouragement, discipline and rigour was just what a researcher and writer like me needed to lead me out of then many rabbit holes I found myself in. I have loved working with every one of you.

The final six weeks of this doctorate have been the most pleasurable of the journey in a masochistic kind of way. It has been exhausting but also exhilarating because I magically found myself with three brilliant and funny women to help me put all those words into six books. I thank the illustrator Alice Coates, a young woman with the freshest and zaniest lens on the world, and I thank the inspiring, highly original and lovable Zoë Blow, the designer who somehow wrangled us, including the editor who

had no idea what she was getting herself into. If anyone wants a quick-witted, assiduous and irreverent editor with incredible depth of knowledge across disciplines, Dr Camille Nurka is your woman.

And I thank the kelpies for their unconditional love and companionship.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

I acknowledge the traditional owners who have lived and loved this Country through the vastness of time. I honour the Boon wurrung peoples on whose Country these works were crafted.

I pay my respects to the Old People, to the Elders and Ancestors who are the safe-keepers and caretakers of the oldest living culture on the planet. For this is the very bedrock of this place, our shared home and our special identity in the world and the source of shared pride for us all as Australians.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This acknowledgement is based on the acknowledgement given by Misha Schubert before Richard Flanagan's address at the National Press Club, April 2018.



# ABSTRACT

This bricolage of writings is the result of a middle-aged white privileged woman who jettisoned (most of) her motherly and housewifely duties to explore her social conscience in a scholarly but creative way. I call it my passion PhD as I meander through the cultural abyss between black and white Australia for the sheer love of learning, luxuriating in research, trying to see what I had never been shown, and unsee what I had been shown. I wonder how can I be complicit and complacent in a society that privileges me over others because of the colour of my skin?

I combine a creative practice of storytelling to question the status quo that is the dominant culture, the mercurial methodology of poetics, and the autoethnographic eye that guides a reflexive process of personal decolonisation. I bring to the research a burgeoning awareness of colonised minds, bodies, spirits and lenses and am confident my fresh eyes, curiosity and commitment to unlearn, unsee and unsettle can be deftly deployed to challenge and disrupt the prejudices and perceptions of my fellow white Australians.

This is not a problem-solving piece of research, although I am exploring the nature of a problem. The problem – which is often erroneously cast as the ‘Aboriginal Problem’ when it is a Whiteness Problem – is the core of my research. But I am not focusing just on First Nations peoples and their legacy of colonisation; rather, I examine our shared legacy, turning the gaze back on white Australia, holding up a mirror, to ask with all sincerity: Who is the problem? Where is the problem? What have we done? Why weren’t we told? Did you really just say that?

The space I am writing into is the denial that W. E. H. Stanner called ‘The Great Australian Silence’, ‘the cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale’ (1968) and it remains disappointingly relevant today. I follow those historians who have sought to open white Australian ears and hearts to our violent history and the true legacy of colonisation, including Bernard Smith, Henry Reynolds, Ian Clark, Minoru Hokari, Lyndall Ryan and Inga Clendinnen, to name a few. I respectfully listen to and follow the lead of First Nations scholars from other colonised nations who have demanded from the academy the right and space to create research and methodologies in their own cultural

shape, foregrounding their own ways and knowing and being, such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Jo-Ann Archibald, Michael Yellow Bird, Richard Frankland, Natalie Harkin and Aileen Moreton-Robinson. I submit my whiteness to scrutiny to 'undo', or unravel, this identity to which I have been so accustomed and that has afforded me so much. In this task, I see myself through the gaze of critical race scholars like George Yancy, Robin DiAngelo, Shannon Sullivan and poet Claudia Rankine and emerge chastened. I lean on the scholarship of my creative contemporaries who write from deep in their hearts and bellies to advocate for a society that is better than this, that we are better than this, for Treaty, for self-determination, for Change the Date, for a First Nations voice to Parliament. I am inspired by, and add my voice to the works of Stephen Muecke, Deborah Bird Rose, Anne Elvey, Katrina Schlunke and Michael Farrell.

What you have in your hands are six chapbooks, each painted in a hue from Boon wurrung Country, filled with stories about my peering into and trying to work out ways to bridge the cultural abyss to discover how I might write about white relationships with black Australia in a way that engages white Australia to listen.

# PREFACE

I remember when I was pregnant, and my baby shifted inside me. I could whisper it to another, and they might feign interest for a moment, but really, it was a secret only I knew.

The sensation of 'seeing' First Nations peoples and culture is akin to that secret and it fills me up. It is an invitation to notice their presence in the stars, trees, rivers, mountains and birds such as Waa the crow, a cheeky creation hero, or Bundjil, who rules the skies, or a death bird. Gulp.

I carry this exquisite awareness, like a baby moving, but I am wary to share. At times people have been scornful, but slowly through my decolonising journey I found writers, poets, artists, scholars and teachers who share my sentiments.

I INVITED THE SILENCE IN. IT TOLD ME  
A DANGEROUS HISTORY  
OF BLOOD ON THE WATTLE,  
CONTESTED GROUND.  
CONVINCING GROUND  
HIDDEN HISTORIES  
OF BLACK WARS  
OF BLUFF ROCK  
THE SPECTRE OF TRUGANINI  
THE HISTORY QUESTION  
WHO OWNS THE PAST?  
OF A RAPE OF THE SOUL SO PROFOUND  
WHY WEREN'T WE TOLD?

IT SHOWED ME  
COLONIALISM  
THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH  
THE PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED  
THE QUESTION OF GENOCIDE  
BLACK SKIN WHITE MASKS  
THE CULTURAL BOMB  
THE FIRE INSIDE

IT SHOWED ME  
WHITE ON WHITE  
MY WHITENESS AS PROPERTY  
AS UNCONSCIOUS HABITS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE  
THE GOOD WHITE PEOPLE  
WHITE FRAGILITY  
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE WHITE?  
CITIZEN

IT SHOWED ME MY RACISM  
THE PENCIL TEST  
BLOOD QUANTUM  
HALF-CASTES  
BOUNDARY STREET  
BOOING  
THE WHITE AUSTRALIA POLICY  
UNSETTLING THE SETTLER WITHIN



THE WRITING WAS ON THE WALL  
STANNER,  
WHITE MAN GOT DREAMING  
WOLFE  
ELIMINATION OF THE NATIVE  
REYNOLDS,  
FORGOTTEN WAR  
AN INDELIBLE STAIN

My First Nations guides tell old stories, new stories, new songs, old songs, showing me the way out of *terra nullius*, the right way, offering a dance we can share together.

THE SMELL OF FRUSTRATION  
CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DEAD  
WALKING INTO THE BIGNESS  
THE CRY FOR THE DEAD  
BECAUSE A WHITE MAN'LL NEVER DO IT  
TALKING TO MY COUNTRY  
WHERE ARE MY FIRST BORN?  
EVERYTHING STANDING UP ALIVE  
WHO KILLED MALCOLM SMITH?  
BEYOND TERRA NULLIUS: THE LIE  
DIRTY WORDS

I follow in the footsteps of those who listen to the silenced, dance with the silence.

GULARABULU

MY GURINDJI JOURNEY

DINGO MAKES US HUMAN

DANCING WITH STRANGERS

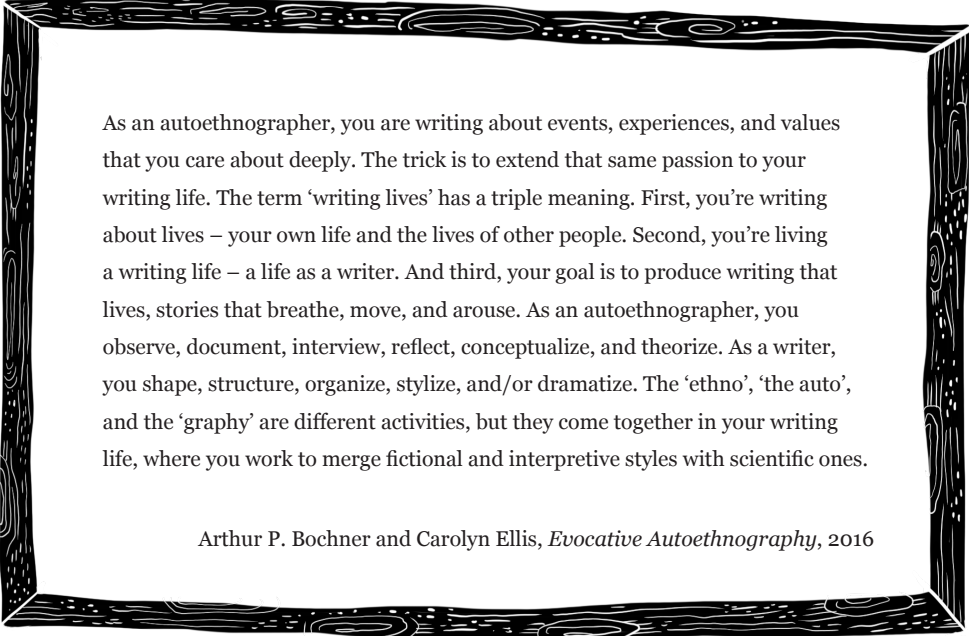
There is complicity in silence.

How do I talk to my white Australia about First Nations peoples and culture so they will listen? How can the truth of our shared history bleed into the national consciousness and cleanse the whitewashed narrative of who we are and how we came to be the Lucky Country?

THIS WHISPERING IN OUR HEARTS

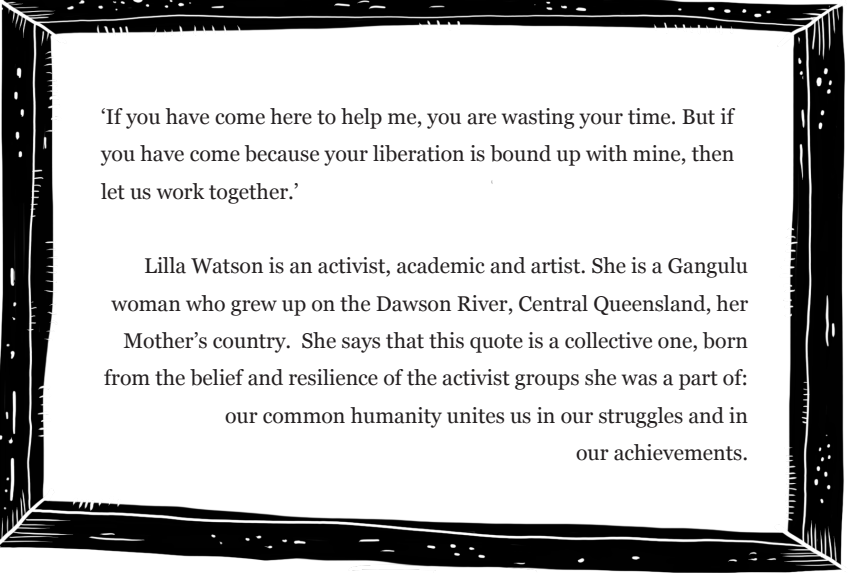






As an autoethnographer, you are writing about events, experiences, and values that you care about deeply. The trick is to extend that same passion to your writing life. The term ‘writing lives’ has a triple meaning. First, you’re writing about lives – your own life and the lives of other people. Second, you’re living a writing life – a life as a writer. And third, your goal is to produce writing that lives, stories that breathe, move, and arouse. As an autoethnographer, you observe, document, interview, reflect, conceptualize, and theorize. As a writer, you shape, structure, organize, stylize, and/or dramatize. The ‘ethno’, ‘the auto’, and the ‘graphy’ are different activities, but they come together in your writing life, where you work to merge fictional and interpretive styles with scientific ones.

Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, 2016



‘If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.’

Lilla Watson is an activist, academic and artist. She is a Gangulu woman who grew up on the Dawson River, Central Queensland, her Mother’s country. She says that this quote is a collective one, born from the belief and resilience of the activist groups she was a part of:

our common humanity unites us in our struggles and in  
our achievements.



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## INTRODUCING THE WHITE WOMAN

If my kids ever really wanted to wind me up, they would call me a Toorak housewife. It guaranteed 'a look' without fail. It says something about me that I read it as a gibe, as opposed to a fact, which it was.

The problem was, it was an association and an identity that I vehemently resisted at home, although I floated in and around that world seemingly effortlessly, some might say with aplomb. Perhaps I was a double agent, living and loving money and privilege, but insisting it did not define me, which, of course, only a person in this position can say:

that is, to profess to want to jettison all that makes my life so comfy. It is all a bit rich, really. I was a well turned-out contradiction; I hope I wasn't a hypocrite.

In 2005 someone put a (metaphorical) stone in my shoe. It might have been a broken First Nations mother crying inside because her children were stolen from her, or possibly one of a number of people experiencing homelessness, who disarmed me with their humanity. This stone reminded me of how lucky I was, that I had always been lucky, that, within reason, there had never been any reason or obstacle to prevent me being and doing whatever I wanted. At that time, I began to see that I could use my luck, my position and privilege to open my eyes and ears and arms. And maybe a few others'. I found myself as a woman who wanted to decolonise, but I knew it was a heavy topic that called for a light touch, so, as I started to research and write these stories, I began to think about titles. The first was:

#### *A Housewife's Guide to Decolonising*

It made some people curious and smile; but for others (mainly women under fifty), the 'housewife' moniker was incendiary. It summoned the hideous Real Housewives of Melbourne, it smacked of the Stepford Wives, the 1950s, subservience, subjugation, put your lipstick on before your husband arrives home from work. The reaction was fascinating, but I could see it was distracting from the real purpose, which was decolonisation. The second iteration was:

#### *A White Woman's Quest to Decolonise*

The 'quest' evoked a hero's journey, proffered one of my supervisors. It was more an anti-hero's journey, but I agreed it misrepresented the path and task at hand. A further suggestion was placing a parameter on whom I am hoping to decolonise; we had already identified how problematic it was to generalise using the royal 'we', so I narrowed down my target. The third iteration was:

#### *A White Woman Attempts to Decolonise (Herself)*

#### *(Creative meanderings through racial literacy)*

There was some discussion about whether it was cultural or racist literacy and a further suggestion to replace 'attempts' with 'essays' as the two words have similar meaning and

it also foregrounded my method at the time, the familiar essay. The (Herself) was added as I realised I could only decolonise myself and could not speak for others. The sub-heading could prove to be a minefield, so I opted to change it to ‘cultural literacy’.<sup>2</sup>

By this time, I was beginning to imagine my creative practice artefact as a bricolage of works. At the NGV I picked up a copy of artist Joshua Yeldham’s book *Surrender: A Journal for my Daughter* and I loved his collection of memories, musings, poetry, photographs, and artworks and it was a rough template for what I was trying to achieve.

