Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius:

The ways that First Nations women in art & community speak Blak to the colony & patriarchy

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by Creative Project and Exegesis

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ABSTRACT

For PhD by creative project and exegesis:

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The concept of ‘artistic terra nullius’ refers to the violent erasure of First Nations peoples in colony Australia and highlights their absence – particularly Aboriginal Women – in the white-dominated arts world. This doctoral research by creative project and exegesis sets out to document and respond to the work of Aboriginal women in art and community. I have used practice-led inquiry as the main methodology, informed by my own roles as artist, writer, curator, community researcher and as a Wemba-Wemba & Gunditjmara, matriarchal and sovereign woman. Practising community ways of 'being, knowing and doing' to witness, participate and respond to Aboriginal women's art making and activism, I developed a new body of visual works and a series of essays, together with an exegesis relating to the project as a whole.

The exhibition in December 2019 at Footscray Community Arts Centre held two bodies of work in two spaces. The ontological (or Being) space was a healing space of unconditional love, one of memory, timelessness, and respite. It has been created as 'daily acts of repair' in collaboration with other Aboriginal women and family members in a new process of bush dyeing fabrics, clothing and rags to become 'healing cloths”, dyed with gathered gum leaves, bush flowers, plants and Wemba-Wemba family bush medicine gifted to me from my Aunties. As a three-dimensional space, it makes visible trauma trails and stains and visualises what respite and healing could look and feel like. Under the 1961 flickering Super-8 image of my great-grandmother, this space also recreates ‘home’, particularly resonating with Aboriginal women’s curation of ‘home’ even in Mission housing. The second space, an epistemological (or Knowing) space, was an active studio of photographic based works drawn from matriarchal family stories, both past, present and future, and archival research. It included

scholarly and other literature on Blak art and representation, in a recreation of my home studio and office.

These bodies of work were made over a four-year project, drawing on concepts of de-colonising, Aboriginal feminist standpoint theory (Moreton- Robinson) and sovereignty. In emphasising making art as both research and artistic outcomes, I demonstrate art as a sovereign act, based in cultural practice and sovereign values. Both the exhibition spaces and the exegesis weave across past, present and future, across research in family, community and the Aboriginal women's arts-work, across multiple creative media and stories – in the process here called 'Ghost Weaving'. Responding to various modes of oppression, patriarchy and racism, Blak women's art is not only a form of resistance to colonising, to violence, to academia and the white art world. It is also an ethical foregrounding of other forms of knowing and being.

The exegesis is in two main parts: the written, thesis-element and a series of appendices which include a pictorial record of the exhibition, links and lists of related works, including relevant essays.

Declaration

I, Paola Balla, declare that the PhD thesis entitled ***Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius:*** is no less than 18,000 words and no more than 30,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University's Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures.

Signature:

Date: October 30, 2020

Dedication and Acknowledgements

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Thank you to my grandmother Rosie Tang nee Egan, an artist and poet who told me at nine years of age to "get educated, beat them at their own game and go as far as you can". Nan, as you were not allowed to go further than grade 3 as a Black child, I honour you in this work for teaching me to value education as emancipation.

DEDICATION

To all the Aunties who bush dye, make work for and with community and work closely with Country for healing and wellbeing from plant knowledges. To my Mother and Grandmother, artists and poets, fighters and story tellers who showed me how to dye clothes and shoes and make the best out of what you have.

To my great grandmother Nanny Nancy Egan, née Day, who featured in the exhibition super 8 footage and has been a constant presence in my life, despite passing away in 1961, thirteen years before I was born. In Echuca, at around 1998, Aunty Melva Johnson, my grandmother's cousin, and daughter of Uncle Stanley, 'Stoon' Day, told me the story of how Nanny Nancy was stopped in the main street of Echuca during the 1967 Referendum by a white woman, who thrust a how to vote card into her hand.

Nanny Nancy looked down at the paper, said, "This will do nothing for my People!" and promptly ripped the paper up and threw it over her shoulder, and strode away proudly from the white woman. Alexis Wright writes in her seminal paper, "What Happens When You Tell Someone Else's Story,' that imagination must never be underestimated. My imagination soars and is nourished by this story, so generously and considerately shared with me by Aunty Melva. Aunty knew I needed to hear that story at that time. I was a young single mother, staying with my two-year-old daughter in my Aunty Maureen's already overcrowded home so I could undertake the Nyerna Studies Bachelor of Education VU program to become a school teacher.

Thank you to my great-great grandmother Papa Mariah Day, a traditional midwife and 'liberated woman' who has also been a constant presence in my life through the reverence our family has for her, the way she is kept alive in our stories, gatherings and memories as matriarchal peoples. Papa undertook the long and risky 1500 km round trip to Sydney alone, from Moonahcullah to attend and participate in the first Day of Mourning, January 26, 1938 in Elizabeth Street Sydney organised by William Cooper and other members of

the Aborigines Advancement League at the time to protest the unjust treatment of all Aboriginal Peoples in Australia.

To Aunty Barbara Walker, my Grandmother's sister, to Aunty Walda Blow my Grandmother's sister cousin-you were my other Grandmothers, who always loved and encouraged me, thank you.

During my candidature, between 2015-2020, we lost loved family members, Aunty Tanya Day; we remember her as a beautiful, strong Yorta Yorta and Wemba Wemba woman, and the unpunished injustice of her Death in Custody. We lost my Aunty Walda Blow, Yorta Yorta and Wemba Wemba warrior woman and community leader. We lost my yaryin, my little Sister Cousin, Sharon Walker, mother and staunch community woman. We lost our Tidda Raelene Clinch.

I dedicate this work to all of them, to all my Matriarchs and to my children.

ABBREVIATIONS:

PLR	Practice Led Research
PAR	Participatory Action Research
VU	Victoria University

TERMS:

Blackfullas	Aboriginal Person/People-not gender specific

Blak — Curator Clare Williamson along with fellow curator Hetti Perkins said in a written program of the 1994 collaborative First Nations exhibition Blakness; Blak City Culture: "Destiny Deacon developed the term 'Blak' as part of a symbolic but potent strategy of reclaiming colonialist language to create means of self-definition and expression." Ms Deacon began using the word and spelling 'Blak' in her work, taking on the 'colonisers' language and flipping it on its head. Deacon asserted an expression of urban Aboriginal identity that is authentic - bearing little, if any, resemblance to the coloniser's 'boxed in' one-dimensional definition of Aboriginal Australians that, even today, continues to be derogatory and misinformed.

Yaryin	‘sister’ in Wemba-Wemba language
Tidda	‘sister’ in Koori English
Kalina	‘to love,’ Wemba-Wemba language

Moonahcullah
‘place of many waters,’ in Wemba-Wemba language; Moonahcullah is surrounded by the Edward River, Colligen Creek, Tumugeri Creek and the lagoon

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Chapter 1: Exercising Aboriginal women's sovereignty: Linking art, research and activism

For an Aboriginal woman artist and academic, there are many challenges in undertaking a PhD by exhibition and exegesis. In particular there is the ethical responsibility to my community to exercise sovereignty in refusing the colonised-and-colonising domains of both art and academic worlds. My Exhibition, *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius: The ways that First Nations women in art & community speak Blak to the colony & patriarchy,* emerged from an Aboriginal women's standpoint (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) for creative portrayal and research of Aboriginal women's humanity, resistance and disruptions. It was held at Footscray Community Arts Centre (FCAC) in December 2019. The exhibited artwork drew on visual, embodied and material practices, and on literary and archival research including that of my matriarchal herstories. Herstories is a term inspired by Black and Indigenous scholars as an alternative to 'history'. This exegesis, itself a creative task, is a form of Aboriginal women's work, utilising a 'practice-led research' methodology Arlander (2010, p329) to disrupt Australia's artistic Terra Nullius. The exegesis thus offers critical analysis and reflection on the development of the creative works from a decolonising and sovereignty-affirming Aboriginal women's standpoint.

In this exegesis, I use a combination of Koorie English and some of my family language, Wemba-Wemba. I am a Koorie woman; and my Peoples are Wemba-Wemba and Gunditjmara. I only use Wemba-Wemba language names or terms because it is the dominant matriarchal Day family lineage of my mother and all my grandmothers, which makes me a Wemba-Wemba woman first. I am also a member of the Egan Family and Gunditjmara woman through the patriarchal line of my great grandfather. In this work I use a number of terms to name Aboriginal People, including Aboriginal, Koorie, Indigenous and Blackfullas, Black or Blak. I acknowledge that, in an Australian context, where I use the term 'Indigenous' it also includes Torres Strait Islander Peoples; however, I

respectfully state that as an Aboriginal woman I cannot speak to or about Torres Strait Islander Peoples with any authority.

In showing care for language and lineage, I pay particular respects – in my thesis project, and in broader arts practice and writing – by ensuring attribution of the word *Blak* to Destiny Deacon, the acclaimed photographic artist and KuKu and Erub/Mer Torres Straits woman. In the exhibition catalogue for the 1994 exhibition, *Blakness: Blak City Culture* – at ACCA (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art), in collaboration with Boomalli Aboriginal Artist Co-operative – curators Clare Williamson and Hetti Perkins wrote: 'The term 'Blak' was developed by Destiny Deacon as part of a symbolic but potent strategy of reclaiming colonialist language to create means of self-definition and expression' (Perkins and Williamson, 1994 pp 20-31).

In conversation at the 2020 at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, Deacon clarified further:

> *I just wanted to take the 'C' out of 'black.' I was able to convince Hetti Perkins and Claire Williamson to alter their curated urban Indigenous exhibition to 'Blakness: Blak City Culture (ACCA, Melbourne) without the 'c' in 1994!," Deacon explained at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair at the Cairns Art Gallery this year for the exhibition QUEEN'S LAND- BLAK Portraiture.* (**in** Munro 2020, n.p.)

This Blak womanist act of resistance, dropping the 'c' to de-weaponise the term 'black cunt', is an act of disruption that has grown through use, particularly by young Aboriginal women on social media (e.g., C.Watego, M.Onus, C.Liddle, A.McQuire) and in new and emerging Aboriginal arts dialogue and Blak arts businesses.

Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Goenpul woman of the Quandamooka nation, argues that: "We are involved in a constant battle to authorise Indigenous knowledges and methodologies as legitimate and valued components of research" (2013, p.331). Building on Martin Nakata's (2007, p.213) development of the concept of Indigenous standpoint in research,

Moreton-Robinson insists that social positions, especially gender, must be taken into account in standpoint methodology, emphasising the need for a specific Australian Indigenous Women's Standpoint:

> *The relationship between Australian Indigenous women's knowledges and experiences will be different to that of Indigenous men because of our embodiment, our relations to different country, people and ancestral creator beings and our social location. I am not arguing that Indigenous men and women do not share a body of cultural knowledge. What I am arguing is that our experiences will differ because as Indigenous women our social location within hierarchical relations of ruling within our communities and Australian society also factors into our standpoint as researchers within the academy as does our different disciplinary training.*
>
> *(Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p.339)*

This doctoral work starts from and contributes to documenting Aboriginal women's knowledge, work and experiences. In recovering and remembering, in making and making anew, Aboriginal women artists such as myself are working alongside many other Indigenous groups around the world. Linda Tuhiwai Smith points to 25 such decolonizing projects, including (while not excluding other approaches):

> *Claiming, Testimonies, Story-telling, Celebrating, survival, Remembering, Indigenizing, Intervening, Revitalizing, Connecting, Reading, Writing, Representing, Gendering, Envisioning, Reframing, Restoring, Returning, Democratizing, Networking, Naming, Protecting, Creating, Negotiating, Discovering and Sharing (2000, pp 143-160).*

In the body of art I created – in which visual art creation is also a researching of Aboriginal women's practices of resistance and disruption – I worked from my Standpoint as an Aboriginal woman, from visual and literary research, from my matriarchal herstories and responding to how Blak women resist, in and through the visual works. The exegesis shows that creating multiple strands of art and cultural practice emerges from thousands of years of connected practice as sovereign people. It speaks back and *Blak* to an ongoing patriarchy and

coloniality with attempts at healing and daily acts of resistance and repair. I created new visual photographic works which: (a) honour matriarchal knowledge and ways of being; and (b) respond to the broad body of Aboriginal women's work.

The overarching problematic for the project is two-fold: the responsibility, from an Aboriginal Woman's standpoint, to establish healing spaces of sovereignty and to chronicle/counter herstorical traumas. Together, the exhibition and exegesis make creative and critical-analytical sense from Aboriginal women standpoints connected to my matriarchal herstorical lineage. By generating and sharing new works, previously unheard stories and experiences, the exhibition opens dialogue and opportunities for healing from transgenerational traumas of colonisation and structural violence. Further implicated, and surfaced in the exegesis, are the symbolic violences of omission and negation of Aboriginal presence – in art and academic fields, reflecting the broad range of public spaces where dominant colonial narratives continue to prevail as historical legacies. This thesis speaks back and Blak, forcefully, to what Professor Tracey Bunda and I have discussed as 'Artistic Terra Nullius'.

In speaking Blak to the arts establishment and western colonialising academia through this work, my dual exhibition and exegesis developed a meta-methodology which, in dialogue with thesis Associate Supervisor, Professor Tracey Bunda, Ngugi/Wakka Wakka woman, we named 'Ghost Weaving'. This term signifies the multi-fold art and cultural practices I wove together to conduct the research and community cultural work of the project, combining historical, cultural and 'survivance' (Vizenor 2008) practices that embody past, present and future.

Anishinaabe Chippewa writer and scholar, Gerald Vizenor created the term 'survivance', defined in his essay, 'Aesthetics of Survivance; Literary Theory and Practice,' as:

> *The theories of survivance are elusive, obscure, and imprecise by definition, translation, comparison, and catchword histories, but survivance is invariably true and just in native practice and*

> *company. The nature of survivance is unmistakable and in native stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions, and customs and is clearly observable in narrative resistance and personal attributes, such as the native humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind and moral courage. The character of survivance creates a sense of narrative presence over absence, nihility, and victimry.*
>
> *Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuation of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent. Survivance is greater than the right of a survivable name. Survivance stories are reannuncations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry. Survivance is the heritable right of succession or reversion of an estate and, in the course of international declarations of human rights, is a narrative estate of native survivance (2008, 1).*

The conceptual as well as methodological threads involved in this project's 'Ghost Weaving' processes are developed further in Chapter 2. A key outcome of the overall project is the active provision of 'heritable right' as a decolonising move of Sovereignty.

The exhibition included two different spaces: one focussed more on Aboriginal women's ontology or ways of being, in creating a matriarchal 'healing space' that foregrounds unconditional love connected to Homelands and community; the other focussed more on Aboriginal women's epistemology or ways of knowing, representing my Studio space in which I continually explore connections to community and family knowledges. It demonstrates connections to the work of generations of women, including Aboriginal women artists, who inspired me. Across these exhibition spaces of ontological and epistemological emphasis, runs an activist impulse that the exegesis attends to as Aboriginal women's axiology or ways of pro-acting ethically.

As Prof Moreton-Robinson (2013, 337) emphasises:

> *The constitutive elements of Indigenous social research paradigms are axiology, ontology and epistemology …*

> *informed by our embodied connection to our respective countries, all living entities and our ancestors; our sovereignty…. Ontology is defined as our way of being … Axiology is our way of doing … [involving] a set of ethics … Epistemology is our way of knowing …*

Elsewhere Prof Moreton Robinson (2013, 337) clarifies further: "Axiology, ontology and epistemology are all interconnected." She points out that: "when researching within Indigenous communities all elements of your methodology are totally interconnected, as it is culturally required" (337).

In this project, ontology, epistemology and axiology are co-produced. Ontology is featured in the art-and-exegetical affirmation of spaces in which Aboriginal sovereignty expresses; epistemology into art-and-exegetical recovering of matriarchal-herstorical knowledges; and axiology in the activism that acts to speak Blak and decolonise wider fields of art exhibition and academic disciplines. Since this is a thesis based around visual art creation and associated photographic and textual materials, there is no separate 'literature' chapter. There are, however, significant passages where both art and literature by others are drawn upon as relevant to my art creation and exegetical explication, especially (but not exclusively) in Chapter 4.

In early 2020, after the Exhibition in December 2019, as I worked to finalise this exegesis, the conjoined crises of bushfires, coronavirus, the coronial findings of my Aunty Tanya Day's Death in Custody and the connected Black Lives Matter activism disrupted me. Individual acts of work began to feel self-centred, and it was difficult to focus in the midst of colliding crises. Yet, for Blackfullas, the ongoing and generational experience of survival, struggle, grief, loss and traumatic legacy is far too familiar. We have become used to dancing with genocide, practised at resisting and disrupting the ongoing colonial project, and dedicated to affirming our sovereignty that, as ontologically who/what we *are*, can never be destroyed. The 2020 disruptions have thus been rechannelled as fuel for exegetical thinking further about the exhibition's expressions of artwork.

I adapted 'Practice Led Research' (PLR) to my thesis purposes, as both an art praxis of pro-action, and critical-analytical reflection on this praxis, bundled – or,

‘ghost-woven’ – in taking up an exhibition-and-exegesis as ‘academic research’. In this way I sought to bring my ‘academic thesis’ into the ontological, epistemological and axiological service of Indigenous women’s standpoints. Situating myself as a Blackfulla is part of my standpoint and specifically acknowledging I am a (cis) straight Aboriginal woman from a strong matriarchal lineage that, culturally and politically, emerges and evolves from past into present and towards transformational futures. That is, the PLR methodology needed to be decolonised, as its literature is predominantly white in its assumptions and perspectives. For example, Malins’ introductory chapter to PLR gives its history and origins in the UK (emulated in Australian universities and creative arts research), with the first creative thesis being undertaken in 1978 described in unequivocally colonial terms:

> *Thanks to early pioneers and brave settlers, research in Art and Design can claim some territory and draw some boundaries. The diverse and eclectic characteristics of our particular landscape are becoming clearer and more confident – we now have new routes, alternative perspectives and creative constructions (Malins 2007, 26-32).*

Whilst I understand this “new” field of art research was undertaken by artists developing research frameworks and processes, the whiteness of their language is stark. Indigenous artists, in the face of colonisation, have continued to make art through research practices that were developed out of necessity to survive and speak back to colonial violence, erasure and genocidal practices that include looting Indigenous cultures, human remains and material culture for museum collections and for white artists to steal, copy and emulate not only in form but concepts and intellectual property.

As a Blackfulla artist and researcher, I thus contribute to ‘decolonising methodologies’ (Smith 1999) that support Indigenous cultural, relational and ethical responsibilities through artistic-activist research that resists and responds to the limited and derivative western art canon and to white dominance in community arts and art institutions. In the context of doctoral research in the colonised institution of the university, the place of art-as-

research embodies the western separational epistemologies of individualism and the mind-body binary.

In providing a rationale for PLR, Arlander points out that:

> *Practice-based and art-based research frequently has a practical, critical or emancipatory knowledge interest, whereas artistic research seems to find contact points with philosophical research, sharing its speculative freedom. Nevertheless, research involving artworks or artistic practice inevitably has an empirical dimension (Nevanlinna 2002). The motivation for artistic research is rarely mere knowledge production as such. Most artists turn to research either because they disapprove of existing artistic practice, they have a vision or dream or they want to experiment and play (2010, 329).*

This rationale allies with Aboriginal women's standpoint which refuses separations of knowing, being and acting in the political-ethical act of making art in-and-for our communities. Furthermore, by refusing this separation, I also avoid the problem of 'how to present artworks and performances as research outcomes, or as demonstrations of research outcomes' (Arlander 2010, 329) since our research is both a process and an outcome.