*A White Woman Stories to Decolonise (Herself)*  
*(Creative meanderings through cultural literacy)*

The fifth iteration came after my third milestone feedback to look deeper into evocative autoethnography to refine my methodology. I could see that the story had to be centred in my reporting of my research. The sub-heading continued to be problematic as the following questions arose: Whose culture should we be literate in? Whose is the dominant culture? What does this statement presume? I came to rest on the final version:

*A White Woman Stories to Decolonise (Herself)*  
*Creative meanderings through the cultural abyss*

I am particularly enthused at framing story as a verb, not just a noun. I think it animates the word with action and dynamism. I am storying the process of unpacking decolonisation, while creatively wading through the cultural abyss.<sup>3</sup> With the final milestone completed and feedback taken on board, I began to think about how I wanted the artefact to look. I was still keen on a curious collection, à la Yeldham, and I was also conscious about there being too much reality all in one place, and that non-Aboriginal readers might find my approach to decolonisation overwhelming.

One of my supervisors mentioned Ann Carson’s collection of chapbooks, *Float*, which broke her works up into bite-sized pieces. I ran with this idea and split the works into six chapbooks to lighten the load for the reader and to make my work more

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2 Joshua Yeldham, *Surrender: A Journal for My Daughter* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2014).

3 Ann Carson, *Float* (New York: Random House 2016).

accessible. It was important to me that the books are not numbered; I do not want to dictate an order to the reader (I want them to think with story, not just consume it) and I wrote each piece as if it could stand alone. However, it is best to read *The White Woman* first, as it explains the background.

In the final eight weeks before submission, I worked closely with a graphic designer to fashion the books and create spaces for my various voices and also briefed her housemate, an illustrator on drawings to further and play with the narratives. This was about the co-creating that I allude to in 'The Bowerbird' in *My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing*, making something enticing and beautiful and then letting the reader connect and create their own understanding. The role of the illustrations is to deepen the ironic and playful tone, again to lighten the load, and to draw the reader in. Once the reader is immersed, my aim is to make them care.

## WHAT IS THE POINT?

'What is the point?' one of my supervisors asked me a year into my research. He is an Anangu man working within the academy. He is well-acquainted with white do-gooders, white allies, white virtue and bleeding-heart liberals like me.

It is a good question. Why would a white, privileged, middle-aged, middle-class woman and mother of four young adults eschew chatter, lattes and Pilates for at least four years of academic research and vicarious trauma. I am not seeking a job in academia. The stakes are low for me as it does not matter if my body of research does not forge out an academic career. In truth, it is a luxury to be able to research so freely, with no strings, no money worries, and unfettered access to any resources or experience I need to deepen my practice. The stakes might be low, but that does not mean there are no risks; after all, I am willingly immersing myself in genocide, racism, oppression, whiteness, privilege, deaths in custody and uncomfortable truths. The risks for me have been emotional and psychological, as a witness.

My cultural guide and mentor, Associate Professor Richard Frankland, says it is vital that non-First Nations Australians arm themselves with information to enable them to hear and share the perspectives of those who are oppressed by white

settler colonialism.<sup>4</sup> He asks that we learn about his people for fifteen minutes a week because that is one hour a month First Nations people do not have to justify themselves collectively to the world. Then, when you have learnt what makes them cry out in anger and pain, go and tell a dozen people and tell them to tell a dozen more. Tell everyone. If I apply some calculations to his advice, I have ‘learned’ for forty hours a week about his people, which is 160 hours a month, around 2,000 hours a year that First Nations people do not have to justify themselves collectively to white Australia.

I refer to the space I willingly put myself in as the ‘cultural abyss’.<sup>5</sup> It is the chasm of misunderstanding between black and white Australia. I drip-feed you snapshots of it throughout the collection of stories, but in my mind’s eye, I imagine it like the illustration on the following page:

My first step into the abyss was my first step towards my own epistemic decolonisation.

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4 In these works, I call him The Songman. You will meet him properly in his own chapter of the volume. He has said these words to me, but he also says them frequently in keynotes and presentations.

5 A term I borrow from Richard Frankland.



## DECOLONISING MYSELF

When I set out to ‘decolonise’ myself – and, I hoped, others too (including you) – I truly had no idea what it would mean to me, but I knew it was an imperative. In the dictionary, decolonisation is the act of getting rid of colonisation, freeing a nation from the imperial shackles that foster dependence and decimate cultures and peoples. Colonisation positions the coloniser as the dominant culture, so decolonising is the active resistance to the subjugation and exploitation of a people’s minds and bodies, lands and waters. A result of colonisation is the colonised mind, also called internalised racism, where First Nations peoples are made to feel inferior to the dominant culture. For First Nations peoples, decolonising the mind means undoing that damage and reclaiming agency and identity.

The first step, for me, as a white woman, was to come to terms with my whiteness. I am a fifth or sixth generation Anglo-Australian from the settler culture, a coloniser, a beneficiary of the wealth – material and intellectual – our forebears stole from the First Nations peoples of this country, whose sovereignty was never ceded.

To state my race is unusual for me as I have not been conditioned to think about myself in racial terms or to see it as significant to my identity or potential: other people have a race; my being white is not an issue. But it is. Race scholars George Yancy, Robin DiAngelo and Shannon Sullivan have all been instrumental in my new understanding as to why my being white *does* matter.<sup>6</sup>

As well as being white, I am middle class, which means that everything that is accessible to a white person is even more accessible to me. I might be dangerous. DiAngelo says white progressives like me are her specialty because she is one. ‘I think

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<sup>6</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); Robin DiAngelo, ‘White Fragility’ (podcast), *Sydney Ideas*, University of Sydney, 4 December 2018, <https://sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/sydney-ideas/2018/white-fragility.html>; Shannon Sullivan, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (Albany: State University of New York, 2014); Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); George Yancy, ‘Dear White America’, *New York Times*, 24 December 2015, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/24/dear-white-america/>; George Yancy, *On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

white progressives cause the most daily harm to people of colour.<sup>7</sup> Because we are ‘progressive’, we are most likely to be in the lives of people of colour, but we need to be clear that we are not using them for diversity cover, while disregarding their viewpoint. White people strive to control the people of colour in their orbit; if they challenge, they will be ejected, as many white people think they should be the judge of whether racism has occurred. Progressives, the defenders of those experiencing racism, can be so certain, arrogant, complacent. When a progressive says ‘I’m not racist because ...’, says DiAngelo, they are giving you their evidence for how they cannot be racist: Some use rational scholarly argument to distinguish themselves from the figure of ‘the racist’; some use their experience working with, and sometimes within, First Nations communities as proof that they are, unequivocally, not racist. But, DiAngelo asks, can fond regard mask your racism? What is the evidence I use to credential myself? A cross-racial friendship is not an answer.

I may be of the well-to-do world now, but I was not born into it. My parents were working class from Moonee Ponds; my father was a successful packaging manufacturer and provided well for us materially. My husband, an Iraqi refugee, built a successful business from nothing and sold it in a timely fashion.<sup>8</sup> Our comfort has been hard-earned and lucky. My world is one of virtually unlimited privilege, choices, options, opportunities and access. This is the lens I offer you. A female, white, privileged gaze. I write to get out of this bubble, to learn of other ways of knowing and being that cannot be bought by wealth, to explore ways to contribute in an authentic and honest way.

Comfort is the norm: cars, homes, holidays, holiday homes. (A common greeting among this tribe is ‘have you been away?’<sup>9</sup>) Our homes have high fences and garages to

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7 Robin DiAngelo, ‘White Fragility’ (podcast), *Sydney Ideas*, University of Sydney, 4 December 2018, <https://sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/sydney-ideas/2018/white-fragility.html>.

8 My husband is a half-Catholic, half-Muslim Iraqi refugee who went to Jewish primary school in Baghdad. His family fled Iraq when he was eight, his parents were sentenced to death *in absentia* and they made a new life for themselves in Berkshire, England. He was sent to an Anglican boarding school in England’s sleepy Eastbourne, where he was miserable, and went on to study at a university in Manhattan, Kansas (aka the Little Apple), which he loved. He is a self-made, successful entrepreneur. Once, when I grumbled about him, my mother said, ‘You knew what he was like when you married him’. I was twenty-five and I didn’t. Marriage is hard.

9 This line bemuses The Songman enormously, as it is so far away from his world.



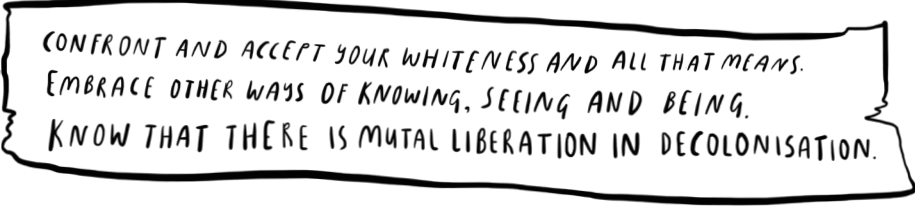
cloister us, permanently excusing us from possible pleasantries with the neighbours. It is not a community, but a collection of individuals. We live on ‘the map’, which harks back to the printed *Melways* street directory, and the spread of pages 58 and 59: sought-after addresses in Toorak and South Yarra and their neighbours, Prahran, Malvern and Armadale. Real estate agents deem these suburbs to be where many of the triple-A addresses are, the sort of homes that are sold ‘off market’ for staggering amounts of money. These addresses and postcodes are valuable because of the kudos, the class connotations and perceived wealth. Within reach are selective tennis and golf clubs (with extra-curricular Bridge and Bowls) for socialising with like-assetted members whose skin is never darker than a Noosa top-up or spray tan. Schools are reassuringly exclusive and expensive, ensuring that offspring mix with others of the same class status. One estate agent summed up this tribe as insular, aspirational and entitled. The high-street shops are dominated by services dedicated to individual wellness: hair, beauty, nails, massages, Pilates, yoga, gyms.

In light of this, you will see that decolonisation, for a white Australian, is vastly different to that for a First Nations person. I am the oppressor; they are the oppressed. I am invested in the status quo as it guarantees my status at the top of the food chain. My personal understanding of decolonisation is that I must question the status quo, contest it, trouble it. I found that the status quo favours the privileged and if you are rich and favoured, then you’re probably not interested in disrupting the status quo. Those of us who benefit from the continued oppression of First Nations peoples – especially

those who are white and middle class – need to be unsettled and disrupted from the flourishing status quo which is our Western-centric world.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout this collection you will share my decolonising path and adventures en route, but I will share you a precis of my thoughts and reflections along the way. They are in no particular order, as decolonisation does not work like that: it is about stopping, pausing and thinking before you act. Every day. All the time. Forever. It is a full-time job. It is a new and more conscious and respectful way of moving in the world.

## NOTES TO SELF



CONFRONT AND ACCEPT YOUR WHITENESS AND ALL THAT MEANS.  
EMBRACE OTHER WAYS OF KNOWING, SEEING AND BEING.  
KNOW THAT THERE IS MUTUAL LIBERATION IN DECOLONISATION.

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<sup>10</sup> Most of the scholars and creatives I have gravitated towards and include in my community of thinkers harbour the motive of unsettling deep in their practice. Michael Farrell's text *Writing Australian Unsettlement* aims to unsettle colonial histories and literature by rereading texts according to a counter-lens of 'unsettlement' (10). Farrell gives voice to my practice across these six chapbooks when he says unsettlement takes place in writing practice 'regardless of our sentiment or intention', in that we unsettle with layers of 'other literacies' through stretching and testing writing and genre (7). See Michael Farrell, *Writing Australian Unsettlement: Modes of Poetic Intervention 1796–1945* (New York: Palgrave, 2015). My omnipresent crow, Waa, is a literary device to unsettle the reader (as Zusak did with Death as his narrator in *The Book Thief*), as are the layers of First Nations words and works, which I foreground to privilege other ways of knowing and being, plural histories and uncomfortable truths (and adhere to the tenets of an Indigenous Methodology). By nature, autoethnography as a practice is unsettling for the reader, who is drawn into using the story to reflect on themselves and their own experiences. Minoru Hokari unsettles the reader with his unique perspectives and humility, sharing his Japanese gaze on the Gurindji people in his *Gurindji Journey: A Japanese Historian in the Outback* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2011). Canadian writer Paulette Regan has a book called *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), while Ross Gibson makes the most of the pun in his text *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002), 98.

## BEING

YOU ARE WHITE; CONFRONT IT, OWN IT!  
 YOUR ENTIRE FRAME OF REFERENCE IS WHITE.  
 YOUR EXPERIENCE IS NOT UNIVERSAL; IT IS WHITE.  
 WHITENESS IS A BAG OF HABITS.  
 WHITENESS IS A BAG OF INVISIBLE PRIVILEGES.  
 YOU ARE INVESTED IN WHITENESS  
 WHITENESS = ENTITLEMENT, OPPORTUNITY AND COMFORT  
 WHITENESS = THE STATUS QUO (SO YOUR DISCOMFORT  
 IS NECESSARY AND IMPORTANT!!!)  
 YOU ARE NOT SPECIAL

## KNOWING

HISTORY MATTERS. KNOW IT, BECAUSE IF WE DON'T  
 KNOW OUR HISTORY, WE CANNOT EXPLAIN THE WAY  
 THINGS ARE NOW.  
 DO YOUR OWN RESEARCH. LOOK IT UP.  
 READ THE WORK OF PEOPLE OF COLOUR.  
 SEE THE DOMINANT CULTURE.  
 BE AWARE OF COLONIAL LANGUAGE.  
 RACISM IS A COMPLEX, MULTILAYERED SYSTEM  
 THAT INFUSES EVERYTHING.  
 I AM THE ONE WHO DOESN'T UNDERSTAND.

I AM FRAGILE. I PROJECT WHITE INNOCENCE.  
 I AM CONSTANTLY REINFORCING MY WHITENESS.  
 EVEN AS I WRITE THIS, I AM REINFORCING  
 WHITENESS. I WRITE FROM A WHITE PRIVILEGED  
 POSITION. BOLSTERED BY MY POSITION WITHIN THE  
 ACADEMY. AN INSTITUTION OF KNOWLEDGE THAT  
 REINFORCES DOMINANT CULTURE. I HAVE AN  
 INVESTMENT IN NOT SEEING ALL OF THIS.  
 WHITE SUPREMACY AND RACISM ARE SEDUCTIVE.  
 THEY ARE WILY. I CANNOT BE TRUSTED.

YOU ARE WHITE SO YOU ARE RACIST.  
 (EVEN IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BE!)

RACIAL BIAS IS IMPLICIT AND UNCONSCIOUS,  
 GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH.  
 BEING GOOD OR BAD IS NOT RELEVANT.  
 I AM NOT ONE OF THE GOOD ONES.  
 I AM NOT INNOCENT.  
 FIRST NATIONS DISTRUST GOOD WHITE PEOPLE  
 FOR GOOD REASONS. TRUST MUST BE EARNED.  
 I AM A RISK THEY ARE TAKING.

## DOING

CONFRONT SILENCES;  
 WELCOME UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS;  
 EMBRACE THE UNFAMILIAR.  
 TAKE A STAND.  
 USE YOUR PRIVILEGE TO SET THE  
 RECORD STRAIGHT.  
 THINK IN TERMS OF POSSIBILITIES.  
 TELL GOOD STORIES.  
 BE HUMBLE. DECOLONISATION IS A  
 FRAMEWORK FOR HUMILITY.  
 THE ANTIDOTE TO GUILT IS ACTION.  
 DON'T SHARE STORIES THAT AREN'T  
 YOURS TO TELL.  
 NICENESS IS NOT ANTI-RACISM,  
 IT IS NOT COURAGEOUS, OR INTENTIONAL  
 OR STRATEGIC.