In *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*, Graeme Sullivan cites the work of Indigenous artists and their research and speaks of 'transformative research as a braided metaphor,' (2010, 113-114). Although I relate to 'braiding' as consistent with Ghost Weaving, I take his definition as predicated on being only in the realm of "humans", thereby excluding our non-human relations as Indigenous Peoples. Another definition to describe PLR in my project might be expressed as follows:

> *… an artwork can be considered to be a site where knowledge is created and meanings are made. Research about works of art communicate new insights into how objects carry meaning about ideas, themes and issues. As an object of study, an artwork is an individually and culturally constructed form and thus can be examined as a form of knowledge (Sullivan, 2010, 71).*

Sullivan expands on braiding by describing the practice led research of Badtjala artist, scholar and researcher, Fiona Foley as primarily responding to the silence around Indigenous history:

> *….old postcards, memorabilia, and everyday artifacts often serve as more accurate historical traces that hold the clues from which Foley can fashion her critical responses. And here images are wrought in the rawest of form, yet they offer cues that can be read as the narrative threads that remind and provoke, render and rouse, and in ways where experience is both seen and felt (Sullivan 2010, 182-183).*

Fiona Foley herself states of an Australian public art realm and public dialogue:

> *Because there is no analysis of the work it doesn't have a historical context, it is not spoken about, therefore there is no history of the work. So important historical moments like that in Australia are 'written out' and that's very disturbing for me when the work isn't critiqued in some form…Australia only sees things as a dichotomy of black and white cultures, and everything is reduced to a core between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and for me that's not where it's at (in Sullivan, 2010, 182).*

Ghost Weaving includes emphasising the personal as political in my works and draw on Toni Morrison's description: 'If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything.' Morrison goes on to reject the apolitical view of art according to which:

> *[I]f a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted…It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time (1984, 344-345).*

I am also driven by Anzaldua's description of why she was impelled to write:

> *To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or poor*

> *suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit. To show that I can and that I will write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary. And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing*
>
> *(Anzaldua, 1981, 169).*

In Anzaldua's words, I recognise my impulse to make art and writing as parallel practices that feed each other. I make art because I have always 'researched' my survivance and that of my matriarchs in this medium. Even when I was unsure how to name this process, I made art. I have always written my survivance and that of my matriarchs because it made representable my experiences, which were so traumatic that they became surreal stories in the disassociation I often slipped into to survive them. I make art and write because I, too, am more scared of not doing so, and don't know who I am without these practices.

The exegesis and the exhibition are themselves joined in the effort of Ghost Weaving. The exegesis explains the process of development of the creative works presented in the exhibition as continuing matriarchal knowledge work, and its enactment as both ontological and political-activist expression of our Sovereignty. As I explained in my curation of the *Sovereignty* Exhibition at ACCA in 2018:

> *Sovereignty itself is an inalienable, innate and intimate right; its expression can be found buried within artistic works, gently emerging from inherited practices, or boldly spelled out in new artistic forms …..*
>
> *The sovereignty of Indigenous peoples is being asserted in a cultural revolution of Indigenous activism, action and voice (Balla, 2018, 13).*

And,

> *To be sovereign is in fact to act with love and resistance simultaneously (Balla 2017, 15).*

The Exhibition and Exegesis deal together, as joint works, with the legacies of trauma and colonialism, violence and erasure but they also act as an expression of Sovereign love and solidarity.

Within the overall problematic outlined above, I aimed to address a range of questions in this arts-practice-led research:

- In which ways do Aboriginal women artists in Australia de-colonise the contemporary art field that maintains the existing single colonial story?
- How do Aboriginal women artists refute, resist and disrupt the patriarchal, colonial white art and colonial sites of power, such as major art galleries, institutions and museums?
- In which ways do Aboriginal women artists present knowledge in their art and develop this from their practice?
- Considering that these women artists represent their families, communities and familial narratives by telling stories that are drawn from family, history and cultural knowledges, narratives and lived experiences, how do Aboriginal women translate, transform and materialise these multiple knowledge systems?
- How are Aboriginal women artists expressing and responding to key critical national and local issues relating to justice, land rights, ecology, identity, sovereignty, treaty and matriarchal and cultural maintenance, and generating new cultural processes and stories?
- How have I, how do I, and how will I, continue as both an Aboriginal woman artist, curator, educator and writer to join these Aboriginal women artists?
- How do I reflect on, critique, value, understand and expand upon the knowledge I have inherited, developed and continue to know and learn as both a researcher, Aboriginal woman, artist and story teller and story keeper and protector of knowledges I am privileged into by my family, in particular, my matriarchs?

To address these questions, I embarked on PLR that is multi stranded, complex, pluralistic, and intersectional. That is I consider the intersection of class, race, gender and identity that informs my approach to Aboriginal Women's standpoint. My work began with drawing on the stories of my matriarchs, entrusted and taught to me by my matriarchs. Since art practice is itself research, in making and creating new works from materials, I have been involved in creating new meaning and re-contextualising both historic and contemporary narratives, traditional and contemporary making practices. In turn these have informed my place in the world as an artist and an Indigenous woman.

Chapter 2 elaborates the concept of Ghost Weaving and reflects on the methodology underpinning the multiple bodies of work presented for the exhibition. It gives details of the background development and rationale for the diverse pieces and installations. In brief, the stages include:

1. Working up Aboriginal Women's Standpoint by working on Country
2. Performative photography to disrupt and flip the colonial gaze
3. Going Home to Country: photographing the six-generational matriarchal line
4. Research and writing contributing to critical analysis of my own practice as an artist and researcher
5. Photography for sovereign matriarchs
6. Learning how to bush/eco dye cloths for healing and survivance by gathering stories through yarning while gathering bush-dyeing materials on Country
7. Gathering cloths and making healing cloths on and with Country
8. Making Home: recreating the Mission Home installation
9. Bringing the Exhibition together, a long labour and birthing process
10. Giving back and workshopping with Community
11. Exegesis writing.

These stages are roughly chronological but not linear; for example, research, writing and analysis occurred throughout, photography and portraiture are

brought together, including from previous works, while working with family and community occurred throughout.

Chapter 3 gives a descriptive overview of the two rooms of the exhibition and their works, accompanied by selected photographs of exhibition pieces and layout.

Chapter 4 speaks Blak to Artistic Terra Nullius, focussing in particular on works of Aboriginal and other Indigenous and People of Colour. It also explores my work, placing it in relation to my matrilineal community and to the Blak women's art world.

A separate set of appendices provide a photographic record of the two main rooms of the exhibition (A and B), a list of selected essays written during the PhD and relevant to the exhibition and exegetical argument (C), List with links to catalogues, including essays from curated exhibitions (D), and the approved Human Ethics Plain Language Statement for the project (E).

Chapter 2: Ghost Weaving:
A critical overview and reflection on creating this body of work

Blak women's work: the art of disruption and survivance

This chapter situates the original inspiration and motivation for the research project, to understand and platform the work of Blak women as sovereign warrior women who are/have been active in the resistance against colonialism, patriarchy and state settler violence. In approaching this project, I had dual purposes: first, to create a dream world of unconditional love where Aboriginal women are sovereign warriors, embodying the disruptive and transformative work of Aboriginal women's art work and resistance and second, to speak back and Blak to dominant white and patriarchal public narratives and spaces that hold violence and erasure. I aimed to explore these key issues through practice-led art research in creating a new body of work. This chapter offers a critical reflection on the processes that have been woven together in creating this body of work, describing the methodologies, histories and practices I enacted and grappled with to conduct the research and exhibition outcome. It considers prior works and curatorial experience and their relevance leading up to work of the final exhibition.

Developing the term 'Ghost Weaving', in dialogue with Professor Tracey Bunda, encouraged a matrilineal, intergenerational approach, which could embody the '*everywhen'* (Gilchrist 2016), rather than separating past, present and future. Dr Tony Birch shared a story in which he spoke about the 'sky being held up by women,' which got me to thinking about how the sky is filled with narratives by Blak women. These story tellers and keepers are Ancestral, they are contemporary, they are lived, they are spiritual, they are gone and they are present. The knowledge and understanding that we are all related and all connected implies that we are responsible to each other culturally and ancestrally.

I set out to create a new series of work responsive to Aboriginal women artists who have gone before me – through photography, digital form, personal memoir, family narratives, performative elements, installations, and portraiture work – along with analytical and theoretical meditative statements that align with each piece of the Exhibition. I wanted to understand the diverse, creative, analytical, deadly ways that Aboriginal women artists, community women and activists – who sometimes act as all three (and more) in community life – disrupt the notion of terra nullius, refusing the virtual no (wo)man's land in white man's history. History literally and figuratively ejects Blak women out of the picture, in art as much as politics, language and daily family and communal life.

> *Unfortunately, a comprehensive herstories of resistance by Indigenous women has not been researched and documented, unlike the frontier political activism of Indigenous men, which has been recorded in the works of historian Henry Reynolds.* (Moreton-Robinson 2000 p. 152).

By investigating how Aboriginal women subvert and utilise art to disrupt both the erasure of their voices and experiences, in history and through art *as* history, I was then able to utilise matrilineal and contemporary art modes to have unspoken community stories and memories seen and heard, to be re-membered in spaces that are usually impenetrably dense with whiteness and colonial patriarchy.

Disrupting colonialism in methodology

As explained in Chapter 1, Ontology, Epistemology and Axiology are woven together across the Exhibition, its associated workshops and the Exegesis. The axiological priorities of expressing Sovereignty, refusing coloniality and speaking Blak require careful Ghost Weaving of practice-led arts research, a range of artistic genres curated into an Exhibition, engagement with other Indigenous artists' work, research reading and writing.

Professor Karen Martin's seminal work conceptualising Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing' in *Please Knock Before You Enter: Aboriginal regulation of Outsiders and the implications for researchers (2008)* both excited

and overwhelmed me: how was I to approach Aboriginal research without replicating colonial methods whilst engaging practice led research methods that held space for my art practice and story and respected the legacy of Black research gone before me?

Core issues jumped out at me, and helped me respond to the overuse of the term ‘decolonisation,’ particularly in the arts and cultural field, Martin cited Cree academic, Cora Weber-Pillwax who said:

> *Deconstructing and decolonising will serve some purpose, but I don’t think these processes will necessarily bring us to a better state of existence as Indigenous people. Although they may be necessary discourse and practices for western or non-Indigenous researchers, deconstruction and decolonising discourses on their own will not lead us as Indigenous researchers to where we want to be (2001b, 170 in Martin 2008, 84).*

It is hard to do this work. During the candidature I was invited into many arts-based speaking and writing opportunities. I took some, said no to quite a few, (especially at last minute invitations) and shared others. Most of them took the form of commissioned essays during the first two years of my candidature. I was doubtful, cautious and suspicious of the level of interest in my perspective on Aboriginal women’s matriarchy, responses to white feminism, modes of resistance, de-and colonial work. I was aware that talk about de-colonisation was becoming fashionable, and therefore palatable to particular white and settler audiences without any solid moves to actually de-colonise institutions or galleries, still maintaining only minor roles for actual Indigenous people in art and cultural fields. I was also aware of my accessibility, being city based, my perceived palatability and the comfort which white people seemed to have in speaking to me. I spoke or wrote back my suspicions of white motivations, named my concerns with white institutions, and to the void of erasure. I named artistic terra nullius to celebrate Blak women warriors whom I was witnessing, sometimes collaborating with, exhibiting with, or working in community with – some I idolised as artists and as warriors.