## MY UNDOING

I am deep in the cultural abyss, exploring and probing, contaminating the data with my subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> I am your guide to places you may never have sought to go to, to thoughts you never wanted to have. You can safely visit and ponder via my experiences. I am taking one for the team, so to speak.

What do I mean by this? I may sound light-hearted at times, but this is not an easy journey, this never-ending road to decolonisation. I am putting my skin in the game, exposing my self, peeling back my whiteness, my privilege, my biases and prejudices. It is apt to use bodily metaphors because it is a visceral undoing of who I was socialised to be.<sup>12</sup> In this undoing, I am confronted with the norms, mores, attitudes and expectations of my white tribe and they are not pretty. Sometimes they are abhorrent. Undoing myself has presented me with moral and emotional quandaries, particularly in relation to people and their attitudes. I have had to choose whether to speak up or perpetuate the silence, to foster a friendship or let it flounder, to take a position on the moral high ground, but endeavour to do so with humility and non-judgement.<sup>13</sup>

It is a question of personally taking stock, weighing up, looking at the playing field of your life and asking, Is it level? Is it fair?

An important political turning point for me came at the end of our first year in Melbourne. We rented a house by the beach on the Mornington Peninsula for part of the summer holidays (yes, it was Portsea, don't judge, although an epiphany in Portsea is ironically poetic). We were living just outside the city and I wanted my kids to experience the Aussie summers of my childhood: spending the day in the ocean, their sandy, salty

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11 Evocative autoethnography insists on this. See Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016); Carolyn Ellis. *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek and Oxford: Alta Mira, 2004).

12 In 'Dear George', my letter to Professor George Yancy in *Skin in the Game*, I engage with his suggestion that we become 'unsutured' from our whiteness and privilege; this is me continuing with that bodily theme.

13 I experienced this stripping back when I walked the Lurujarri Trail with the Goolarabooloo people in 2012. I refer to my experiences in various stories, but to summarise, walking for nine days, sleeping under the stars, washing in the ocean, eating off a fire stripped me back to essentials: food, shelter, company, no artifice. It was profoundly liberating, although short-lived.

bodies rinsed off in a pool and stinging with sunburn; eating a barbecue to the chorus of cicadas; being safely tucked in at night with a bedtime story. But as they slept, I was transported to another place where children were not safe. I was seeing the world through a mother's tears.

As I made up the beds on the first day, a book benignly arranged on the coffee table, tucked in among glossy home-decoration magazines, caught my eye. It was a collection of stories by those of the Stolen Generations. (I join many in ensuring there is an 's' on the end of Generations, as it ravaged many generations and continues to do so.) Due to my eighteen years overseas, I had 'missed' the *Bringing Them Home* report, which documented the Stolen Generations. Up until this moment, my entire exposure to First Nations culture was the Papunya dot paintings on our walls that we bought in the 1990s as 'investments'. I still do not know what song the dots are singing and what stories they are telling. In the knowledge bank were the racist slurs people called the artists who painted them and the negative stereotypes: lazy, welfare bludgers, drunks, petrol sniffers, glue sniffers. Australian history at my school was full of convicts, sheep and bushrangers, and poets who rhymed about them. I felt short-changed.

While my children fought and frolicked in the sunshine, I sank into stories of wretched mothers chasing black cars, their children being taken away for 'their own good', for 'a better life', 'rescued' and assimilated. I read of brown-skinned faces and limbs blackened by their mums with charcoal from the family cooking fire, doing anything to make their babies look too black to be taken.<sup>14</sup> I was captured by stories of 'half-caste' children in white nighties crying themselves to sleep in dormitories. I fumed at tales of heartless nuns and priests, of missionaries and 'protectors' who would patrol and control these stolen children's every waking and slumbering moment. I learned it was us – the colonisers – who severed their connection to family and Country, who cut their ancestral twine that had joined hearts and hands, people and place for millennia.

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14 I am thinking specifically of Anthony Hill's heartbreaking *The Burnt Stick* (1994) about a little 'half-caste' boy and his mother's attempt to blacken him with charcoal to prevent his removal. I would read it to my kids.

Later, these stories were further imprinted on my mind by Phillip Noyce's *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) and Steven McGregor's *Servant or Slave* (2016).<sup>15</sup> I believe that mothers share a common bond. I ached for these families. I felt their tears and tried to imagine the impotence and the powerlessness they must have felt. These stories broke my heart. They have stayed there. They are forever with me.

I fumed; how could Anglo-Australia be so heartless? Where is our humanity? How did we get to a point where this seemed a good idea? These humiliations and dehumanisations were inflicted on fellow human beings for no other reason than for the colour of their skin: As African American writer James Baldwin wrote:

You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set for ever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.<sup>16</sup>

I was ashamed to be Australian, especially when I realised I had never met an Aboriginal person. I did a few years later, at the age of forty-three. He was sixteen and a student at a



You will meet me properly later in this chapbook, but I am Waa, a highly intelligent and erudite omnipresent narrator, interloper, unsettlor. I have a curious challenge for you. Complete the following: 'The Great Australian ...' Google the answer and the following may appear in the search: 'Dream', 'Bake Off', 'Spelling Bee' and 'Fly'. 'Silence' does not feature on Google's first page of suggestions. In his 1968 Boyer Lecture, Professor W. E. H. Stanner accused Anglo-Australia of 'the Great Australian Silence'.

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<sup>15</sup> Phillip Noyce, dir., *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, motion picture (London: Hanway Films, 2002); Steven McGregor, dir., *Servant or Slave*, documentary (St Peters: No Coincidence Media, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (London: Penguin, 1963), 7. I use this Baldwin quote twice in this collection; it is that bad and that good.

private Melbourne boys' school with my sons, one of the 'footy scholarship' boys. We opened our home to these young men.<sup>17</sup>

I could not let the injustice lie and felt a responsibility to know more. No one seems to talk about it (in my world). I grew to realise that it is a 'thing' – it is called the 'Great Australian Silence'. Anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner called it out in 1968 in his Boyer Lecture, 'After the Dreaming', more than fifty years ago. His argument was that several critical areas of our shared history, such as invasion, theft of land and massacres, had been long ignored by Australian historians. It was less a case of neglect by individual historians than 'a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale'.<sup>18</sup>

Since then, First Nations peoples have demanded and made space for their voices, and we have access to more knowledge about their history and their experience of colonisation, but is anyone listening now?<sup>19</sup>

I feel that as a fifth-generation Australian who has been the beneficiary of colonisation and the stolen land and wealth of First Nations peoples, I should use my

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17 As I reflect on this statement, I realise that I was making a colour generalisation; clearly, I was blind to a black present in Australia. White Australia has always had a black present; it is just that many have not 'seen' it yet? During her 2018 Sydney presentation on white fragility, race scholar and educator Robin DiAngelo let me know that there is every chance I could have lived and died in the racial segregation that is not discussed in Australia, and never met a First Nations person. She adds that it is also likely that the people who love and guide me would not have brought this loss to my attention, as it would not occur to them that there is something missing (can anyone tell me what is missing?) or that we have lost something of value. 'That is the deepest message of all', proffers DiAngelo. She helped me realise that without the efforts I have made, I could easily have taken my last breath without having had an authentic, sustained, rich and respectful cross-cultural relationship with a First Nations person or people. And no one would ever have suggested anything of value was missing. DiAngelo, 'White Fragility' (podcast).

18 W. E. H. Stanner, 'After the Dreaming: Black and White Australians – An Anthropologist's View', Boyer Lectures 1968 (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969), 25. The disciplinary landscape has changed since 1968, and there is much more scholarship by contemporary non-Indigenous historians writing histories centred on First Nations peoples and their experiences of colonisation. Such authors include Penny Edmonds, Kat Ellinghaus, Ann Curthoys, Anna Haebich, Jane Lydon and Lyndall Ryan.

19 Here I am beginning to explain how I am writing into the Great Australian Silence, challenging that silence. Historians like Larissa Behrendt, Bruce Pascoe, Lynette Russell give vital First Nations perspectives.



I am just listening  
to what the white  
woman has to say  
here, and some of  
you readers who have  
explored the realm  
of race studies will be  
thinking, OMG listen  
to that budding white  
virtue, the blossoming  
of the white saviour,  
the emergence of the  
white ally, but reserve  
your judgements. She  
eventually sees this,  
knows this, tries to  
combat it.

privilege and voice to express a humble and apologetic solidarity with those who have suffered so deeply through colonisation. I immersed myself in any First Nations culture I could access in Melbourne. People around me made fun of me, teasing that I wanted to be Aboriginal, rolling their eyes at my invitation to another First Nations event. I devoured plays, films, television, books, radio, exhibitions, workshops, writers' festivals and keynote speeches.

In 2011, after a twenty-three-year hiatus from study, I enrolled in university to study creative writing. There were stories I wanted to share with the world, and I needed to learn the crafts and skills to do this. It was very challenging, but I loved every second of it. I was the eldest (and most diligent/nerdy) in the creative writing cohort, including most of the teachers. Many of my peers were the same age as my offspring and two of my eldest son's school mates were in my cinema studies class. A year later, that son also enrolled in the same course and we would pass on the stairs. In the first semester I studied *Hamlet* and wrote an essay on it as part of the assessment. I gave a draft to my second son – who was, by chance, also in the company of *Hamlet* for his VCE studies – to check. It came back covered red pen and he said it read like a *Herald Sun* article.

As I progressed through my degree, I realised that I gravitated towards real stories and the genre of creative or literary non-fiction. I revelled in delving into other cultures and other ways of being and knowing. There were two realms I wanted to explore in my research and writing. The first was writing as inquiry, and my focus was trying to understand the shape and contours of Asperger's Syndrome (specifically young women and how they are often undiagnosed), a deeply personal area for me as some members of my family had been diagnosed



as being on this spectrum. This exploration dominated my Honours year and I share some insights into that journey and how it helped me develop as a reflexive researcher and writer in the story 'How to Grow Asparagus' in *Seeping, Oozing, Blooming*.

The second realm is the subject of this doctorate, which is exploring Anglo-Australia's relationship with the First Nations peoples. I sense the cultural abyss between black and white Australia with much of white Australia unable to 'see' black Australia, either through benign or wilful ignorance.

## PAIN

As I began to research in this space, I found people around me reacted in curious ways. Many tuned out, uninterested; others tried to tell me why they thought assimilation was the way forward (this is the perception that Aboriginal people are primitive and need to modernise); others thought they were an expensive lost cause, persuaded by negative stereotypes; the more enlightened were intrigued. Overwhelmingly, I found that people were ignorant about First Nations peoples and culture. As I researched and began to see the genocide that came after invasion, I was further stunned at the silence around the treatment, past and present, of the First Nations. Battles and massacres loomed into my consciousness



Miranda Tapsell is angry:

What do you dick-monkeys know about racism?

Because I have been living with racism since the moment I shot out of my mum. Thirty years of trying to be who they want me to be ... but it is never good enough, because there is something about us that they will never accept. What is it? If only I could put my little black finger on it ... thirty years of smiling and not showing my black anger. I am done not being angry.

I AM ANGRY, and if you don't like me being angry, then by all means, Australia, take this furious baton and run this race for me. Because we are dying in infancy, we are dying in custody and we are dying decades earlier than you. And you should be as angry about that as I am. Be angry at what is happening to us, for me, so I am not the only one shouting.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This was a piece of brave and brilliant television; in March 2019, comedians Kate McLennan and Kate McCartney gave over their final Get Krack!n show on the ABC to Nakkiah Lui and Miranda Tapsell, two fierce First Nations performers. They shared the baton of being the 'good Aboriginal' and not making the white lady cry and being furious and repeatedly uttering the G-word – genocide. This is an excerpt from Tapsell's stunning incandescent monologue to camera. Get Krack!n, series 2, episode 8, television program (Sydney: ABC, 27 March 2019).

beginning with Bruce Elder's *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Australian Aborigines since 1788* (1988), C. D. Rowley's *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (1970) and then the work of Lyndall Ryan and her team at the University of Newcastle to construct the definitive massacre map.<sup>20</sup> In the abyss, I found the testimonies of the Stolen Generations in the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1996) and the lives of those who died in custody through Commissioner Wootten's humane assessments in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991).<sup>21</sup>

These stories forever changed my lens on the country I was born in, that I live in. I see stolen land, soaked with the blood of those who fought to keep it and care for it as their ancestral responsibility. I began to sense their loss, their pain, and be angry; but I will get to that. It is the pain that is being passed on – this transgenerational trauma – that I cannot ignore.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to examine this pain I refer to. Isn't it interesting that when speaking of colonisation and oppression, so much comes back to the body, the violence visited on the body of the other? George Yancy asks us to 'unsuture' ourselves from our whiteness, and cultural studies scholar Sara Ahmed asks us to think about the embodied

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20 Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Australian Aborigines since 1788* (Frenchs Forest: Child & Associates, 1988); Charles Dunford Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1970). Developed by University of Newcastle historian Professor Lyndall Ryan, the map is a significant step in the recognition of the periods of violence in Australia's history. The interactive map, 'Colonial Frontier Massacres in Central and Eastern Australia 1788–1930', is an online tool that records massacre site locations. Lyndall Ryan, Jennifer Debenham, Mark Brown and William Pascoe. 'Colonial Frontier Massacres in Eastern Australia 1788–1872', accessed 16 March 2019. <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php>.

21 Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: HREOC, 1997), <https://bth.humanrights.gov.au/the-report/bringing-them-home-report>; Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and John Halden Wootten, *Report of the Inquiry into the Death of Malcolm Charles Smith* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989), [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/rciadic/individual/brm\\_mcs/](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/rciadic/individual/brm_mcs/).

22 See Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines. The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia* (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002).

politics of pain in her essay, 'The Contingency of Pain' in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004).<sup>23</sup>

In this book, Ahmed considers the damage done to the bodies of First Nations peoples, not just as individuals but as 'the skin of the community': attachments severed, collective trauma, the body of the community that was 'torn apart'.<sup>24</sup> She insists we need to hear these stories, but cautions it is not that simple. Is there the political will to hear them 'justly'? The reports are about a process of healing, but we cannot address the devastation unless the whole community listens with an open heart and mind to the stories of what has happened in the past. We need to listen, understand and commit to reconciliation.<sup>25</sup> It prompted me to think about the emotional arithmetic of healing: truth, pain, shame, blame, guilt, reparation, reconciliation ... but again, be cautious, counters Ahmed. The white nation must not listen to these stories and let them soak in and away, 'cleansed through its expression of shame'.<sup>26</sup> Reconciliation is active: that is, it is the white nation that must look inward to come to terms with its violent past, rather than seeking to reconcile First Nations peoples to its own cultural demands. As Ahmed warns, reconciliation carries a double meaning, one of which is assimilationist.<sup>27</sup> Be wary of narratives of the 'national pain' that appropriate First Nations wounds, claiming the pain as their own, expounding the healing of a nation: 'the healing of the wounds is represented as the healing of the nation; the covering over of the wound caused by

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23 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004). With thanks to Camille Nurka who brought this chapter to my attention.