Early doubts in my abilities as an academic, imposter syndrome, Blak trauma shame and fears of being successful were sabotaging me. A brilliant and enlightening Indigenous Post Grad Masters workshop with Professor Linda Tuhiwa Smith and her husband, Professor Graham Smith, held at Melbourne University in 2015 in my second year of candidature, snapped me out of my fears when she asked the group what was holding us back. I expressed my fear of not being good enough, and she relayed a story about how her pakeha or white students on campus walk straight to their office doors, knock confidently and stride in with their direct questions and demands. The Maori students, Prof Smith said, were waiting outside the office, or in the hallway, waiting, patiently and modestly to be seen. Not wanting to impose. I took this straight in and could see myself, waiting by that door. Professor Smith challenged me to stop holding myself back and move into the work despite the fears and doubts.

I had to apply an Indigenous way of working to the existing theories of Practice Led Research Methodology, De-Colonial Research, and Participatory Art Research. I posed that these methodologies were appropriated from Indigenous modes of working without acknowledgement by the Community Cultural Development field that historically has espoused justice driven, community centred work but continues to be led by white people and structures of management applied to community arts settings.

Naming this methodology as *Ghost Weaving* gave me the framework to present the visual work as a body of epistemological and ontological work from a place of realness, autobiography, memory and identity. I had to understand my art practice and research as reciprocal processes in order to develop my own practice led research as Blak and communal. Wilson argues that

> *an Indigenous methodology must be a process that adheres to relational accountability. Respect, reciprocity and responsibility are key features of any healthy relationship and must be included in an Indigenous methodology; Cora (Weber-Pillwax, 2001) calls these the 3 R's of Indigenous research and learning (Wilson 2008, 77).*

Our respect and relationships with our families, communities and our matriarchs is embedded with a set of ethics – an axiological position – that white universities, galleries and museums fail to grasp. I struggled to articulate an Indigenous art creative thesis PhD without ignoring or disrespecting key Indigenous issues, how to do an art as research process within an Indigenous lens, and specifically my standpoint as Wemba-Wemba and female. This has to be achieved whilst developing an evolving language and practice that is non-colonial, responsive and resistant in 'talkin' up to the '[white cube]', to paraphrase Moreton-Robinson (2000) in the field of art. To enact art and cultural practices that evolve in response to various modes of structural, historical and systemic racism and oppression requires the weaving together of various cultural practices, including artistic. It is also communal: it requires collaboration with my matriarchal figures, family research, permission seeking and the approval of matriarchs.

The deep accountability and reciprocity Martin (2008) names again resonated with me:

> *… after having levelled some strong critique at existing Aboriginal research models to determine their role in our dispossession, and then also identifying problems in the beliefs, behaviours, values and assumptions of some Aboriginal researchers I realised I was not immune, or neutral. I therefore wondered about the filters I would use and the types of representations I would form in this research study (Martin 2008, 32).*

Whilst my research was not as deeply implicated in other Mob's business as Professor Martin's was, I still had to be accountable to my Wemba-Wemba matriarchs and community, both gone and present. I was making my work for my family and other Blackfullas rather than a white audience. I had to think through a lens that responded to the injuries of racism and sexism. And I had to figure out how to apply:

> *critique as an Indigenous research project must tell us what is 'wrong,' (even though practice led research in visual arts does not focus on "problem solving" as such) and what is to be*

avoided if we are seeking relatedness, agency and sovereignty in research' (Martin 2008, 84).

The ultimate responsibility of an Aboriginal researcher is to her research participants, her family and community, not the university. As an Aboriginal woman I conduct insider/outsider research (Smith 1999). I am challenged by research within the university because I am engaging with de-colonial research methodologies. My research project is an act of de-colonial practice in itself: an assertion of sovereignty in which I situate the contribution of Aboriginal women artists and activists to resistance, naming traumas and critiquing structural oppression.

These ethical issues are given additional insight in relation to this project's decolonising efforts in the Yarning and 'Remembering' sections below, exploring enactments of Indigenous cultural protocols which replace the colonial.

Yarning Methodology replacing "Interview"

In the original design and ethics application for this doctoral work, I included interviews, applying for Ethics approval to conduct a series of interviews with Aboriginal women artists and community members (VUHREC # HRE17-229 see Appendix). I moved away from doing these interviews in a formal sense, and moved towards a practice of listening and yarning, in a range of community, family and gallery settings.

The original formal interviews had been planned to include a list of incredible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women artists who have made significant contributions to the cultural landscape in Australia and to my research. Instead of interviews, I wrote about a number of these women and their work in the commissioned essays (See Appendix C).

The project morphed into a more culturally-responsive form that drew instead on art-based conversations and responses in galleries, theatre show performance, foyers and event spaces post-exhibition opening, along with informal community spaces. Some conversations are referred to within

particular essays and some are drawn on specifically for the project, while others have been kept private to the community.

The nuances and cultural specificity of interviewing other Indigenous women is a very particular practice. The knowing how to speak with, *not to,* and *not at*, our sisters is an act of respect and reciprocity: it requires the knowledge of responsibilities. We must remember to check ourselves in our active listening, to ask our ourselves and others "*Are you asking me* or *are you telling me*?". The move to Yarning methodology (Walker, Fredericks et al. 2014; Geia et al. 2013) has become more prominent among Australian Indigenous researchers in multiple fields. For this project it called on me to value the ways in which we listen to and value Aboriginal women and their contributions in speaking Blak and back.

To engender trust and not harm, the ability to listen deeply and most of all a willingness to participate fully in the conversation are core to our communal ethics. This is demonstrated through speaking, observing, listening, caring, making (food, tea, shared art practices, space, comfort) and through maintenance of the space as culturally sound and safe, particularly from interference from non-Aboriginal women. The circle of women's yarning is held in time, space and place through participation. Bunda (2007 p77) writes of the embodied 'The Sovereign Aboriginal Woman' in response to Vivienne Cleven's Mavis Dooley character in *Bitin' Back* where Mavis is observing the conversation of younger Aboriginal women, and then sums up their contributions by concluding, 'they think that when they have your land, they have your fork'. These sovereign assertions, whether critiqued in literature, or taking place in community space through story and yarning, are sovereign exchanges.

The place of Yarning was central to the family community work for the Healing Cloth installation in the ontological space of the Exhibition. The healing cloths were created together with five other Aboriginal women, and my son Katen, fifteen years old at the time. These conversations there were not recorded, nor organised to "capture" or "document" the contributions from the women I invited

to participate but were instead to share the practice as a healing and creative activity and to have yarns that I facilitated from my standpoint as a Wemba-Wemba and Gunditjmara woman. All of the participants had things in common: all are Koorie People (First Nations Peoples from South East Australia), all have creative practices, and work in Aboriginal Community work in various contributions. Their work spans visual art, curating, community arts practice, Indigenous education, including early childhood and tertiary, Aboriginal women's health, social media and public platforms, writing, Indigenous youth initiatives and cultural practice.

The process included inviting participants to my home, sharing the process with them, sharing food and tea and coffee, and driving to the local Maribyrnong River to walk, talk/yarn and collect plant material. After visiting my mother on Yorta Yorta Country, with my Aunty Donna, who was visiting Mum, I collected handfuls of gum leaves there, specifically bush flowers and flowering gum, gum leaves, and some paperbark for bush-dying healing cloths. We shared stories and ideas for how to create activities for children as my Aunty is an early childhood educator. There were also stories in relation to the place where we were gathering. Across the road from my mother's house, it was also outside my childhood kindergarten. At this site was a pine tree, a flowering gum, which *spoke* to my Aunty and me and we both agreed that it *was talking* to us. We then moved to the paperbark at the site and in the fork of the paper bark was a piece of white calico cloth (the same type I was using to create my healing cloths) which had soaked up the colours of the tree and looked incredibly similar to the cloths I was dying. My Aunty Donna told me that "the crow had put it there for me." A week later, my mother, visiting me in Melbourne, brought me a gift from Aunty Donna: a beautiful dilly bag style basket that she had woven for me.

The weave between Yarning, as a process of passing on matriarchal knowledge, links to Country and arts practice was thus central to the Healing Cloths creative work. It could not have occurred without the centrality of knowledge and practice among family, Country, and community. This was a

healing experience through storying as ‘giving voice to our stories creates a healing, a knowing that our voices weave back into age-old traditions, enabling our bodies to thread seamlessly with the veracity of our spiritual selves’ (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, 107).

Decolonising through Remembering: Aboriginal Matrilineal research in art

This project with its work is motivated by the decolonising work of ‘Remembering,’ one of the 25 Indigenous Projects Linda Tuhiwai Smith names in her book, *Decolonising Methodologies*:

> *… the remembering of a people relates not so much to an idealized remembering of a golden past but more specifically to the remembering of a painful past and, importantly, people’s responses to that pain. While collectively Indigenous communities can talk through the history of painful events, there are frequent silences and intervals in the stories about what happened after the event. ….. Violence and family abuse became entrenched in communities which had no hope. White society did not see and did not care. This form of remembering is painful because it involves remembering not just what colonisation was about but what being dehumanised meant for our own cultural practices. Both healing and transformation become crucial strategies in any approach which asks a community to remember what they may have decided to unconsciously or consciously to forget*
>
> *(Smith 1999, 146).*

Most of this remembering work is not written, nor the subject of literature reviews but, rather, oral. As Marie Battiste (2002, 2) argues from a Canadian First Nations’ perspective:

> *… in the European (or Eurocentric) knowledge system, the purpose of a literature review is to analyze critically a segment of a published topic. Indigenous knowledge comprises the complex set of technologies developed and sustained by Indigenous civilizations. Often oral and symbolic, it is transmitted through the structure of Indigenous languages and passed on to the next generation through modeling, practice, and animation, rather than through the written word. In the*

> *context of Indigenous knowledge, therefore, a literature review is an oxymoron because Indigenous knowledge is typically embedded in the cumulative experiences and teachings of Indigenous peoples rather than in a library. The second point is that conducting a literature review on Indigenous knowledge implies that Eurocentric research can reveal an understanding of Indigenous knowledge. The problem with this approach is that Indigenous knowledge does not mirror classic Eurocentric orders of life. It is a knowledge system in its own right with its own internal consistency and ways of knowing, and there are limits to how far it can be comprehended from a Eurocentric point of view.*

My initial literature review confirmed my experience that western art research literature largely ignores or excludes Indigenous artists, theorists or standpoints. I was looking for myself and our people everywhere, all the way through. I felt extra pressure to address this form of artistic terra nullius or erasure by privileging Indigenous or People of Colour scholars to cite, and in particular women, to rectify this erasure. My research problematic set out to understand and expand and platform the ways that Aboriginal women in Australia disrupt this silencing through their work, art and contributions.