24 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 34.

25 Also see the ethics of listening in Brigitta Olubas Lisa Greenwell, 'Re-Membering and Taking Up an Ethics of Listening: A Response to Loss and the Maternal in "the Stolen Children"', *Australian Humanities Review* 15 (1999): <http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/1999/10/01/re-membering-and-taking-up-an-ethics-of-listening-a-response-to-loss-and-the-maternal-in-the-stolen-children/>.

26 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 35. Ahmed also refers to shame in Chapter 5 ('Shame Before Others') of the same book, which asserts that shame can form a collective ideal and work for nation building.

27 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 35. See also Fiona Nicoll, 'Blacklash: Reconciliation after Wik', *Meanjin* 57, no. 1 (1998): 167–83.

the theft of indigenous Australians allows the nation to become one body, sealed by its skin'.<sup>28</sup>

Our task, explains Ahmed, is to 'learn how to hear what is impossible'. By this, she means that we must be open to this pain without appropriating it as though it were our own.<sup>29</sup> It is neither possible, nor ethically desirable, for us to imagine that we can fully inhabit these bodies in pain if we have not lived in their skin. The sense of impossibility also refers to those stories of the colonisation and oppression of the First Nations peoples that are too awful to contemplate: 'unbelievable, too believable, unliveable and yet lived'.<sup>30</sup> I explore this complex relationship to feeling in my story, 'The Mopoke' (*My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing*), about the death in custody of Malcolm Charles Smith. As a white reader, I am distanced from this pain; I am complicit in it. Yet it touches me, drawing me into its orbit. The grief and trauma catch me as I tried to imagine what it must have been like.<sup>31</sup>

The personal impact of this knowledge I have collected and curated over these stories has made me look differently at my social conditioning (whiteness), our shared history and at the foundations of this nation. Today, I inhabit 'the surfaces of bodies and worlds differently', as Ahmed so poetically says.<sup>32</sup> I cannot, see, unsee and see with fresh eyes without it changing me. It has been an undoing (and an attempted untethering to the dominant culture) for me, and, as Ahmed suggests, 'un-housing',<sup>33</sup> where I feel the

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28 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 35.

29 Ibid.

30 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 35–6.

31 I tried imagine myself as Malcolm's mother, to feel the pain I would feel if he were my son, but in truth, it is not available to me. I cannot know it, and it is important to acknowledge this and resist any attempt to appropriate it. I can let it in, feel its weight, but it does not keep me up at night. All I know is that there is a feeling that binds me to these stories; empathy, sorrow, guilt, horror. They are enough to drive me to action, though.

32 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 36.

33 Ibid.

weight of my implication in this violent history, the silence that surrounds it, the realisation we are on stolen land, never ceded. This must affect our reading of the shared past.<sup>34</sup>

I cannot feel the pain that The Songman shares with the world or intuit the anguish of those who tell their stories of the Stolen Generations or the families of those who die in custody. But I could not, cannot ignore the spectre of pain, a daily a stone in my shoe, a thorn in my side, a spear in my conscience (that is a many feathered thing).

The pain is a call to action, to pay attention, to break the silence, for an attentive hearing of impossible stories.

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34 Ahmed is not one for imagining happy endings with us all living in harmony. For her, togetherness is actually about acknowledging that which we can never share, 'learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one'. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 39.





## THE SONGMAN

Would you set off on a long hike into a territory you do not know, without a map, without a compass, without GPS, without local intelligence, without a guide?

I did. I began a decolonising journey to understand more about First Nations peoples and culture without a First Nations guide to help me navigate. This is a reflection I make at the end of my doctorate as I did not consider this at the outset. I realise now that this was one of the many unconscious habits of my white privilege at work, specifically ontological expansiveness: that is, where white people act and think as if all spaces – geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual and bodily – are,



The audacity! No introductory letter from someone who can vouch for you, no introductory email from you humbly introducing yourself, just a bolshy text, screaming 'I am white, I am privileged, you will want to know me'. This is a story of you being supremely confident that your white privilege can open most doors.

or should be, available to them to move in, around and out of as they choose.<sup>35</sup> It means I assume total mastery of my environment, and I did. I just thought I could 'learn' more about other ways of knowing and being, about oppression and racism, about intergenerational trauma and connection to Country, all from books and films and the internet.

I will tell you the story of how I found my guide, The Songman.

I first heard Associate Professor Richard Frankland speak in his role as the Head of the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development at the University of Melbourne and also as part of a panel at RMIT University in 2016.<sup>36</sup> At the event, one of my supervisors, Barry Judd, introduced me to him. I googled him and discovered he is a significant holder of Gunditjmara knowledge and renowned as a fierce artist-warrior. He is a respected community leader and educator, songman, musician, filmmaker, poet, playwright and novelist. He is a wordsmith who uses any medium to tell his stories of his people's painful past, our shared legacy and hopeful tomorrows. His huge body of work showcases his voice through art, which inspires and energises reconciliation and social change. Over three decades, his contributions have striven to revitalise First Nations cultural practices and language, and to combat the 'poverty of spirit' that is the legacy of colonisation.

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35 Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

36 The Wilin Centre works with First Nations communities to identify, recruit and support potential and practising First Nations artists to study and refine their academic and artistic skills at the Victorian College of the Arts and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music at the University of Melbourne. Situated at the heart of Melbourne's arts precinct, the Wilin Centre fosters innovation in the research, development, advocacy and presentation of Indigenous arts and cultural practice.



He is also full mischief and makes people laugh.

I wanted to meet him, so I sent him a text asking him for a meeting or the chance to buy him a coffee.

No response. Zip. He must have missed my text. Thinking there must be a mistake, as who can be impervious to my whitely charm? I decided a follow-up text was clearly needed. It never occurred to me that he might have no recollection of me. (Such was my white arrogance.)

Still nothing. Zip. I remember feeling quite miffed.<sup>37</sup> I may have even tried a third time. There was some consolation when he accepted my Friend request on Facebook.

Months pass. One day I see an announcement on Facebook that Richard has posted an open invitation for people to join him on his Gunditjmara Country for a vigil to commemorate a massacre, thought to be the first massacre recorded in Victoria. They are to gather on a beach just outside Portland they call Convincing Ground.

Portland had been established as a whaling station in 1829. The whalers' genocidal impact on the Gunditjmara was already being felt when one day in 1833 or 1834, a whale washed ashore on this stretch of beach. The Kilcarer gundidj clan of the local Gunditjmara people made their way onto the sand to begin to harvest parts of the whale as they had for centuries. A group of whalers arrived to claim ownership over the carcass. The Gunditjmara people were determined to assert their right to the whale as traditional food, so responded aggressively when challenged by the whalers. The Gunditjmara were armed only with spears. A battle over the whale ensued.

In 1841, seven or eight years later, details emerged of what transpired that day. George Robinson, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Port Phillip from 1839 until 1849, was visiting Portland when he heard the place referred to as Convincing Ground. He wrote in his journal that the whalers were so enraged that they went to the head station for their firearms and then returned to the whale, The Kilcarer gundidj clan defended the whale again, so the whalers then let fly, 'right and left upon the natives'.<sup>38</sup>

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37 The same sort of miffed when the artist I discuss in 'Paperbark Roses' in *Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing?* did not respond to my emails.

38 Ian D. Clark, *Scars in the Landscape: A Register of Massacre Sites in Western Victoria, 1803–1859* (Canberra: AIATSIS, 1995), 17–18.

The whalers turned their guns on the Kilcarer gundidj clan, later referring to the place as the Convincing Ground as they had convinced the First families of their mistake. No one knows exactly how many men, women and children were massacred, but there were only two young male survivors, Pollikeunnuc and Yarereryarerer, and they were adopted by the Cart gundidj clan of Mount Clay. The Cart gundidj would not allow any member of the clan to go near the settlement of Portland following the massacre.<sup>39</sup> The site later became a whaling and fishing station.

Frankland was inviting people to stand with him and his family on this place on a June morning. I sought out the story and (inexplicably) felt compelled to go, and my husband and I decided to make a trip of it and stay the night (a four-hour drive away). We were the first to arrive at the empty beach. The Frankland family and others soon arrived, all dressed for the cold, wet, blustery morning. It was a moving ceremony for the small gathering. I tried to picture the extended family scene before the massacre, kids dancing with the waves on the shore, adults carving up the whale, various generations working side by side, accepting the gift from Country, knowing what to do with each piece. Incredibly, the rain stopped for Frankland's words and afterwards, a rainbow appeared. It was a deeply moving and humbling experience.<sup>40</sup>

Afterwards, he approached us, bemused. *You*, he said. *What are you doing here?* I felt very awkward and embarrassed. I was sure that at that moment it seemed a really odd thing for me to do. I explained that I was answering his call to hold vigil and acknowledge that history matters. He introduced us to his family and friends. We talked a little and then my husband and I set off back to Melbourne. An hour into the trip home, my phone rang. It was Richard.

I will help you with your PhD, he said. I will share my life's work with you. I will show you how I walk and live in two worlds: Gunditjmara and non-Aboriginal. With my writings, music, films, plays and performance, I will show you the cultural abyss and I

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39 Clark, *Scars in the Landscape*, 19.

40 Anne Elvey includes a haunting poem, 'All Souls' Eve', in her collection *White on White* (Carlton South: Cordite, 2018). This is one such poem in Elvey's collection that, according to Bonny Cassidy, 'harnesses concrete visual signifiers' to bear witness to the trauma of massacre. Bonny Cassidy, 'Book launch speech for *White on White* by Anne Elvey' (unpublished manuscript, 24 January 2018), Microsoft Word file.

will create a cultural bridge for you to walk across and read, see, hear and, I hope, digest large aspects of my life and culture.

He has led me along his *yakeen tharn*, his dreaming path, telling me of the *ngarra keetoong parreeyt meeng*, the many tears and the many heroes, resistance fighters, the *leerpeen marr thananbool*, the song men and women. He storied my path to decolonisation.

I immersed myself in his works. My heart ached through *Conversations with the Dead* (2002), knowing there is *No Way to Forget* (1996); I shadowed him in *Walking into the Bigness* (2014) and fumed over the files to ask *Who Killed Malcolm Smith?* (1990).<sup>41</sup>

He taught me ...

About grief, that grief is love. That he learned to see the world through a mother's tears. And he floats a question, Are there spirit babies in our tears?

About First Nations culture and how it is a living, breathing entity and, like water, it will always find a path, a way to evolve; even when it stays in the one place, water will promote life. Am I paying attention, listening to what Country has to say, to teach me, if I slow down?

About surviving – colonisation, invasion and war. His people continue to evolve culturally, and their revitalisation of culture, dance, ceremony, art, hierarchy, philosophies and doctrines is fuelled from what was, but also from what is: their culture, their people. Their voice evolves, fed from possibility and hope, from the hope of a better tomorrow. Am I telling good stories about his people? – stories to challenge the damaging negative tropes and stereotypes, to combat the homogeneity of 'the Aborigine', that makes us imagine them as one people when they are 270 unique nations? Am I

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41 Richard Frankland, *Conversations with the Dead*, in Tammy Anderson, Richard Frankland, Harding, John, Jadah Milroy, Tracey Rigney and Maryanne Sam, *Blak Inside: 6 Indigenous Plays from Victoria* (Strawberry Hills: Currency Press in association with Playbox Theatre, 2002); 'Letters to My Father: Yan Wanyoo Peepayan' (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2018); *Walking into the Bigness* (Strawberry Hills: Currency Press, 2017); dir., *No Way to Forget*. Torquay: Golden Seahorse Productions, 1996. Also see Nicholas Adler, dir., *Who Killed Malcolm Smith?*, documentary. Lindfield: Film Australia, 1992.

foregrounding First Nations voices, languages, perspectives and worldviews?<sup>42</sup>

About my culture, the dominant culture and the way it decides who has access to the wealth, power, influences and opportunities of this nation. Of the social engineering or conditioning that leads me to internalise from the first days of my life that there is a racial hierarchy with my white tribe at the top. This inherent superiority fosters and defends our national blindness and the Great Australian Silence, as anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner called it in 1968. Am I complicit in my silence? Am I aware of my whiteness, my privilege, my inherent biases and prejudices?

About voice: when you have art, you have voice and when you have voice you have freedom, but with that freedom comes responsibility. Richard urges me to ask myself, Am I using my voice and my freedom responsibly? Am I challenging the silence, the status quo, using my privilege in positive ways to level the playing field for those our dominant culture oppresses?

About the power of the arts. First Nations visual art offers a new cultural tapestry for the nation. Their poetry and songs are lyrics of what was, what is and what can be. Their plays and films tinker with our perceptions and prejudices and foreground fresh narratives and ways of seeing. Their crafts stitch old ways with new, symbols of ever evolving culture and identity. Their art is a tool for cultural capacity-building, not only for First Nations peoples, but for us all, shaping a new national identity. Look for stories, listen for voices that do not reflect my whiteness back at me.

About what was lost after invasion and dispossession: his people's villages, stone houses, aquaculture, agriculture, legal systems, health systems, kinship structures and general social order and how they had been smashed and written out of history. He told me of the ignored battles, massacres, murders, rapes and infanticide – a shock for me, yet a daily painful reality for his people. I can feel the 'poverty of spirit' he speaks of.

About community capacity building: of forever business, cultural safety, lateral violence, generational trauma, chronic disease, low life expectancies, suicides, funerals (on average First Nations people go to fifteen funerals a year), cultural loads and systemic racism. This is their everyday; they are Aboriginal 24/7.

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42 This is about using Indigenous Methodologies as discussed in 'Right Way'. I use the term 'indigenous' in this context because the discipline is referred to, internationally, as Indigenous Methodologies.

About a dialogue with the past, our shared legacy, that it is not about apportioning guilt, blame and shame. It is not about welfare. It is a legacy that has been placed in our hands, a legacy that is about a 230-year-old cultural clash. We have a choice: we can own it and do something about it, or we can be blind. I choose to see and act, but that is because I have his support and guidance. There are right ways to do things and good intentions are not enough.

About bruises and scars. First and foremost, he said, it was his responsibility to keep me safe, but he warned me that I might get bruised on my way into First Nations affairs, bruised while in there, and there may be permanent scars on my soul, but that it is not necessarily a bad thing, as scars are there to remind us of the hard lessons of life. He has shared his scars; I bear them with honour, humility and pride. They have changed me, changed the way I live, influenced my family and reconfigured my friendship circle.

About humanity and inhumanity. He warned that I might find my humanity among the dehumanised. And in return, I confront that inhumanity, the racism I hear, the double standards of our white world. I advocate for social change and self-determination. I might be viewed by some as a race traitor.

By trusting me with his life's work, Richard showed me the cultural abyss and empowered me to begin building a bridge over it. He told me to be confident with what I have learned and to pass on his gift to others, to ask my audience to confront the silence and step bravely across the cultural abyss and take the bruises.