Aboriginal women's art work, as research and practice, is one form of representing the epistemologies, the knowledges and knowledges embodied in practices, that becomes our archive, our gallery, our museum, a continuing process of remembering, recovering and passing down the generations.

And it is 'ours', not just mine. To support this collectivity, I developed a digital online journal in Instagram and Facebook posts with annotations and iphone photos that I took. I gave updates of my PhD creative process and family research. Though this makes the work quite visible publicly and worries me regarding the protection of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, this is about the protection of Aboriginal People's rights to the ownership of information about us and our ways of knowing, doing and being. I made sure not to share images of people without their permission and that I did not share anything that was of a secret or women's business inappropriate for social media. However, there is always the risk that my posts can be misappropriated, or misused.

Despite these risks, I found by posting publicly that it was an immediate way to utilise digital media and communications with family and community members and report on my progress, especially that which involved us collectively as family and Wemba-Wemba Peoples. It would otherwise have been difficult to keep family updated of the research process. Though there is a risk in making the work available to online audiences, I believed it has been a successful medium to maintaining visibility and transparency to family and community. Of course, actually meeting with family and presenting research outcomes to them, in particular my Aunties, giving them copies of the research materials, was the most important face to face responsibility I undertook.

The online journal was a way to communicate and share the relationship between the research process, what was learned, what was uncovered and how I translated that into a series of new visual art works for the exhibition. It was a way to express how I was creating a relationship between the stories I was being gifted and privileged and how I would create visual art outcomes with that new and old knowledge. How would this knowledge be best served in a visual art mode? How would the works be shared publicly without breaking or damaging family protocols and maintain protection of that knowledge and those stories? How would I share the impact and damage of colonialism on the bodies of Aboriginal women in my family, of my own damages without spilling our blood again? How would I maintain the respect, dignity and pride that my matriarchs survived their traumas with? There were also stories of language protection and politics embedded within, how it was that our matriarchs' knowledge, shared and taught to Dr Louise Hercus, has then been publicly available to both white people and other Aboriginal Peoples who have not always acted ethically with access to Wemba-Wemba language.

Reparative aesthetics: made by daily acts of repair for healing

Using art for personal and community memory work means naming the pain and the resistance to it, the healing that is needed and the processes by which such healing can be mobilised. I started making art as a child as both a way to be who I was as Koorie child, and to escape and disassociate from traumas.

Writing became the process and vehicle to let it flow out, and name the unspeakable, with art becoming my space to construct and manifest my stories and survival.

The research and creative work for the doctoral project continues this journey. It involved a process of localising historical and trans generational trauma with localised acts of healing. These works were to be an invocation of ‘aesthetic repair,’ an expression of ‘daily acts of repair’ for colonial traumas and wounds, as Kruger noted in her ACCA symposium presentation in 2017. Since colonisation is a structure, not an event (Kauanui 2016), it requires daily acts of repair and maintenance like any structure, necessary if we as dispossessed, marginalised and traumatised Aboriginal Peoples are to be able to survive. Aboriginal artists, activists and creative workers thus become critical to ‘survivance’ (Vizenor 2008) by making shared, collective and public events, communities, places and spaces to disrupt what functions to uphold dominant colonial narratives.

The image of my grandmother labouring in child birth and giving birth on the verandah of the Echuca Hospital in the nineteen fifties haunts me and ghosted my own birthing experiences in 1995 and again in 2004. In between those years, it ghosted me again at the Royal Women’s Hospital when I suffered a miscarriage and had a white male radiographer tell me coldly that my womb was “motherless” after an internal examination. The transgenerational traumas on Aboriginal women’s bodies, and on our business, is carried through body memory, story, blood loss, violence and brutality repeated in language, processes and repetition in public institutions. These histories are laid out in government and organisational policies and maintained through public dialogues about the value of Aboriginal women’s lives which are valued less than that of white women’s lives. When I retold my grandmother’s experience at the Royal Women’s Hospital in 1999, at their apology ceremony to Aboriginal mothers, speaking in front of my mother and young daughter was an opportunity for healing.

The medicalisation of our bodies, birthing rites and sites, in particular since June 2018, and the attempted destruction of Djap Wurrung Birthing Trees and sites by Vic Roads and the Victorian State Government are continuations of the ongoing colonial project that includes ecocide, erasure and desecration of sacred sites and the hypocrisy of doing so whilst attempting to create a treaty with Victorian Aboriginal Peoples. The resistance – activism, and the protective actions of Djap Warrung women on their site – is disruptive, revolutionary and incredibly courageous.

The use of the term healing and its practice as trauma treatment speak to Kruger's 'daily acts of repair' needed to both remember and to reconstruct sovereignty. As a Wemba-Wemba woman, I researched Aboriginal women artists' work, and women's work to recover matrilineal relationships with mothers', grandmothers' and great and great-great grandmothers' experiences of surviving, experiencing and resisting colonisation. Indigenous art standpoints and theories, particularly those in which Aboriginal Peoples name their own traumas and healing processes, are largely neglected from the white research curriculum.

My exhibition was a way to create pieces that draw on the aesthetics of repair, the architecture of healing, considering the very structure of what temporal respite could look like, where restorative aesthetics and daily acts of repair came together. The project encompassed multiple bodies of work made over the four-year project. The project was designed and evolved to demonstrate art as a sovereign act, in the way that Bunda (2009) names writing as a sovereign act, and using research as ceremony (Wilson, 2008).

Working up Aboriginal Women's Standpoint by working on Country

Throughout my arts career to date, including being represented in numerous group shows and seven solo exhibitions between 2010-2016, I created works that spoke to the stories, experiences, resistance and survival of my family and matriarchs. As a curator, I have been honoured to platform the work of other Aboriginal artists. However, the opportunity to consider and weave these

cultural concepts, my standpoint and research into a single PhD exhibition was a huge and at times overwhelming challenge. I broadly researched the work of Aboriginal women artists, community women and activists through writing a series of essays that responded to their works and how they disrupt dominant patriarchal and colonial dialogues and created photographic works that were more of an intimate nature, of myself, my mother, daughter and niece. It was in a sense, a call and response of research outwardly, see who was making what, what they were creating and saying and turning back to my base of matriarchal knowledge, practice and being to reflect and respond. This became my praxis and methodology of participatory action research and practice led research done from a de-colonising practice of my own standpoint as a Wemba-Wemba matriarchal researcher and artist.

From this place, I embarked on practice led research that is multi stranded, complex, pluralistic, and intersectional: I consider the intersection of class, race, gender and identity that informs my standpoint theory. This begins with drawing on the stories of my matriarchs, entrusted and taught to me by my matriarchs. It includes considering art practice as research itself, which is practice led in nature. By making and creating new works from materials I am creating new meaning and re-contextualise both historic and contemporary narratives and stories that inform my place in the world as both an artist, a woman and an Indigenous person.

Situating myself as a Blackfulla is core to my standpoint, specifically a standpoint of an Aboriginal woman, a cis woman, a straight woman – culturally and politically as an Aboriginal Wemba-Wemba matriarchal woman with family and ancestors. To keep strong and connect with family and community knowledges, connection to Country was central: grounding myself in matrilineal memories, stories and continuing connections.

Mok Mok: To disrupt and flip the colonial gaze with performative photography

The creative component of my research began in 2016, by creating a new body of photographic works, in particular the *Mok Mok* series that celebrates *Mok Mok* the old woman/hag character written about by esteemed Elder, Aunty Margaret Tucker in her 1977 biography, '*If Everyone Cared*' (1977). Aunty Marge recounted a story about *Mok Mok*, one I had heard many times as a little girl from my matriarchs about this fearsome and fearless wild woman who lived in the bush with her huge hair and ugly features – and, as Mum and Nan told us, red eyes. We were often taunted with "Mooky at the window, look out!" if us kids were being too cheeky, or too loud at night time. *Mok Mok* also threatened to steal babies for herself if left alone, or if they weren't safely tucked up in the fork of gum trees. The moral of the *Mok Mok* story is that babies in Victoria ended up being carried on their mothers' backs in possum skin cloaks to keep them close, and out of Mok Mok's reach. Despite her ominous presence, I loved *Mok Mok* and her courage, as an antithesis to fear and childhood traumas. I wanted to bring a version of her into suburbia to speak back to the white footy Mums, their cult of motherhood and "domestic goddess," nonsense of gentrification and white, heteronormative cis-gendered parenthood of the inner-city hood I live in.

I posed as a *Mok Mok* in Footscray, mocking the process of "doing it all" as a woman, and speaking back to my own anxieties about raising my Black kids in the city away from the bush I grew up in, away from mobs of cousins and extended family. In urban spaces, without your family of origin, you have to work hard to maintain culture, story and connections to keep your children knowledgeable and strong away from your homelands. *Mok Mok* was also a way to resist racist and narrow white definitions of beauty and white feminism. It gave me a way for me to perform a liberated character that is fearless, healed and unapologetic. As kids in our family, my grandmother, mother and aunty would regularly put us kids on the spot, and demand we perform for them to make them laugh; the pursuit of and celebration of excellent black funniness

was held in high esteem. Having “a good laugh” was prized as an important Aboriginal activity long before laughter classes were introduced into the western self-help movement.

I utilised photography for this act, to create a hyper realistic Blak wild woman, flourishing and thriving in her body and herself. Although *Mok Mok*’s status as a mother is not present or relevant in Tucker’s (1977) or my matriarchs’ telling, my enactment is a play on *Mok Mok*, trying to appear as if she is a “perfect mother.” In narratives, *Mok Mok* was willing and plotting to steal other women’s babies to devour once she had roasted them over a fire. Mothers come in many forms and mother work is conducted by multiple community and family members in Aboriginal community. *Mok Mok* is a woman, though not defined by western gendered tropes, and is from both the spiritual and physical realms.