A year on from that day on Convincing Ground, I had become quite the expert on Richard Frankland's achievements and contributions, and it became a bit of a joke between us. I could remind him of something he had done that he had long forgotten, replaced by the daily demands of being on the front line of First Nations affairs, teaching and conducting cultural strengthening work in community as a family man with a phone that never stops. To add to his loads, he was being asked to undertake the first ever Doctorate of Visual and Performing Arts, a new research degree out of the Victorian College of the Arts section of the University of Melbourne.

He explained to me that this was similar to a doctorate by publication, where the candidate writes a through line (around 20–30,000 words) to situate and contextualise their body of work. The difficult part was finding a starting point. We brainstormed some

ideas and his plan was to create the through line via a series of letters to his father, who died when he was six. He was to tell his father about his life.

Part of any strong relationship is reciprocity. Richard had shared so much with me, and now I was able to share something back with him. As I had studied his body of work, I had built it into two databases: one was an excel database of all his films, television, theatre, music, interviews, novels, awards and more. The other was a literature database (on Scrivener) of all his written works, poems and songs. It did not take long for me to move the information around Scrivener under the themes for each letter.

Once ready I suggested he download the Scrivener software and put both databases on a shared Dropbox. What he opened at his end was his life's work he had shared with me, given back to him in a form he could easily access to write his doctorate. Then the hard work began.

Early in 2019, 'Letters to My Father: *Yan Wanyoo Peepayan*'<sup>43</sup> was uploaded to the repository, the written component of Australia's inaugural Doctorate of Visual and Performing Arts. The dissertation and its accompanying huge collection of creative works narrates Associate Professor Richard Frankland's deeply personal and poetic story of a lifelong journey that performs and documents the complexities of First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing.

It is a piece of work that addresses the dominant culture front on. The shape of the dissertation is original and non-traditional, it does not look like the customary thesis. Like other First Nations scholars around the world, he insisted on his own unique style to carry his voice and to convey his culture's oral and performed knowledge systems, which are deeply connected to Country.

What is so special about the work is that readers from the dominant culture engaging with this form of First Nations storywork will find themselves in the contact

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43 Richard Frankland, 'Letters to My Father: *Yan Wanyoo Peepayan*' (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2018). When the drawing of The Songman (opposite) came in from illustrator Alice, I got the giggles. I had sent her a few pictures of Richard and asked her to draw from any of those. She has not met him, but she knew he was a First Nations man. I texted it to him, asking just how black he would be like to be? He was amused. Alice draws with Procreate on her iPad and our policy had been only black-and-white for the books, so she was presented with a binary. It was not lost on us that it was representative of the binaries we operate in on a daily basis.

zone, the space between the coloniser and the colonised, the First Peoples and the settlers. He treads lightly in the space, without apportioning guilt and blame, acknowledging a shared legacy with an invitation over the cultural abyss to places of possibility and hope.

My role in curating Richard's body of work was my first decolonising act, putting into practice all he had taught me. Ultimately, decolonising, for me, is about learning about the damage done to First Nations peoples and culture, seeing it and acknowledging it, and then doing something in your power to start repairing the damage, while celebrating their resilience and beauty. It is about finding a balance between the beauty and the tragedy.









## WAA

Agitators are a set of interfering, meddling people, who come down to some perfectly contented class of the community and sow the seeds of discontent amongst them. That is the reason why agitators are so absolutely necessary. Without them, in our incomplete state, there would be no advance towards civilisation.

Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', 1891

Allow me to introduce my friend in the margins (though in one of these books he takes over a whole page!), the crow.

His name is Waa. This is the name (also Waang and Wahn) the Kulin nations and other Victorian First Nations give to this cheeky black bird, whom we call a crow, but he is officially an Australian raven. He is clever, curious, opportunistic, and a problem solver with a remarkable long-term memory.

In local First Nations cosmology, he is a culture hero and a trickster and part of the skin system or moiety. Pre-colonisation, an individual's moiety was inherited from the father and it dictated all behaviour, social relationships, even marriage partners. Waa is also a totem for some, including The Songman, Richard Frankland.<sup>44</sup>

Waa is in the margins as a kind of First Nations conscience, a symbol of the influence that Richard's body of work has had on my research. He is also an omnipresent unsettle throughout the thesis.

This narrative layer is inspired by the narrator in my favourite novel, *The Book Thief* (2006) by Markus Zusak,<sup>45</sup> a novel set in Munich during the Second World War. Zusak uses the story of genocide to tell other stories of family, friendship, loyalty and fortitude. He masters stories within stories and captures the beauty and the ugliness of humans, just as I hope to. The Jewish Holocaust and the genocide of the First Peoples in Australia were 'successful' because of the fabrication and fostering of 'otherness'. Dehumanising the 'other' gave licence to members of the dominant race to collaborate in atrocities, assured of their victims' 'lesser' status.

Zusak uses Death as an omnipresent narrator: 'I am always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their ugly and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both.'<sup>46</sup> The reader finds themselves beguiled by this voice, which, ironically, exudes more humanity than the humans and exposes the contours of their inhumanity, leaving him to reflect in the final line that he is 'haunted by humans'.<sup>47</sup>

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44 My mentor, Gunditjmara Elder, Dr Richard Frankland, has given me permission to respectfully deploy the crow, Waa, as an omnipresent narrator in these works.

45 Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (Sydney: Picador, 2005).

46 Zusak, *The Book Thief*, 522.

47 *Ibid.*, 584.

Death's omnipresent voice is the glue of *The Book Thief* and Waa is the glue in these narratives as he flies in and out of the pages, delivering curious and sometimes unconnected information to create a connection or reaction. His observations and asides are often facilitating a conversation with myself. They are a way of keeping me in check and they present further interrogation and scrutiny of what I have done or thought. I endeavour to make Waa a decolonising force who challenges the status quo, an echo of my conscience and intuition.

Like Death, Waa is curious, and both are tormented by the inhumanity of humans; but in contrast to Zusak's compassionate narrator, Waa can be controversial and a disrupter. I like to think of him as an 'agitator and a stirrer', a phrase made infamous by Justice Lionel Murphy when he borrowed it from Oscar Wilde in the early 1980s.

I will let Waa tell you the story, as he loves a tale that threatens the status quo.



It was 1981. Up on Yarabah Mission just out of Cairns, a fella called Percy Neal and some of the mob had had enough of the white bosses. Their lives were run by rules such as some insulting decree about which electrical goods they were allowed to use with or without permission from the authorised officer. They were all still living under the Act (see more on this in 'The Dog Licence', *Skin in the Game*) and if they put a foot wrong, they would end up on Palm Island. One night, Percy and others went visiting the staff in the homes, asking them to move out and leave them all in peace. At the shopkeeper's house, things got a bit heated and spit from wild words flew through the wire door and onto the shopkeeper's face. This spit got Neal arrested, tried for assault and sentenced to two months hard labour by Magistrate Spicer, who fancied he knew all about Percy's 'type': violent, creating hatred between black and white, a hatred of white authority, upsetting the harmonious running of these communities. Spicer wanted to know why Percy couldn't be happy with his lot like the majority of 'genuine' Aboriginals who lived a happy life.

Percy appealed the decision and got six months hard labour. They said he was a stirrer. Another appeal was heard by Justice Lionel Murphy, who knew that paternalistic policies had robbed Percy and his people of their dignity and right to direct their own lives. He said Percy should not be punished for challenging authority and attempting to change unjust social conditions and being a stirrer was not relevant. Murphy was a fan of agitators and stirrers because they are, as Wilde had put it, vital to human progress.





## THE WEAVER

You will find me in the footnotes, the Weaver, sharing the shenanigans behind the making of these stories. I imagine this bricolage of works, this *mélange* of meanderings, as six hand-crafted baskets, with decorative elements to make each especially unique, but each has the same base, woven from six structural materials: the methodology of evocative autoethnography, the voice of the white woman, poetic layers of creative works, the unsettling voice of a wily crow, the insights of The Songman and the thoughts

of the reflective writer and researcher, the Weaver, who is constantly trying to ask herself how this is all going.<sup>48</sup>

Natalie Harkin is a poet and a weaver. The latter is a traditional skill she learned from the Narungga women in her family, all Stolen Generations, all put into domestic service. Harkin found their lives well-documented in the archives, in notes from protectors and the welfare system. She wove a basket from the papers: 'I weave your words, your words from these records, this basket of words I weave back to you.'<sup>49</sup> I follow Harkin's lead in her poem 'Weaving Lessons (on Genocide)':<sup>50</sup>

**prepare the reeds  
work light with swift fingers  
gather stories with each thread  
weave through night**

I gather my stories, my layers, the voices, sorting the threads, twisting the twine, soaking the fibres for suppleness, beginning to coil: theorists of methodology and practice; First Nations writers, scholars and activists; and the Crow and The Songman

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48 Here she is in the footnotes, the Weaver, working hard to satisfy the examiners, trying to justify why she does not need a separate dissertation, that the making and the artefact are irretrievably intertwined, woven tightly, and that trying to pull them apart will weaken the basket. This is a balancing act, akin to tightrope walking, proffers Brad Haseman in his paper 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', *Media International Australia* 118, no. 1 (2006): 98–106. I am a writerly *seiltanzer* (tightrope walker), negotiating the perilous wire of creative practice research that challenges research orthodoxies in the academy. But let us pause for a moment ... What comes first in my practice? Creativity or research? Unequivocally, I am a researcher first, a collector, and then I creatively curate the information. I find the data and ask myself what can I do with this, how can I weave it? To drill down my practice, I am a creative researcher who looks for stories that matter, while cultivating the 'dual consciousness', as Ross Gibson puts it, that needs to be examined when the creative arts are used as the basis for scholarly research. How do I stay stable on this wire? Ross Gibson, 'The Known World', *TEXT* 8 (2010): 1, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue8/Gibson.pdf>. Also see Terry Rosenberg, "'The Reservoir': Towards a Poetic Model of Research in Design', *Working Papers in Art and Design* (2000): <http://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/298>.

49 'Archive Fever Paradox, 2013', YouTube, uploaded 15 April 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q\\_hkHH1h2k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_hkHH1h2k).

50 The following stanzas are excerpts from Natalie Harkin, 'Weaving Lessons (on Genocide)', *Overland*, 4 December 2014, <https://overland.org.au/2014/12/emerging-poet-series-natalie-harkin/>.

all contaminate the data with my subjectivity – visceral, sensory and dangerous. Natalie says:

carry what you can  
 food – tools – babies  
 don't spill a drop when it's time to run

here they come  
 here they come

A problem is not always the starting point. I began my weaving with an 'intuitive hunch'<sup>51</sup> and 'an enthusiasm of practice'<sup>52</sup> that gave purpose to the process, as I wondered how to engage fellow white Anglo-Australians who may be indifferent to First Nations peoples and culture. This project sent me on a long meandering walk with an idea or hunch and a 'see what happens along the way' approach. Gibson would call this phase immersion, exertion, reflection, and 'the oscillation between being inside and outside'.<sup>53</sup>

And Natalie weaves:

wait for clever winds  
 to carry your smoke signals  
 subvert and deflect  
 bide more time

sharpen flints with your senses  
 cover your tracks  
 disappear with the sun  
 prepare for blood

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51 Rosenberg, "'The Reservoir'", 2.

52 Haseman, 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', 100.

53 Gibson, 'The Known World', 5.

they're here  
they're here

I gather and weave, from the archives, from the internet, from reports of Deaths in Custody, situate my project, find the gap:

in creative writing, where artefact and exegesis are already modally identical – i.e. couched in the same 'language' in the first place – why must they remain separated? Why might they not be interwoven?<sup>54</sup>

The woven piece is stronger, more poetic, with many components, though the structure must be sound (read: rigorous).<sup>55</sup> It is a collection of disparate elements brought together, curious juxtapositions that offer the possibilities of new discoveries and meanings. What can be read, seen or considered in the gaps between old paintings, new artworks, First Nations stories and personal experience, all woven together?<sup>56</sup>

Natalie weaves uncomfortable truths:

**I smell your reeds burning  
as they cloak you with blankets  
gifted with smallpox  
to blister your skin**

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54 Nigel Krauth, 'Exegesis and Artefact as a Woven Work: Problems of Examination', *TEXT 22*, no. 1 (2018): <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april18/krauth.htm>. The academic reader will be narrowing their eyes with suspicion, wondering if I am so bold (and daft) as to attempt to weave my dissertation into my artefact, to submit a 'woven work', as Nigel Krauth calls it.

55 Doctoral submissions of creative work have traditionally had two elements: the artefact and the exegesis (some refer to it as a dissertation). In theatre studies, or music, or art or architecture they are submitted as separate modes, or languages, such as performance and textual, composition and textual, painting/sculpture and textual, architectural plans and textual.

56 I am especially referring to my stories 'Pioneering Propaganda' and 'Paperbark Roses' in the chapbook *Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing?*



**I hear red cliffs wailing  
a ration-station's offering  
arsenic-laced flour  
to convulse your gut**

Krauth appreciates the complexity of a practice like mine. It may appear haphazard, but it is tactical, with an overall picture in my mind, involving 'aesthetic and intellectual manipulation proceeding towards an overall statement'.<sup>62</sup> The meaning of this woven or collaged work is based on my understanding of the possible meanings that emanate from the alchemy of elements.<sup>57</sup>

Juxtaposition requires the writer's insight into the nature and significance of the pieces brought together, along with awareness of the contribution the conjoining – the contrast and connection – makes to the overall composition.<sup>58</sup>

The six baskets are the sum of the parts, synthesised in a symbiotic relationship, as each informs each, each complements the other.<sup>59</sup> This woven form demands the basket recipient intuit the symbiotic nature of the components.<sup>60</sup>

Natalie's words weave a dangerous history:

**I cry you a flood  
as they boil your tea  
from strychnine-waterholes  
to choke your breath**

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57 He also points out the pitfall of a woven work in that I may be able to create something original, but 'collaging of exegesis and artefact requires extraordinary competence to achieve coherence'. Krauth, 'Exegesis and Artefact as a Woven Work', 4.

58 Ibid.

59 Symbiosis denotes an interaction where the relationship is mutually beneficial. To be pedantic, I am talking about mutualism as a subset of symbiosis, not commensalism where only one side benefits, or parasitism where one – the parasite – benefits to the detriment of the host, like mistletoe. An example of mutualism is the rhino and the oxpecker, where the bird sustains itself by grooming the rhino, eating all its bugs and parasites.

60 Krauth, 'Exegesis and Artefact as a Woven Work', 3.

I am falling

I am falling

in fields of grief

I trip on your bones

trace your flesh

catch your last breath

I search for your baskets

to carry your hearts

gather what's left

before they burn

Krauth advocates freedom of expression and formal experimentation in my basket-making, seeking non-linear links, a plethora of possibilities, offering ways of making, 'woven, plaited, blended, merged, mixed, collaged, cut-up, fragmented, composite, montaged, medley-ed, mosaiced, pastiched, disruptive, disconnected, nonlinear, fictocritical ... the plaiting of strands, the splicing of strips, or the laying of mosaic pieces'.<sup>61</sup>

Collect the strands, depending on how thick and strong you want the basket. Baskets start stories, change as they age, speaking to each in a different way. Thread your

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61 Another way of thinking of my practice is poetic research. A disciplined researcher would find this approach, of flitting, tangents and rabbit holes, very stressful. In my experience, it is exhilarating, complicated and hard to contain. ('Narrow and deepen', my supervisor would say, as she watched me cast wide, again. But can my audience consume narrow and deep on these issues?) It is best explained by Rosenberg, who questions the expectations, methods and demands of traditional academic research to draw through it the possibility of research that is poetic and therefore other to it. Rosenberg posits that the 'poetic' cannot be fully incorporated in the methodological forms of conventional research. The notion of poetic research emerges from a questioning of practice (design), which tries to locate parts of its creative drive so that it may be brought through in regard to research. The poetic in research can be seen as an attempt to develop a technicity of the 'hunch'. Rosenberg, "The Reservoir".

needle with strong thread, and begin with the core, the central point, collecting, coiling, crafting, from the inside out. Adapt your stitch as is your fancy. Tight

Natalie weaves of resilience:

blood from my grandmother's womb  
 feeds my babies  
 they kick to survival songs  
 before they swallow the air

rise up  
 rise up

burn the old blankets  
 the old-ration-stations  
 track down the waterholes  
 cleanse them with your dreams

And I weave my stories of women's business, harvest the reeds, grasses, dry, soak, split, sit, talk, watch, teach, listen, possibilities, learn, you are weaving your history, whitewashed history, good stories, stolen babies, hearts broken, a mother's tears, impossible stories too awful to be spoken. Lovingly woven with all my heart, six literary baskets, because we cannot cope with too much reality.<sup>62</sup>

prepare new reeds  
 let your ancestors guide  
 weave them their story  
 with poetry and love

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62 As a woman of means, I was determined and able to make my stories as engaging and as aesthetically enticing as possible. Little did I know the joy my collaboration with my designer and my illustrator would bring me. These two twenty-four-year-old creatives have brought such enthusiasm to my work, stimulating discussions and interpretations I never thought of. They have helped me bring my six woven baskets to life. I chose chapbooks as I know that some of the material is difficult to engage with. My hope is that small baskets may be more readily accessible to a reader who covets their comfort zone.

weave them strong to carry  
the weight of our truth  
then thread them with hope  
to lighten your load

it's time  
it's time.

## EVOCATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The way I craft these stories for you is grounded in the practice known in the academy as evocative autoethnography. This is my creative practice, writing about the personal and its relationship to culture, putting myself in the story and research. In this way, I am contaminating the material with my subjectivity, and this is deepened by a reflexive approach which brings forward multiple layers of consciousness.<sup>63</sup>

I write in the first person, sharing my foibles and vulnerabilities, sharing my life and experiences, all in an effort to pull you in and make you care about what I care about.<sup>64</sup> I do want to provoke a response from you, whether it is to motivate empathy, fresh understanding, reflection, cultural criticism, or move to acceptance, anger or action. I do realise that I cannot control your reactions or guide you to my favoured set of 'truths' (but I will try).

You will notice that I go back and forth with my autoethnographer's gaze: first with an ethnographic wide-angle lens, zooming in on social and cultural aspects of my own

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63 Ellis, *The Ethnographic I*, 37–8.

64 I explore this further – especially co-creativity between reader and writer – in 'The Bowerbird' in *My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing*. Being reflexive means using all my senses, body, feelings, whole being – using the word 'self' to learn about the other, using all experiences to reflect critically on my own. Ellis, *The Ethnographic I*, 48.

experience, then looking inward, exposing my vulnerable self.<sup>65</sup> The writer/researcher who observes, but is also observed; who acts, but interacts; who looks outward, but also inward.

It is a transgressive tool well suited to challenging the status quo. As a practice, autoethnography troubles the boundaries of the academy, blurring and unsettling the rules of disciplines, bending, blending and breaking through conventional genres of research and writing practices.<sup>66</sup> In a way, it creates a liminal space, finding value in its in-betweenness, neither arts nor sciences, hovering between epistemology and ontology, facts and meaning, experience and language.<sup>67</sup> In my mind, it is well-suited for the space I write into – the cultural abyss – and accommodates that which is irreconcilable: Western and First Nations ways of knowing and being; linear and non-linear temporality; plural histories; and the fissure ‘between a cold and rational objectivity and a hot and visceral emotionality’.<sup>68</sup> In this in-betweenness, there is a place of possibilities, a place of creativity.

You will also find that at times I take a non-linear approach: back and forth, reflecting, dissecting, merging roles of writer/researcher/mother while weaving in other poetic layers, curious juxtapositions to stimulate other ways of seeing and understanding the material (such as ‘The Mopoke’ in *My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing*). For me, this layered approach reflects the complexity of our lives.

Ultimately, this is about me inviting you to put meanings into motion and experience thinking *with* a story – asking you to use my experience to consider how the experience is affecting your life and to find in that experience a truth about your life.

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65 This form demands my authentic voice, self-questioning, self-aware, self-critical, introspective. Bochner and Ellis call it ‘ethical self-consciousness’. To resonate with the reader, I need to be present in the text and come across as honest and vulnerable, speaking my heart, showing both sides – my narrative self and my reflective self – and acknowledging my own uncertainty about what things really mean. Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, 254, 247.

66 Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, 45.

67 *Ibid.*, 67.

68 Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, 66.

This is different to thinking *about* a story, where we reduce the story to its content and then analyse it hoping to find larger categories, themes or patterns.<sup>69</sup>

## MY COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

You will note that I have read widely to research and write these stories to challenge the racist status quo. There are many brilliant minds and concerned consciences I draw from and lean on for guidance and inspiration. You find references to them woven throughout the stories. My community of thinkers falls into four groups in the context of my research and writing:

The historians opened my eyes to the whitewashing of our history, uncomfortable truths and fresh ways of viewing the past and the present and the Australian nation. They include Ian Clark, Inga Clendinnen, Ann Galbally, Bill Gammage, John Hirst, Minoru Hokari, Jeanette Hoorn, A. W. Howitt, Ann McGrath, Henry Reynolds, C. D. Rowley, Lyndall Ryan, Bernard Smith, Tom Stannage, W. E. H. Stanner, Clive Turnbull and Patrick Wolfe.

The race scholars introduced me to both my whiteness and privilege, and they opened me up to black lived experience. They include James Baldwin, Aimé Césaire, Robin DiAngelo, Frantz Fanon, Joe Feagin, Paolo Friere, Cheryl Harris, bell hooks, Peggy McIntosh, David Mowalijarlai, Fiona Nicoll, Derald Sue, Shannon Sullivan, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o and George Yancy.

My study of Indigenous methodologies was guided by Jo Ann Archibald, Chawwin-is (Ruth Ogilvie), Jeff Corntassel, Gregory Cejete, Scot DeMuth, Margaret Kovach, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Waziyatawin, Shaun Wilson and Michael Yellow Bird. A main tenet is to privilege and foreground First Nations voices and worldviews. I have woven in the wisdom, creative works and insights of Elders, creatives and scholars including Ghillar Michael Anderson, Muriel Bamblett, Carolyn Briggs, Richard Frankland, Kevin Gilbert, Georgia McGuire, Natalie Harkin, Jackie Huggins, Richard Hunter, Jeanine Leanne, Amy McQuire, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Bruce Pascoe, Paddy Roe, Xavier Rudd, Bobbi Sykes, Sam Watson and his son, the poet Samuel Wagan Watson.

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69 Ellis, *The Ethnographic I*, 197.

In the academy, I am one among many other non-First Nations writers who have challenged the silences and denials and forgettings around our shared history with First Nations peoples and culture and our racist and discriminatory present. I add my voice to a constellation of creative writers and practitioners, including Deborah Bird Rose, Arthur Bochner, Bonny Cassidy, Stuart Cooke, Carolyn Ellis, Anne Elvey, Michael Farrell, Phillip Hall, Stephen Muecke, Geoff Page, Claudia Rankine and Katrina Schlunke.<sup>70</sup>

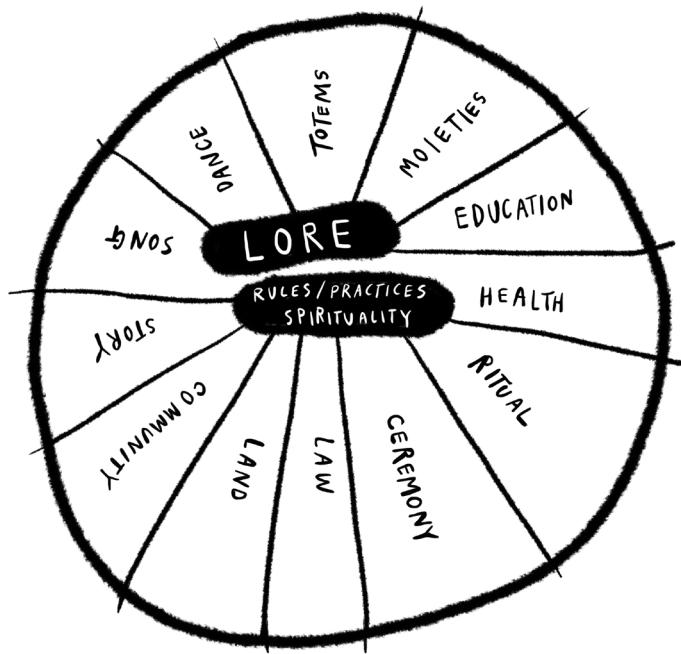
I define my community of practice as fellow concerned thinkers who poke at consciences, question easy habits of thought and challenge dominant knowledge production and maintenance. I look for writers who help me clarify how I see the world and offer insights in my process of decolonisation.

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70 I would particularly like to acknowledge the scholarship of Katrina Schlunke. Our writings share many commonalities: her love of the land; her discomfort with the colonisation of time and the seasonal order; her quandaries about knowing and not knowing, the silences, impossible stories, wondering what we did know, do know, and how the stories of massacres never had the 'never, ever again' response; how we have been let down by the promise of history to tell us what really happened; her realisation that history is plural, there is no one way of doing history, or knowing history; and her awareness and troubling of her whiteness. I add my voice to hers in saying history must not be left unturned. See, in particular, Katrina Schlunke, *Bluff Rock: Autobiography of a Massacre*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005.







## RIGHT WAY

Are academic systems of knowledge so unshakeably superior? Even if it's possible, under present circumstances, for Aboriginal people's knowledge, experiences, and beliefs to occupy academia's rigid, modern system of knowledge, isn't it possible to at least put a dent in it?

Minoru Hokari, *Gurindji Journey: A Japanese Historian in the Outback*, 2011

‘Australians all let us rejoice, for we are young and free.’<sup>71</sup> As a middle-class white Australian, I rejoice in freedom and opportunity, which gives me access to education, networking and the wealth and power within this nation. Many of my problems can be solved with a phone call.

Freedom means I have voice and with that voice comes responsibility. As a researcher and writer, I am aware of the values and information I put out into the world. I recognise the social and contextual implications of my writing. This is especially important when exploring spaces in and around First Nations peoples, who have suffered at the hands of extractive and reductive researchers. I write this to articulate my ethical positioning and guiding principles in relation to research in these spaces. There are eight personal statements or observations I would like to make. I will state them all briefly and expand on them as required.

The first is that the language I use when writing about First Nations peoples and culture matters. They are not ‘our’ Aboriginal peoples; they do not belong to us and we must end this patriarchal framing. My preference is to use the term ‘First Nations peoples’ or ‘First Peoples’, as they ground Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as traditional owners and assert that they are made up of many diverse nations (approximately 270). I do not use the term ‘Indigenous’, as it is a word that evokes the settler association of First Peoples with native flora and fauna.<sup>72</sup> However, I may use the terms ‘non-Indigenous’ or ‘non-Aboriginal’ to refer to those who do not belong to First Nations communities.

My second observation is that in my experience, authentic engagement with First Nations peoples is not about meeting half way, because this would imply an equal exchange, which settler culture has, in reality, rendered impossible. Since first contact, British settler culture has established itself in the national language, laws, economy and modes of governance: First Nations people have had to assimilate to Anglo-Australia, but the same has not been expected of non-Aboriginal people.

My research is about building a bridge over the cultural abyss. This process demands a leap of faith and a personal investment, all of which begins with humility.

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71 For Non-Australian readers, this is the opening line to our national anthem.

72 For more on my thoughts on this, see ‘Interview with a Hyacinth Orchid’ in *Seeping, Oozing, Blooming*.

While shame and guilt for what has happened in the past 230 years may be encountered, this research is not necessarily mobilised around these (white) feelings.<sup>73</sup> It is about looking forwards, to imagine a more equitable shared future. Having said that, the violent and whitewashed past does need to be acknowledged. A leap of faith, to me, means respectfully attempting to apprehend the world, and its history, within First Nations ways of seeing, while recognising that there will always be limits to what it is possible for me to 'know'. I see this as a 'decolonising' act.

My third observation is that by immersing myself in First Nations methodologies I understand that First Nations cosmology cannot be contained and constrained by Western paradigms.<sup>74</sup> Through the valuable insights of Minoru Hokari and Stephen Muecke, I see that the academy struggles to accept the supernatural elements of First Nations cosmology, to respect it as plural history, thereby rationalising it as myth. This monoculture of the mind is a barrier to connecting with Country.

My fourth observation is that authentic engagement calls for acceptance of what Hokari calls 'dangerous history', of acknowledging plural truths and plural histories, thereby creating space for the supernatural essence of First Nations cosmology that connects everything.<sup>75</sup> To begin to decolonise history, I must relinquish the colonial lens that dictates that there can be only one truthful account.

In doing so, and this is my fifth observation, I must acknowledge the custodians and safekeepers of story and culture as historians and experts. When I access their accounts of history, I must follow protocol and respect the provenance of the information by seeking permission to use it and by giving credit to the source. Reciprocity, as in giving back to the community in a meaningful, authentic and sustainable way, is also key.

My sixth observation is a sticky one, as it may put me at odds with the academy's process of authorising ethical engagement with First Nations peoples. I express concern

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73 Ahmed says in her essay on pain that not knowing is more important than thinking you know this suffering: 'in the face of the otherness of my own pain, I am undone, before her, and for her'. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 31.

74 I expand on my immersion in Indigenous Methodologies in a few pages.

75 Hokari, *Gurindji Journey*.

over the patriarchal model of university ethics process, which I feel constrains and stifles First Nations voices, and I problematise how the process ‘works’ in the more elastic realm of Creative Practice.

I appreciate that the ethics processes are there precisely to prevent unethical extraction of First Nations knowledges, but, as it is a colonial structure, it cannot be trusted to be culturally safe (a bit like ‘progressives’, as I mentioned earlier).<sup>76</sup> As Aileen Moreton-Robinson shows us, ‘When patriarchal whiteness within Australian legal and anthropological discourses constitutes and defines “Aborigines” it produces a subject of its own making; an etic white social construct and possession. This social construction of Aboriginality violates our subjectivity by obliterating any trace of our different ontological and epistemological existence’.<sup>77</sup>

After being confronted with the brutal history of the founding of modern Australia, my seventh point is to articulate that I acknowledge the false narratives that lay the foundations of our modern nation.