I describe these *Mok Mok* photographic works as performative photography and acknowledge the work of Aboriginal women photographic artists, Tracey Moffatt, Destiny Deacon, and Brenda L Croft whose works embody character, narrative and story. The self-portraits painted by Frida Kahlo also influenced this process.

In my research, the camera became a tool for expressing Blak matriarchy and community ways of 'being, knowing and doing', following Martin (2008), a response to Aboriginal women's art making and activism through photographic based works drawn from my matriarchal family stories.

The method of “performing” *Mok Mok* was an act of survivance, both a liberating and empowering process. Enacting the *Mok Mok* photographic series was a method for me to use the trickster, shape shifter or mask to have the courage and strength to complete the early research coursework and early stages of the research, which I felt overwhelmed by.

> *Native reality is best understood through the trickster, who has always been known to First Nations people through oral traditions, and who is best described as a creator that is constantly transforming and shape-shifting. In using trickster strategies, Native artists are able to deconstruct and*

> *reconstruct ideas about Native people and their culture. According to many Native artists, this new discourse, called the "trickster shift," has been around since the beginning, seeded in oral traditions, and it requires the Native perspective to decode these trickster undertakings properly. (Warn 2007, iv)*

Enacting *Mok Mok* was also a healing methodology for me to go forward into the research process; she was a way to speak back into the abyss of exhausting trans-generational trauma. Bringing Matrilineal stories from Country to recreate *Mok Mok* spirit in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray was a tool of courage to establish my starting point and articulate my Standpoint. Printing and framing the photographs from this performance became the first stage and outcome of the practice-led research.

These *Mok Mok* works, developed for the creative thesis, were included in a commissioned solo show at Kingston Art Gallery, Melbourne, in 2016. Works from the series have now been selected for five group shows[1].

Going Home to Country: creating the photographic project of six generations of my Matriarchy, including my daughter and myself

Commissioned for *Next Matriarch* at the October 2017 *Tarnanthi* National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Festival, on Kaurna Country (Adelaide), this was presented as *Lovescapes; Wemba-Wemba Country*. *Next Matriarch* was a group show featuring seven Aboriginal women from different nations across the country: Hannah Bronte, Amrita Hepi, Kaylene Whiskey, Ali Gumillya Baker, Miriam Charlie and Nicole Monks. It was an honour to have contributed a

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- [1] *State of the Nation*, Counihan Gallery, curated by Kimberley Moulton, Yorta Yorta, Melbourne (2016)
- *Strong Women*, First Draft Gallery, curated by Emily McDaniel, Kalari Clan, Wiradjuri Nation, Sydney (2017)
- *In Character,* Verge Gallery, curated by Peter Johnson and Tesha Malott, Sydney (2019) and
- *In Character,* Verge Gallery, curated by Peter Johnson and Tesha Malott, Sydney (2019) and
- *Affirmation* at Koorie Heritage Trust (2020) for the postponed international photographic festival, curated by Gail Harradine, Wotjobaluk/Jadawadjali PHOTO2020.

matriarchal narrative that demonstrated the connections between my daughter to my great-great grandmother with each woman of each generation representing our unbroken sovereign line.

This large photographic group drew on the idea of the ‘personal as political’, showing that Aboriginal women’s activism, work and community achievements are not forgotten, by presenting the matrilineal line in historical images of my daughter, self, mother, grandmother, great grandmother and great-great grandmother. In the Exhibition, the large acetate photos were shown against a large photo of Wemba-Wemba Country.

I have included the use of my family’s photographic collections with the utmost respect, love and gratitude. Historically, the availability of cameras and film was rare due to the cost and the exclusion of Aboriginal Peoples from accessing photography. The flipping of the colonial and predominantly male lens and gaze to Aboriginal family members documenting family and protecting and sharing these images across generations is highly significant and precious. The use of photography, photos and family collections of photos and albums, framed pictures and reverence for photography is very important to Aboriginal families. Aboriginal People, especially women, are expert curators at maintaining family genealogy and story through photography in both their homes – and recently on Facebook and Instagram. We use photography to talk about and maintain relationships with Ancestors and forebears. Photography of gatherings at funerals becomes poignant as many lament that the only time extended families and community gather on masse is for funerals and wakes or, as our family says, ‘cuppa tea after up the hall.’

Many Aboriginal family members set up Family Pages to share images and research and annotate photographs, the story of the image and the family within the images. Respect for the photo’s provenance is important; paying respects to family members and Elders for images shared with their permission. The images I was able to use are from our Day Family collections. Uncle Hubert Day, my great-great Uncle, (great-grandmother Papa Mariah Day’s son) had a photograph collection. My mother granted me permission to include images of

herself, her mother, her grandmother and great grandmother. I sought my daughter's permission to include her image in *Lovescapes: Wemba-Wemba Country* and *Margie the Matriarch* and that of my nine year old niece, and her father and mother, my brother and sister-in-law.

Research contributing to critical analysis of my own practice as an artist and researcher

Research has included reading, writing, visiting Indigenous exhibitions, writing essays and co-curation of the ACCA *Sovereignty* Exhibition, December 2016 to March 2017, in Melbourne (see Appendix C for link). Ten of the eighteen essays produced during 2016 to 2019 are relevant to the work of the exhibition and exegesis and are listed in Appendix D. Research also involved a 2019 research visit with my Mother, Margie Tang, and daughter, Rosie Kalina, to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) on Ngunnawal Country/Canberra, where we examined their archives.

Outcomes from the research with both family and AITSIS archives contributed, both directly and indirectly, to the art pieces for the Exhibition and to the analyses that led to the exegesis. Stories and selections from the literature were directly made present in the epistemological space, with copies recreating my office/studio space. Building my analysis through creative writing, curating and essays underpinned significant artistic work for the exhibitions, commissions and the final project Exhibition. The ethical/axiological commitment to creating and recreating knowledges of Aboriginal Women as an expression of sovereignty remains central to my work.

Photography for sovereign matriarchs

For an installation *Lovescapes: Wemba-Wemba Country*, 2017, a central element was an i-phone photograph that I took of the flowing, gum tree lined, Tummugerri Creek on Wemba-Wemba Country in 2016 during a visit with my Mum, Aunty and children. The Tummugerri Creek feeds off the Kolity/Edwards River and is a significant site for our Day Wemba-Wemba family, being where my great-great grandmother, Papa Mariah Day lived in her own little hut before

our Country was invaded and before the Moonahcullah Mission was established. This site is also where my Aunty Barbara Walker, my grandmother's beloved sister, and Uncle Kevin Walker returned to Country to live in the early 2000s after leaving Moonahcullah Mission for work in the 1960s. This place continues to be an intergenerational family gathering site.

There is a story that Aunty Barbara Walker shared with my mother and Aunties; that her mother, my great grandmother Nanny Nancy had shared: when the women gathered to weave at the Tummugerri Creek, they never sat directly on Country, but on weaving mats they had woven. Re-creating a matriarchal gathering in photography allowed for a re-imagined gathering across generations and time; it created and recreated place and memory.

For the family, this i-photo also resonated with a photograph taken by my Aunty Karen Mobourne of the river close by, seen on a visit with my family to see our great Aunty Barbara Walker who, before her passing in 2013, became one of the oldest living Wemba-Wemba woman in the state. We marvelled at her old photograph and gazed into what we saw and read as cultural and women's business. I had my i-photo printed as a colour 5-metre-wide and 1.5m tall eco wallpaper. I wanted this image of Country to be wide and expansive; to demonstrate this place as a ***lovescape***: more than just a landscape. As I chose wallpaper, it was able to lie smoothly against the wall, almost like a looking window into Wemba-Wemba Country from its city installation on shared Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Country.

Another important photographic process included creating a series of portraits of my mother, my matriarch, in collaboration with her at her home on Yorta Yorta Country. The portrait was commissioned by curators for *Lucky,* a group exhibition at the Bundoora Homestead, Melbourne in 2018 that spoke to the experiences of Chinese people and history in Australia and their entwined relationship with gold and gold mining. My mother's grandfather George Tang came to Australia from China and his grandson Billy Tang married my grandmother, Rosie Egan, a Wemba-Wemba and Gunditjmara woman. Mum spoke at the *Lucky* exhibition about her pursuit of luck, but often feeling cursed

as a black woman in this country. A key portrait of my mother, with my daughter and niece, is included in the exhibition.

I also created a series called *and the matriarchs sang* (2016), commissioned for an exhibition titled *Re-Centre Sisters* at City Gallery, (2016), a group show of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander women artists from around Australia. The purpose of the work was to tell elements of stories told to me by my mother and grandmother, stories of my matriarchs from my mother, grandmother, great grandmother and great-great grandmother. Their work, their struggles and their resistance has inspired this series and I wanted to document this in a way that hinted at what is also not known, what is not told and what is kept secret.

Women in my family have suffered various forms of violence of the colony and state, patriarchal violence from their own men, migrant men, white men and the colony itself. I wanted to speak to these stories without exploiting them and to honour their lives and to share with our family future generations. In '*and the matriarchs sang',* I rubbed 13 small white panels by hand with house paint mixed with ground bark from branches collected on Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung Country on campus at Victoria University during the early stage of my research when I was situated as an artist in residence on campus. This included walking the grasslands to find discarded materials that found their way to the edge of campus, dumped on the remnant grasslands at Iramoo that once covered a quarter of the state of Victoria, home to the endangered legless lizard and home to Murnong, Yam Daisy, once a staple of Aboriginal women's diet and their collecting and harvesting practices.

Within *and the matriarchs sang*, I imbued the little canvases with memory of Country and the remnant grasslands by rubbing that dirt and bark matter into them. Mixing it with white house paint was to embody the colonising impact of "developing" the grasslands and eradicating the majority of their size and health. Within the paint, I fixed copies of photographic images of my matriarchs with hand written text in charcoal, a nod to their dedication that their children and grandchildren be able to access education and not be denied it as they

were, and the charcoal was a nod to the times my grandmother would take coal from the campfire and insist that I draw something.