My eighth and final observation is that by taking notice and paying attention, I am beginning to see that our environment tells us the right way to live and the right way to behave. Through opening myself to First Nations cosmologies, I have been able to build an ethical philosophy from a new and always-developing understanding of Country, its life-sustaining cycles and spiritual significance.

## LEAP OF FAITH

I have alluded to the leap of faith I believe one needs to engage authentically with First Nations cosmology.

I will tell you a story about when I was confronted with a question that tested me: ‘Do you believe the women?’

I remember her unyielding eyes fixed on me, waiting for my answer. I think my

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76 In her paper ‘The White Man’s Burden’, Aileen Moreton-Robinson refers to ‘white patriarchal epistemic violence’, where academic scholarship becomes a colonising force that works to erase black knowledge and self-definition. See Aileen Moreton-Robinson, ‘The White Man’s Burden: Patriarchal White Epistemic Violence and Aboriginal Women’s Knowledges within the Academy’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 26, no. 70 (2011): 413–31.

77 Moreton-Robinson, ‘The White Man’s Burden’, 414.

heart stopped for a moment. To say no would expose me as a fraud, the same as other white researchers who had ingratiated themselves with First Nations peoples to mine them of story and then appropriate and exploit without cultural sensitivity.<sup>78</sup> To waver would expose me as both lightweight and disrespectful, not worthy of her input.

I was meeting a First Nations professor at her office about the prospect of her being an advisor to me on sensitive First Nations issues I may encounter during the early stages of my Seven Sisters research. During our discussions I brought up what I referred to as the ‘elephant in the room’ regarding this area of research: the Hindmarsh Island affair from the 1990s. This episode was a devastating denial of Aboriginal agency, where the Ngarrindjeri women were accused of fabricating secret women’s business to prevent the development of a bridge from the mainland to a place they call Kumarangk, or the colonisers called Hindmarsh Island. Both the High Court and a Royal Commission chose to listen to white ‘experts’ and First Nations women who were not caretakers of this knowledge. The Ngarrindjeri women lost the battle and the bridge was built. The secret sacred business centred on a Seven Sisters story.

Did I believe the women?

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78 When I began to research the Seven Sisters, I noted how dominant the white voice was in the accounts of these stories in the archives. Missionaries, anthropologists and historians recorded the stories, which were then loaded with their own faith, social principles, prejudices and paternalism, tainting the accounts. The collectors were unaware of the complex hierarchy of knowledge which governs First Nations storytelling, so it is never clear who the informant was (was it a custodian? was it their story to tell?) and what level the narrative was at (children’s level, heard generally by the uninitiated, or secret and sacred and therefore the domain of the initiated and not for distribution). The community would be in danger of losing control of its story, with no further say in how it would be portrayed and distributed. Complex issues about the context and place of the story may have been neglected. Once collected and composed, these stories were packaged into anthologies and distributed with no benefit to the source of the story, or deposited in archives and repositories to be regarded as truth (as in the Hindmarsh Island Affair 1994). The white author was installed as the expert and copyright was theirs. Other ‘experts’ would regurgitate and over-brand the narratives. They become empty tales, which may not be accurate, sent into wider circulation and gravely diluted. The powerful Dreaming stories are reduced to fables, myths and legends devoid of the complex spirituality that is their essence. The Seven Sisters have been colonised. Some call it the selling of the Dreaming. I am thinking of those bankers of story who packaged them as myths, such as R. H. Matthews, K. Langloh Parker, and C. P. Mountford. See for example R. H. Matthews, *Folklore of the Australian Aborigines* (Sydney: Hennessey, Harper and Co., 1889); K. Langloh Parker, *Australian Legendary Tales*, selected and edited by H. Drake-Brockman, illustrated by Elizabeth Durack (New York: Viking Press, 1966); Ainslie Roberts and Charles P. Mountford, *The Dreamtime: Australian Aboriginal Myths in Paintings* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1965).

I share this with you as it revealed to me that the stakes are high if you humbly ask to collaborate with First Nations peoples. If you are fortunate enough to be granted an opening, to be welcomed by a community, you are entering another worldview, a way of knowing and seeing that is alien to Eurocentric ways. Being respectfully open to it shook my foundations. My tectonic plates have moved and now I see and feel the land differently.

The Professor was asking me if I believe in First Nations cosmology, of which the supernatural is an integral element. It was and is a profoundly uncomfortable space to be in for two reasons. Firstly, it exposed my colonial lenses and it tested my commitment to respectfully research other ways of knowing. If I did not accept the supernatural as historical knowledge, I was following other academics and historians who interpret Aboriginal beliefs as myth and fable, thereby producing 'good', but not subversive (decolonial) history. 'Good' history may be universalised and conforms to the protocols of the discipline, privileging Western ways of knowing over the traditional caretakers of the story.<sup>79</sup>

What sort of preparation did I, a non-Indigenous researcher, have to undertake to conduct respectful research in collaboration with First Nations peoples, and what questions arose from this? I began by immersing myself in Indigenous methodologies in volumes such as *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* (edited by Jo-ann Archibald, Jenny Lee-Morgan and Jason de Santolo); *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (by Margaret Kovach); *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (by Linda Tuhiwai Smith); *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (by Shawn Wilson); and *For Indigenous Minds Only: A Decolonization Handbook* (edited by Waziyatawin

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79 This thinking was prompted by Hokari, *Gurindji Journey*, 255.

and Michael Yellow Bird).<sup>80</sup> These works have encouraged me to privilege First Nations worldviews and voices. They have led me to critically assess the role of the academy in failing to accommodate, and therefore authorise, First Nations knowledges. More First Nations scholars are entering the academy and foregrounding their own culturally safe methodologies to frame their research and that of others.<sup>81</sup>

Kovach outlines the ways in which First Nations knowledges have not ‘fitted’ into typically reductionist Western knowledge paradigms and have therefore been excluded from those systems of thought.<sup>82</sup> She uses Vine Victor Deloria to explain that ‘because indigenous people did not separate reason and spirit, and because they did not espouse an evolutionist theoretical perspective, then their beliefs have been viewed as superstitious’.<sup>83</sup> Although these texts are mainly written for First Nations scholars and communities, there is advice for those of us who are non-Indigenous. Kovach says that non-Indigenous researchers who have successful relationships with Indigenous communities know that the relationship starts with decolonising one’s heart and mind:

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80 Jo-ann Archibald, Jenny Lee-Morgan and Jason de Santolo, eds., *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* (London: Zed Books, 2019); Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012); Waziyatawin and Michael Yellow Bird, eds., *For Indigenous Minds Only: A Decolonization Handbook* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2012); Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, Black Point: Fernwood, 2008.

81 Anecdotally, I am noticing that the power of the non-Indigenous knowledge broker is waning, as First Nations academics are spearheading the way for universities to create culturally safe pathways for First Nations students to attend university. Examples of such academics who have completed higher degree research in their cultural shape are Associate Professor Dr Richard Frankland’s ‘Letters to My Father: *Yan Wanyoo Peepayan*’ (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2018) and Vicki Louise Couzens’s ‘“*meerta peeneeyt, yana peeneeyt, tanam peeneeyt*” (stand strong, walk strong, proud flesh strong)’ (Master’s thesis, RMIT, 2009).

82 Dipesh Chakrabarty adds to the debate with his views that academia performs secularism in that we study history through secularist methodologies, but daily life is still enchanted by spirits and gods to give meaning to existence. If we focus our academic consciousness not just on secular historical methodologies, but also on the world of daily lives, we would not fall into simplistic dichotomies such as the primitive native versus the civilized Westerner. See Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton Studies in Culture/power/history. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000., particularly Chapter 4: *Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts*, pp 97-113. Hokari also unpacks this in *Gurindji Journey*, 50.

83 Deloria, Cited in Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 77.

Indigenous methodologies prompt Western traditions to engage in reflexive study, to consider a research paradigm outside the Western tradition that offers a systematic approach to understanding the world. It calls for the non-Indigenous scholar to adjourn disbelief and, in the pause, consider alternative possibilities.<sup>84</sup>

The wise insights of the late Japanese scholar Minoru Hokari (1971–2004) have also been a vital part of my preparation in this space and a decolonising force for me. In the 1990s, Hokari was studying economics in Japan, but he harboured a dream to live with Australian First Nations peoples. For his 1996 Master of Economics research, he applied to five remote communities to request permission to research the Aboriginal economy and cattle labour. Only one community responded with a welcome, so Hokari arrived to live with the Gurindji people in Daguragu in the Northern Territory. After his Masters, Hokari also undertook his doctorate among the Gurindji, completing his thesis ‘Cross-Culturalising History: Journey to the Gurindji Way of Historical Practice’ in 2001.<sup>85</sup> He tragically died of lymphoma in 2004.

Hokari was ‘one of the brightest and most innovative young scholars working in Australian Indigenous history research’ with ‘a spirit of adventure and a creative intellect marked by a flexible, imaginative style’, says Ann McGrath fondly in his obituary.<sup>86</sup> His interactions with Gurindji Elders were utterly authentic and his writing is charming and disarming. There is an enviable gentleness in the way Hokari managed to challenge the arrogance of institutions that decide what is and is not ‘good’ history. His work and manner were humble and inquisitive. He went to the very crux of the issue: What is history? ‘He listened to Aboriginal history in an unfamiliar way’, says his colleague and friend Tessa Morris-Suzuki.<sup>87</sup> Hokari was intent on challenging the monoculture of the mind of the Western-centric academy, looking for ways for different knowledges and worldviews to coexist in the academy.

Morris-Suzuki reflects on Hokari’s ‘startlingly different’ approach to Aboriginal

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84 Kovach, 29.

85 Posthumously published as *Gurindji Journey*

86 McGrath, Ann. ‘Hokari, Minoru (1971–2004)’. Obituaries Australia, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. Accessed 11 April 2019. <http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/hokari-minoru-27543/text34948>.

87 Tessa Morris-Suzuki, in Hokari, *Gurindji Journey*, 15.



history, which was uncomfortable for someone like her, who felt she was free of the colonial prejudices that once dominated the discipline of Indigenous Studies. She recalls an exchange they had, which is reminiscent of mine with the professor, where he was probing how she, as an academic, regards and treats Aboriginal stories: Did she believe the words of the Gurindji Elders who assured Hokari that the 1942 flood of Wave Hill was the work of a rainmaker called Tinker who placed rain stones in the waterhole of Kurraj, the rainbow snake?<sup>88</sup>

Her response was that while she was respectful of the Elders' beliefs, which were neither stupid nor laughable, she would naturally defer to a scientist's opinion on the phenomenon. Hokari's insightful observation was that her colonial lenses were still on, as she was still treating the Elders' story as a myth. Morris-Suzuki was claiming dominant knowledge, deciding on the truth, and therefore declaring the Elders' knowledge as false. It was confronting for Morris-Suzuki, who claimed she was trained to practise cultural relativism and be respectful of others' cultures. She concedes that listening to unfamiliar ideas is a 'deeply disconcerting experience'.

What matters, she cautions, is that these ideas and ways of knowing should not be rejected or discounted as mere myth or embraced as an exotic new-age truth.<sup>89</sup> Hokari's challenge to his colleague prompted me to ask some research colleagues, three white men also researching First Nations cosmology, if they believed the stories they were collecting from the communities they were researching. They shifted uncomfortably. Not one could say yes. One proffered that he was beginning to.

In calling for a 'dangerous history', Hokari urges us not only to see history differently, but he also proposes some very curious questions: What if there was no such thing as a metaphor? Could non-human beings become agents of history? Can the earth punish a man?

Reducing stories to a metaphor means we haven't listened seriously enough, that we are 'centralising' history, he claims.<sup>90</sup> Centralised history is dominant knowledge production at work, which feeds the colonial narrative; it is 'good history'. Hokari saw

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88 Tessa Morris-Suzuki, in Hokari, *Gurindji Journey*.

89 Tessa Morris-Suzuki, in Hokari, *Gurindji Journey*, 19.

90 Hokari, *Gurindji Journey*, 37.

good history as a product and captive of Western knowledge, distracted by empiricism, disenchanted through science, and centralised and universalised by the institutions that hold and maintain it.<sup>91</sup>

When Hokari called for ‘dangerous history’, he was validating the alternative historical practices of First Nations peoples. He was looking for methods of historical writing or ethnography that neither exclude nor subsume. But what does that mean for me as a researcher? I took a fine-tooth comb through Hokari’s thesis to understand how different the two ‘histories’ are. The following table is my summary of my findings.

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91 Ibid., 79.

In his book *History and the Poet*, Robert Wood questions good history with this poetic question: ‘What are we to make of a resource, archive, material that has been exploited by influences that might actually thwart our “national development” precisely because of reigning paradigms and the congealed sediment of history?’ Robert Wood, *History and the Poet* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2017), 56.

CONVENTIONAL WESTERN ACADEMIC HISTORY 'GOOD HISTORY'	FIRST NATIONS HISTORY 'DANGEROUS HISTORY'
SINGULAR TRUTH	PLURAL TRUTHS
CENTRALISED	NO ONE CENTRE OR SOURCE
BROADCAST	NARROWCAST; LAYERED
OUTCOME ORIENTED	PROCESS/JOURNEY ORIENTED
SEEKS HISTORY	WAITS FOR HISTORY TO FIND THEM
UNIVERSAL	LOCALISED; SITUATIONALISED
DISENCHANTMENT	THE SUPERNATURAL
TIME-ORIENTED/CENTRIC	PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE AS ONE
LINEAR	CIRCULAR
WRITTEN ON PAPER	WRITTEN IN THE LAND AND SKY
NEGOTIATED	NON-NEGOTIABLE
WRITTEN	ORAL
INTELLECTUAL: CARTESIAN DUALISM	SENSORY: UNITY OF MIND, BODY, AND UNIVERSE
EXCLUSIVE; DICHOTOMIES/BOUNDARIES	INCLUSIVE/RELATIONSHIPS
EVOLUTIONIST	CONSTANT; HAPPENING
PATERNALISTIC	EGALITARIAN/BUT HIERARCHICAL?
SECULAR	SPIRITUAL
FOCUSED	INCORPORATES ENTIRE KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS
LEARNED	EXPERIENTIAL; LIVED; FELT
FACT	STORY; DIVERSE; COMPLEX
RIGID	FLEXIBLE; OPEN
ACADEMICS; EXPERTS	ELDERS; CUSTODIANS
CONSTRUCTED	RIGHT WAY; MORAL AND ETHICAL
TRANSLATABLE	LANGUAGE SPECIFIC

Hokari's insights are important to me, as they demonstrate that when undertaking First Nations research in the academy, I begin from a place of colonisation.<sup>92</sup> This is reinforced by the institution through various paradigms, ontologies and epistemologies. He also showed me why I must respect the material I am immersed in as more than stories, that stories such as the Seven Sisters Dreaming are history in its own right. This is about removing my colonial lenses, decolonising my research, and placing the epistemologies of the dominant culture and of First Nations culture on an equal footing.

## HOW TO DO ETHICAL RESEARCH

Do I believe the women?

In *Decolonizing Methodologies* Tuhiwai Smith writes, 'It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us'.<sup>93</sup> First Nations Elders must be acknowledged not just as informants, but as historians of their own culture.