All of these projects visually articulate the healing process history, land, place, the body and the politics of Aboriginal women's lived experiences of subjugation and violence, coming to survivance, nurturance and healing. Weaving family stories and photos together brings into strong focus the sovereign matrilineal relationships on and with Country.

Curating Sovereignty

In 2016 I was commissioned to co-curate an exhibition, entitled *Sovereignty* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA). This was twenty-two years after *Blakness: Blak City Culture*, the first Indigenous exhibition at ACCA and a time period that encompassed 'ACCA's previous director, white woman Juliana Engberg who had described Aboriginal art as 'a passing moment'(in Carroll 2016-2017) So, the opportunity to speak back to this absence and platform South Eastern Aboriginal art in this space was a responsibility that I was honoured to work on. The task was exciting but also overwhelming as it was at the beginning of my PhD project. However, I was supported by Director of Moondani Balluk Indigenous Academic Unit, Yorta Yorta woman, Karen Jackson, and my PhD supervisors, to do this work whilst completing the early research milestones required for my doctorate.

The research into commissioning Aboriginal artists for this exhibition, with a focus on Koorie artists and my negotiation with ACCA Director, Max Delany, to include a women-focussed, matriarchal space, grew my knowledge of Aboriginal women's practice as a practising artist, researcher and curator. (See Appendix D for links to Catalogues and curatorial statements).

As noted in that catalogue,

> *the idea of sovereignty has been articulated in many ways – political, juridical, ethical, spiritual, and in relation to the actuality and assertion of human rights, autonomy and agency. … As celebrated author and catalogue essayist Tony Birch*

> *notes in this publication: 'Conversely, within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Sovereignty is a reflection of a reality that people, custom and Country are inextricably linked, regardless of the impositions of colonisation' (2017, 9).*

The challenge for a visual artist is to create, in three dimensions, ways to express this Sovereignty, carrying the weight of colonial history while reasserting that land was never ceded. As I argued in the catalogue (2017, 13-17).

> *In considering the social, cultural and historical implications of being sovereign people, we also experience our place and place-making being constantly under surveillance. In the gallery space and in cultural institutions, we situate ourselves to return the gaze with direct eye contact and a request that you listen to us deeply – whilst we attempt at the same time to subvert the process; to de-colonise and to Indigenise the very places that have represented us through the colonial gaze.*

In my work, I particularly emphasise resistance and love. In the Sovereignty catalogue, I pointed out that:

> *To be sovereign is in fact to act with love and resistance simultaneously. Uncle Banjo Clarke, the late Gunditjmara statesman, said we must 'fight hate with love.'[2] If there is a thread that connects all the artists across the wide diversity of practices represented in Sovereignty it is this deep love for family, for truth telling and for beauty.*

This love for family, truth telling and beauty asserts sovereignty in the multiple elements of both the ontological space of the Mission Home and the Healing Cloths, and the epistemological space which foregrounded Matrilineal photographs posed on Country, the Mok-Mok trickster portraits subverting old stories, and the recognition of other Blak women artists and their work.

Visiting International Indigenous and colonised exhibitions

In 2017, I was accepted to present at WIPCE (World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education) and to present my reflections on Aboriginal women's art and activism and my PhD first stage practice led research. As part of this

conference, which was happening on *Six Territories Nations* in Toronto, I visited Tongva Lands/Los Angeles and Lenapehoking/New York City.

I visited as many art galleries as possible, looking for Indigenous contemporary art and a number of these exhibitions were highly influential. In Los Angeles; original photographs of Frida Kahlo by Hungarian photographer Nicholas Muray at the Latin American Museum of Art, and an exhibition by young Latinx women titled *Envision-Picturing the Self* (2017) about identity, self, community and women. It was one of the best community collaborative exhibitions I'd seen. The curators facilitated the process of young Latina women selecting the work of senior and established Latina artists and responding to those works in their own ways through self-portraiture photography.

In New York City, at the Native American Museum I saw an installation titled *The Harbinger of Catastrophe*, 2017 by Marianne Nicholson (2017): a carved box projecting light and shadow around the room enveloping the space in immersive story. For me, it problem-solved how to produce an immersive experience in a gallery without hanging out the family's 'dirty washing'.

On this visit, the Whitney Museum's posthumous retrospective of two decades of Brazilian artist, Helio Oiticicaca, had a huge impact of me. *Hélio Titicaca: To Organize Delirium* (Lynn Zelevansky 2016) included the artist's architectural installations, writing, film, and large-scale environments of an increasingly immersive nature, works that transformed the viewer from a spectator into an active participant. I spent five hours in this exhibition, finding it difficult to leave after being so moved and excited by experiencing each gallery and installation. Helio, born in 1937 in Rio and dying young, at forty-two, created little dwellings of the favelas, as memory spaces of his home country. His work was driven by presenting his truth of his country; he was dedicated to "plunge into the shit" (Whitney Museum of Art 2017). His work embodies his activism and distrust of institutions, speaking of a need for decolonisation and resistance to colonial institutions that narrowly defined the canon of art as European or Western and anything 'other,' ie Indigenous, Black or brown as 'folk' or 'traditional,' instead of as contemporary art in its own right.

Seeing his work as a visitor required responding as a participant and collaborator, not just a passive viewer. By encouraging participation, could restaging in institutional spaces be enough to save them from being appropriated by whiteness and colonisation? Can the same be applied to our works as Blak artists in patriarchal and colonially white art institutions? Can we subvert these spaces while they curate us and manage our works? His work both helped me to articulate such questions and shaped how my Exhibition space was curated. It also assisted me in globalising the experience of marginalisation, resistance and vulnerability in truth telling for Indigenous Peoples in arts settings.

Recovering family archival records

During the Family visit to AIATSIS, we researched and found family photographs, stories and a highly significant collection of audio recordings of my great-grandmother Nancy Egan, and her brother, Uncle Stanley 'Stoon,' Day which formed the basis of a Wemba-Wemba dictionary co-authored by Dr Louise Hercus between 1961-1965. I emphasise co-authorship, as Hercus is named as sole author, and I believe that my great grandmother and great-great Uncle deserve to be recognised formally for their contributions to this significant body of work as one of the few remaining Victorian Aboriginal languages that survived genocide in this state.

The Wemba-Wemba dictionary was compiled from extensive interviews conducted with Nanny Nancy and Uncle Stoon over this four-year period at Echuca, with occasional trips to Moonahcullah to visit the old Mission site. The dictionary is the most comprehensive list of words, terms, linguistic interpretations, introduction and stories. It built on previous historical research done about Wemba-Wemba Language, and also featured loaned photographic images from the collection of my grandmother's Uncle, Uncle Hubert Day, a prolific photographer of the Day Family of the Wemba-Wemba people.

We acquired a copy of 1961 super eight film footage of my Nanny Nancy walking, talking and teaching language to Dr Louise Hercus, a white linguist at

our Moonahcallah Mission site, on Wemba-Wemba Country. By then, the little houses community had created had been demolished by settlers, along with the school house, church hall and gardens created by Wemba-Wemba Peoples. Together they were walking through various ghost weavings, layers of occupation, culture, history and activity of Wemba-Wemba Peoples on Country: scar trees, cultural sites, gathering places, story places, weaving places, hunting, cooking and eating sites that were erased through genocidal acts by the first wave of colonisation.

The Hercus footage which is silent, and the research around it proved especially significant. Growing up I had heard about footage being in existence but the tapes were lost through deterioration, as one of my Aunties had told me. Finding the footage within the AIATSIS archive was thrilling and emotional. Dr Hercus was the first linguist to make contact with our family, and maintained this relationship, visiting my Aunty Maureen Tang's house in Echuca around 1998 to give copies of the language dictionary to my cousin Kelly Ann Edwards, grandchild of Uncle Stoon, and to me, as Nanny Nancy's great granddaughter. At the time, we were both students of the Nyerna Studies Bachelor of Education Program at the time in Echuca, an Australian first program between a university and Aboriginal Community, to develop an on-Country university campus to address the community's self-determined educational needs and aspirations of community, without having to leave Country and our home town of Echuca for Melbourne for tertiary study. I included some basic Wemba-Wemba language and language activities in my Nyerna Studies program with the intention of re-learning it with family and local schools where I hoped to teach after graduating from Nyerna Studies. Kelly Ann and I were lost to school teaching after being unable even to secure interviews, despite our high grades, excellent teaching portfolios and local knowledge, connections and support from our community.

Specially, within the film footage from one of these trips, we see Nanny Nancy and Dr Hercus setting up a little camp site, with Mrs Hercus' little car, camping paraphernalia and a white canvas tent. In this scene, my great grandmother flicks and folds a white cloth, perhaps a table cloth, and I am immediately

fixated and in love with this movement, and this emotive act. Nanny Nancy smiles and chats as she does this, and it validates the obsession I have had for the past few years of working with white cloths and rags and, for the prior six months, the eco dyeing of white cloths. I was transfixed by this movement and felt that I was exactly where I was supposed to be and doing exactly what I was meant to be doing. I felt that I was time travelling with my Nanny Nancy through this action, through working with the white cloths. The mission house was created to replicate the sense I got from the white canvas.

Ethically, I decided to leave out of the Exhibition the sound of Nanny Nancy's voice speaking language, as we have not had time and space to make sure that each family group descending from Nanny Nancy has copies of the recordings, and they should be able to access and listen to her voice for the first time, as I first did with my family as a child from the original tapes; now disintegrating; new digital copies of the recordings I made for my Aunties and shared on USBs. However, an excerpt of the film flickers over the Mission Home in the first room, emphasising the Matriarch continuing to care for Country and those present.

Curating a space of resistance through cultural architecture: Blak Women's Houses

This section ponders what makes Blak women's houses such specific and particular places, and draws on visual inspiration from Helio Oiticica's retrospective exhibition, *To Organise Delirium* (Almino 2016) and the chapter, *Black Vernacular: Architecture as Cultural Practice* (hooks 1995) as global Black references. The mission houses of Wemba-Wemba women and in particular, the stories, and memories of my matriarchs' little bush homes at Moonahcullah Mission, were the beginning point for creating an immersive installation of memory, respite, healing and timelessness. The ontological standpoint as a Wemba-Wemba matriarchal woman, a river woman, a Koorie woman, was something I drew on to articulate a three-dimensional temporal space for the duration of my exhibition period at Footscray Community Arts Centre.