With permission, we may be conduits for their stories, not keepers, and the world should know this when we publish and speak. They are not our stories to tell. For my practice, I am guided by the *Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Writing* (2007) prepared by the Australia Council for the Arts.<sup>94</sup>

If we position Elders as historians and the experts of their knowledge, what does this mean for the university ethics process? Early in my research, I discussed the ethics process with some Anangu people I knew. 'How can the university be your ethics department?' scoffed my friend. She was frowning. 'These jilpis (initiated men) are your ethics department, lovey. This is Anangu business.' She nods towards her desert people. 'These Elders are your ethics department.'

Although the intention of the ethics committee is to 'protect' both parties,

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92 In her book, *Indigenous Methodologies*, Margaret Kovach interviews Anishnabe scholar Kathy Absolon, who observes this as well.

93 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1.

94 Australia Council for the Arts, *Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Writing* (Surry Hills: Australia Council for the Arts, 2007).

particularly the most researched people on earth, the process can compromise relationships between non-Indigenous people and First Nations people by acting out the power relationships that have oppressed the First Nations since colonisation. The university ultimately decides on behalf of an Elder if a collaboration is sound. Rather than carrying the voices of First Nations peoples, ethics systems can work to stifle their voices while ‘protecting’ them, in the belief that they must be authorised by the white university. The process may also be disempowering by classifying all First Nations peoples as ‘vulnerable’. I cannot help but wonder if there is a better process that empowers the ‘researched’ as equal participants and decision-makers. I add my voice to those of Professor Barry Judd and colleagues to promote the merits of the philosophy of *ngapartji ngapartji* as an ethical approach.<sup>95</sup> *Ngapartji ngapartji* is an Anangu concept which infers deep mutual respect: I give you something, you give me something.

As I feel conflicted about the ethics process in this field of research, I made the conscious decision to only reference material that is in the public domain.<sup>96</sup> Having said that, I also state that I am privileging First Nations voices and worldview. This entails sourcing books, poetry, film and television, radio, media, social media, and participating in conferences and workshops made by First Nations groups. There is plenty of material, and their voices are loud and strong. I try to stay attuned to the issues that matter to First Nations people.

As I immersed myself in the realm of Creative Practice Research, I could feel the tension between the dynamic nature of research-based interactions and the relatively rigid character of ethics applications. In 2016 I joined CREW (Creative Research Ethics Workshop) for an ethics-in-action collaboration involving creative practice researchers from a variety of disciplines across multiple universities to explore these tensions.<sup>97</sup>

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95 Gina Louise Hawkes, David Pollock, Barry Judd, Peter Phipps and Elinor Assoulin, ‘*Ngapartji Ngapartji: Finding Ethical Approaches to Research Involving Indigenous Peoples, Australian Perspectives*’, *ab-Original* 1, no. 1 (2017): 17–41.

96 The exception here is some points of personal communication I have had with Richard Frankland.

97 We began in August 2016 with a two-day intensive workshop and then continued and expanded through a month of weekly gatherings inside the Occupied exhibition at RMIT’s Design Hub, leading to a series of contributions at the iDARE Conference (September 2016 at University of Melbourne) including an exhibition, workshop/performative events and a conference bag/kit.

The group formed to explore relationships between ethics and creative practice research, asking questions such as: What if the development of ethical expertise was approached as an integral part of creative practice research? How best might we tailor a process of creative, ethical deliberation? And, could this help leverage an enduring cultivation of ethical practice?<sup>98</sup>

We shared our practices for discussion and explored a range of challenging, delicate and thought-provoking issues. We agreed our practices were risk-taking, scoping, intuitive, complex, uncertain, unstable, unique, rhizomatic, sensory, imaginative, repositioning and empowering. While the formal ethics process sets out guidelines for conduct, the very nature of dynamic research is such that we cannot know what we will come up against until we are in it. There was a delicate balance between curiosity and ethical priorities, where we worry boundaries and dwell in uncertainty as the shape of what we do not know is shaped by what we know at that point in time.<sup>99</sup>

We also discussed how we, as creative practitioners, can cultivate ethical practice. Throughout these sessions I grew to understand how I am developing an ethical practice that is grounded in intuition and tacit knowledge, while remaining informed through doing and, in my case, writing. It requires an active disposition, a living practice of paying attention with an openness to the unknown and the unexpected. I see it as a generative dialogue with myself, examining my whiteness, exploring my beliefs and values about knowledge, critically reflecting on how such realisations shape the way I practice.

I wonder how the rigidity of the university ethics process can accommodate the testing, trying out, pushing and pulling that is part of creative practice. My own practice is dynamic and present, proactive and reactive, reflexive and reflective. I cannot tell which way it may go. It is my own magical mystery tour, my pathway to enchantment, which is a frisson of both maturity and wonder. As Professor Marlene Brant Castellano, a Mohawk of the Bay of Quinte advises in Kovach, First Nations peoples' ethics can never be limited to a defined set of rules.

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98 This is an excerpt from the CREW page on Pia Ednie-Brown's website <https://pia-edniebrown.squarespace.com/the-crew>.

99 These are some of the ideas from the team brainstorms we did.

These ethics are about knowing who you are, the values you hold, and your understanding of how you fit in the spiritual world.<sup>100</sup>

Being on the front line of knowledge creation, individual researchers who learn and commit to ethical protocols for research within First Nations communities are in a privileged position not only to create change from the bottom up, but also to broaden their own understandings on a personal level.

## A MORAL UNIVERSE

Earlier, I wrote of a shift in my tectonic plates, that my research had changed the way I think and feel about this land. A large part of this feeling is due to my knowledge of the blood in the soil at the hands of the colonisers.

The blacks are very quiet here now, poor wretches, no wild beast of the forest was ever hunted down with such unsparing perseverance as they are; men, women and children are shot where ever they can be met with, some excuse might be found for shooting the men by those who are daily getting their cattle speared, but what they can urge in their excuse who shoot the women and children I cannot conceive. I have protested against it at every station I have been in in Gibbs [Gippsland] in the strongest language but these things are kept very secret as the penalty would certainly be hanging ... I remember the time when my blood would have run cold at the bare mention of these horrors, from having murder made a topic of every day conversation. I have heard tales told, and some things I have seen that would form as dark a page as ever you could read in the book of history — but I thank God I have never participated in them — If I could remedy these things I would speak loudly though it cost me all I am worth in the world, but as I cannot I will keep aloof and know nothing, and say nothing.<sup>101</sup>

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100 Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 146.

101 Clark, *Scars in the Landscape*, 1-2.

These are the words of Henry Meyrick, who squatted with his brother Alfred at Colourt station (near Balnarring in Western Port), from a letter written to his mother in England, dated 30 April 1846.<sup>102</sup> Henry, who took it upon himself to learn Boon wurrung, the local Aboriginal language, was tormented by the ‘clearing’ of the country of the First Peoples.

I cannot faithfully write about First Nations peoples without acknowledging the false narratives that our Australian nation was founded on. The *terra nullius*, ‘nothing but bush’, assertion is debunked, but remains; Australia was ‘invaded’ rather than benignly ‘settled’; and the First Peoples fought back.

There were massacres, but there were also frontier wars and battles and First Nations heroes including Pemulwuy (Darug, 1790s), Musquito (possibly Eora, 1805 to 1820s), Windradyne (Wiradjuri, 1820s), Yagan (Noongar, 1830s), Jandamarra (Bunuba, 1890s), Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner (Palawa 1840s), and a woman called Tarenorerer (aka Walyer) (Palawa 1820s).

This is a moral landscape and it is best explained by telling you a story.

There are two men sitting in the red sand on Gurindji Country in the Northern Territory’s Victoria River region. One is a Japanese scholar speaking little English, Minoru Hokari, who arrived on a small motorbike to learn from the Gurindji people. The other is his wizened teacher, Old Jimmy Mangayarri, who knew the full extent of Hokari’s mission even before he did. Old Jimmy told the young man that their country had called him into it to take their stories and their messages back to Japan and to other Asian nations.

Old Jimmy is explaining the origin of the world. There are five ‘headings’: Earth, Dreaming, Law, ‘Right Way’ and History. They do not describe the sequence of the world’s creation, and the fact that they are interchangeable signifies the complex interconnectedness of their cosmology. The concept of ‘Law’ is fundamental to Aboriginal moral philosophy, and it is tangible, physical, visible. It is seen in the land and in the sky. Old Jimmy uses a piece of paper to show Hokari how flimsy a white man’s law is. It can be rewritten, torn up, maybe the wind catches it and it flies away. Aboriginal Law cannot

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102 Henry’s cousin Maurice purchased from the Crown the pastoral license for the run ‘Boniong’ (Boneo) in the southern part of the Mornington Peninsula. Boneo is where we live on our farm, and we overlook parts of this run. The town of Merricks is named after the three men.



be negotiated; it is cast in the soil, stone, water and stars. Earth, Dreaming, Law are embodied in the sky and the landscape and have the same quality, revealing the ‘Right Way’: that is, the morality of the world.

A Dreaming story tells how things came to be and how the world is to be maintained. It teaches the people how to care for Country. At the root of this is moral behaviour and the world is maintained and sustained by the attitude and commitment to following the Right Way. Moral behaviour, which includes ritual practice, visiting your Country, communicating with your Country and ancestral beings and following tribal Law, are all essential to maintaining the world.

One of my favourite stories about Country showing the Right Way is the *jigal* tree, which carries a message about kinship. We were shown it when I walked the Lurujarri Trail, and Stephen Muecke also refers to it in his reflections and writings.<sup>103</sup> The leaves grow in pairs, opposing each other. This reminds the People about the mother-in-law avoidance rule: men don’t look directly at their wife’s mother, and generally avoid her.

What Old Jimmy is explaining to Hokari is that there is morality in the landscape. It tells us how to live and behave if we pay attention. The earth and sky both teach the Right Way. They are a moral guidebook. The Right Way is tangible, a visible morality with visible evidence in the landscape and the stars. They are visible memories of the world’s creation and that it is maintaining its morality.

So, when the professor asked me if I believed the women, she was asking if I had listened enough, been humbled enough or was open enough, to make that leap of faith. Was I open to dangerous history that foregrounds First Nations ways of knowing and being? Did I accept that the Seven Sisters and their nightly adventures is history that is past, present, future, constant and happening and that it is all integral to a complex knowledge system of plural truths, where everything is connected? Did I know that the Seven Sisters story has many layers of knowledge codified into it and that not everyone can tell a story or listen to a story, that there are custodians who drip-feed layers depending on a person’s worthiness, that the knowledge layers in this story are part of a moral guidebook and a celestial calendar that teach the People the right way to live? Did

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103 Stephen Muecke, ‘Light Touch: the Lurujarri Heritage Trail in Broome’ (paper presented at the International Festival of Landscape Architecture, Gold Coast, Queensland, 11–14 October 2018).

I believe that certain Ngarrindjeri women were historians in their own right, experts in their own culture and that the site for the bridge was a special sacred women's place and a part of the path of the Seven Sisters?

Did I believe the women?



## POSTSCRIPT

It is dull *Iuk* day. Somewhere the eels are on the move. Somewhere, The Songman's people will be trapping them, perhaps in the way of their ancestors, and smoking them over a fire. The common brown butterflies are in their last weeks, laying their eggs on juicy grasses for their offspring to eat when they hatch. *Binap* is blooming, oozing nectar for mammals and birds. Ants feast on seeping sap.<sup>104</sup>

I am in the final weary weeks of my doctorate, painstakingly weaving strands and threads of story and theory, amusing myself with the antics of the crow, incredulous that

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104 It helps if you have read *Seeping, Oozing, Blooming* to fully appreciate this paragraph.

I still cannot touch type. I give into the kelpies' request for a walk and head up the road towards the national park.

I never take the dogs into the main part of the national park, but there is *this* track in between roads that at one stage did not display the 'no dogs' sign. I was always aware that *theoretically*, it was national park, so the dogs rule applied, but it is just a cut through – not the main part of the park. There is a sign now, but I don't look, so I don't see it. I do not see other walkers very often; it is off the beaten track.

On this day, I turn to go into the track, the dogs are ahead of me off lead. I see a woman out of the corner of my eye, and she calls out to me: 'You do know that is National Park, don't you?' I am caught out, but I have headphones on, so I pretend not to hear, wave and smile and keep walking. 'Don't you care about the environment?' she yells. I stop and turn towards her. What to say? I do. I really do care about the environment, about caring for Country. She has her phone out and is taking photos of me and the kelpies. She is closer to me now. 'We know who you are. We know where you live, the rangers will be prosecuting you. This is a haven for the kangaroos and wallabies and other wildlife. They have so few places to retreat to!' She is part of the local conservation group and a conservationist herself. She is furious.

What would you do?

I step out of the park and call my dogs back to me. I pause for a moment, my head racing, my heart pounding.

Would you tell her to fuck off?

There is no equivocation in my next act.

I'm not sure if I stepped forward and put my hand on my heart or the other way around. She readied herself; defiant. I look her in the eye.

'I am so sorry', I said. 'You are absolutely right'. I am honestly contrite.

She is speechless.

'I solemnly swear to you that I will never ever set foot in these areas with my dogs, ever again. I have no excuse. It was unbelievably arrogant of me. I obviously needed to get caught to stop me.' Then something occurs to me and I laugh to myself. I decide to tell her. 'The irony is, I am in the final stages of a doctorate and a large part of that is coming to terms with my white privilege. And here I am flaunting it.' I am clearly

embarrassed by my hypocrisy. I did not tell her that these tracks and roads are my muse, the place I interview hyacinths orchids and study butterflies with boring names.

She laughs out loud at me. ‘Really?’

‘Yep’, I nod. A thought comes to me. ‘Perhaps once I am done, I can work with you to help preserve this place, stop other idiots like me flouting the laws.’ She nods and smiles, still not sure of me.

‘Are you going to tell the rangers on me?’ She laughs at that. No.

I begin to walk home, and she asks if she can walk with me. We fall into step with each other. ‘That has never happened to me before’. She is still shaking her head. ‘Everyone usually tells me to fuck off.’

When we part ways, I think at how I have changed, how this research, this space has changed me. A few years ago, I don’t think I would have told her where to go, but I would not have said sorry. I would not have allowed to myself to present vulnerably, authentically.

It was liberating.

## P.P.S.

My undoing had freed me from artifice.

Once I could see, I could not unsee.

Once I had listened, I could not stay silent.

I had found my humanity among the dehumanised.

This doctoral research has charted my first steps to decolonise myself, but they are first steps. Controlling my whiteness, practising anti-racism, harnessing my privilege calls for constant vigilance.

You may recall the epigraph that opened this chapbook. ‘If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.’

I was looking for a way to contribute. My research showed me the cultural abyss, and I have crafted some basic tools and now have a job as an apprentice bridge-builder.

Life after this PhD will find me as part of Richard Frankland’s bridge building team. I have a role in research development for his Koorreen Enterprises, an

organisation committed to First Nations community strengthening and healing. My role is to provide support to strengthen and implement their programs, particularly in the training of young people.

The master plan is for a Healing Centre on his Gunditjmara Country near Condah Mission.



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