After three years of writing, reading and speaking, responding to the field I work in, I realised I needed to find a new physical medium to work in and find a new practice that would give me respite from all of the words I had surrounded myself with. I was sick of hearing my own voice. It was ironic, because trauma had silenced me, perpetrators had silenced me, enablers had silenced me: all I yearned was to be heard and validated. After years of speaking and writing out and back, I realised it was time to be quiet and that I had to *make* again, something more physical than photography and something I could realise into a form of reality for others to immerse themselves in.

It was this feeling of unconditional love that I wanted to express physically. My matriarchs developed a way of curating their homes and gardens to give a sense of safety, welcome and nurturing to their families and communities. To curate means to care. The first curators I knew were my mother, grandmother and Aunties. With very little materially, they were able to create homes of love and beauty that made us proud to live in. However, the narrative surrounding us in the white world, was and continues to tell stories, that we destroy homes and don't deserve the homes we apparently are "given" by the government. Angry, hateful white children at my primary school would scream in my face that "your people get everything! You get houses and cars! And you burn everything down!".

Moonahcullah was deemed a

> *Reserve dating from 1896 to 1962, and the Station dating from 1919 to 1952. Two land parcels were set aside at Moonahcullah as Aboriginal reserves, one parcel of 245 acres was gazetted in 1916 and partly revoked in 1964, the other was gazetted in 1898 and was for a cemetery. Moonahcullah operated as a government run Aboriginal reserve administered by the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM). The Mission school was established in 1911' (AIATSIS 2016, 4).*

By 1941, Mission Managers were appointed by the state government to take over running of the mission. In protest at the oppressive, racist treatment of our people, my great grandparents, Nancy Egan (née Day), a Wemba-Wemba

woman, and Robert Wallace Egan, a Gunditjmara man of Framlingham Mission, left Moonahcullah with their ten children and made their way to Echuca, Yorta Yorta Country, occupation of Wemba-Wemba Homelands for the first time in history.

Our great-grandparents stopped in Barham for a while before moving into town and becoming one of the first Aboriginal families in the town to be allowed to buy a house. This house was in a flood-prone area, at the junction of the Campaspe and Dhungala (Murray in Yorta Yorta) Rivers, in a small section within a one-kilometre section between the town cemetery, police station and court house. These are all adjacent to the Dungala and to the Echuca Wharf, at one point the Southern Hemisphere's largest inland port before railways would move the wheat and wool, preceded by the paddle steamers along the Dungala in the colonisation of River peoples.

A wave of community re-occupation of Wemba-Wemba country took place from the 1970s onward when family returned to take up residence on the site again, to hold place. I was taken there as a child growing up with my brother and cousins for family camping trips; hunting, fishing, swimming and learning in the same places our Wemba-Wemba Peoples had for hundreds of generations before us. The places where we camped corresponded to the positioning of the original Mission Houses, including where each family group had negotiated their positions.

The original Mission Houses were built by Uncles and Aunties long gone. Still when I was a child I was watched over by Elders who would tell us stories about the old days: Mok Moks, Little People or Beccas – the Old People referred to as 'true Wemba People' (Hercus 1992). The houses were constructed not only from local gum trees, and found materials, but Wemba-Wemba Uncles taught themselves how to make mud bricks from the banks of the Edwards/Collingen River for their homes and Mission buildings. Homes had one room, wooden framed, with compacted dirt floors that were kept meticulously clean, by sprinkling with water and brushing with gum leaf brooms. The walls would be

insulated with old newspapers. Their light was lantern or candle light. There was no electricity or heating, other than stoves added later.

I grew up in Aboriginal housing, that is housing funded by the Australian government, managed by white offices where we paid our rent for the house with minimal heating and no air conditioning, with mission brown bricks and thin hard carpet, for the house we never ever felt truly safe in, knowing that we could be kicked out at any time. There were times – due to financial stress and poverty – that my mother would get behind in our rent and had to appear in the Bendigo Magistrates Court to plead for more time to catch up on our rent. When I was sixteen, I went with Mum and watched her plead for our rental. I will never forget the fear of seeing the Sheriff drive up to our house and having to speak to the Sheriff while our mother hid inside, lying to him to protect Mum from facing jail time.

Housing instability trailed us in our lives and resulted in an event where our home was emptied out in our absence and the majority of our belongings taken to a charity op-shop. It was devastating to lose so many of my childhood toys, books and the few things I had been able to hang onto, after moving multiple times with my mother and little brother around the state, following new boyfriends, new homes and new schools. By coincidence, when I was nineteen years old, I was with a friend and visited this op-shop, finding what was left of our belongings. It was a strange event. All of my life I had op-shopped with my family for clothing and household items. It was surreal to see our own life displayed there: I felt as if our very life, our struggles, were on display for everyone to see. It was like being turned inside out, shocking and confronting. Our privacy and dignity were violated. It required drawing on a fierceness within me to explain to the white women who worked in the op-shop what I believed had happened and to demand our things back.

The Aboriginal co-operative itself had sent the charity in to empty us out and change the locks. My friend backed me up and helped explain while I became slightly hysterical, because I was in shock. Because I had been through so much childhood trauma, I reacted in the way that Aboriginal People with trauma

do: I yelled, I swore, I confronted and expressed my grief at seeing our lives spread out in public for literal consumption and shaming. This was before mobile phones were common and I couldn't call Mum to tell her. I was then living in Melbourne with her until we were financially able to get our things moved to our new rented flat.

Charity, trauma and capitalism of a church charity organisation all collided. In this strange intersection I remembered my painting and asked where it was but was informed that I had made my very first art sale. A painting, a very detailed, large portrait of my mother and little brother – who were my whole world – for my VCE art subject had been sold to a white woman who lived on a farm. For a moment, the shock of having our lives displayed in public was suspended and I revelled in someone liking and actually paying for one of my paintings. Then, after that momentary joy and pride were gone, I was left with the horrible duty of transporting our lives in seven green garbage bags, back on the train to our new city, a three-hour trip. Then I had to tell Mum that not only was her painting gone – I had given it to her as a surprise at the end of the school year – but so were many of her things, despite my best efforts to gather and reclaim as much as I could. I went on to write about this story for a reading, my first ever, at La Mama Theatre in Carlton, in 2010.

Such experiences of 'home' were the well-spring for the Mission House created for the ontological space in the Exhibition. It was created as a time travel pod. I did not want to replicate a museum-type version of a Mission House but rather the emotional essence of this cultural architecture within a three-dimensional structure and art work to be immersed in. I had originally intended to re-create a mission home dirt floor by bringing dirt from our family homelands, Wemba-Wemba Country from our Moonahcullah Mission site. However, after contemplating this for weeks, I decided it would not be ethical as it would involve too much grief for Country, myself and family. And, as Country where FCAC is situated is both shared and contested by Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Peoples, I knew that this would add too many complex processes to ask permission to bring dirt from other People's Country, something that is done

relentlessly by white people in colonising Country in building, construction and so called developments. The work of re-creating a dirt floor in a gallery context will be one that I keep for now and discuss further with my mother and aunties for future work. The concept of honouring my matriarchs and the homes they worked so hard for is for now a conceptual process in which I/we create, maintaining and clean a dirt floor, by compacting it, sprinkling it with water and sweeping it with gum leaf branch brooms, the way our matriarchs did.

African American professor of architecture La Verne Wells-Bowie highlights in her writings the significance of architecture created by people who were not schooled in the profession or even in the art of building. She offers the insight that 'vernacular architecture is a language of cultural expression' that 'exemplifies how the physical environment reflects the uniqueness of a culture'. In *Art On My Mind*, (1995) African-American feminist bell hooks talks about little black houses in America: the way that black women make little, modest, poor homes into places of love, beauty and respite. She points to the way that families put verandas on little houses, surprising white people that little poor homes would even have a veranda. She describes her grandmother's house, which

> *was not unlike the small shacks that were the homes of many Southern black folks. Her place was just a bigger, more elegant shack. Wood frame dwellings that were fragile or sturdy shaped my sense of meaningful vernacular architecture. Many of these structures, though fragile and therefore altered by time and the elements, remain and offer a wealth of information about the relationship of poor and working-class rural black folks to space (1995, 149).*

In her chapter, *Black Vernacular: Architecture as Cultural Practice,* hooks (1995) invokes hope of another kind for Black people in Turtle Island, by reflecting on a high school art class activity where she was asked to imagine and draw her dream home. She then designed '… a dwelling place of dreams' (145). In the ontological '*Unconditional Love space*', I attempted to create a place of dreams, and of memory/memories in the cloth mission house.

To draw further on this sense of dreaming, sleeping and rest, sorely needed by Aboriginal Peoples, and Blak women in particular, I included a bed lined with gum leaves in reference to my grandmother's poem, '*Childhood Memories*' (Goodall 1988), which is essentially a nihilist meditation on suffering, hunger and colonial poverty. In the poem, my grandmother invokes the comfort from her mother's 'gentle and loving black hand'.

In completing this chapter, in 2020, my Aunty recently shared with me that great grandmother Nanny Nancy would use those gentle and loving Black hands to create shadow puppets that would dance across candle and lantern light in their little mission house as her grandchildren watched transfixed. Nanny Nancy also had the knowledge of how to revive dead birds, and regularly practiced this on Wemba-Wemba Country. In addition to this, Nanny Nancy was a Wemba-Wemba language keeper. To illustrate this (without playing the audio files from the 1960s of her speaking language), I decided, with my mother's and Aunties' permission, to play this silent footage on a loop to complete the immersive sense of being in and on Wemba-Wemba Country in that memory space.

Learning how to bush/eco dye cloths for healing and survivance by gathering stories through yarning while gathering bush-dyeing materials on Country

Learning new practices and challenging myself as an artist and researcher, brought respite from academic research and writing practices. By developing new media for artistic work, and in workshops with other Indigenous women, gathering bush and cloth materials, I experimented with dyeing using bush materials from Yorta-Yorta, Boon Wurrung and Wemba-Wemba countries, and worked with colleagues, matriarchs and community members, yarning along the way. I learnt through doing; by walking and talking or 'yarning' during the gathering and cloth dyeing and through sharing food and cups of tea and coffee, at my kitchen table.

Some of the plants and eucalyptus were collected in the bush in my hometowns of Echuca and Kyabram on Yorta Yorta Country, and on Boon Wurrung Country

and Wurundjeri Country along the Maribyrnong River. Each place I gathered, I said thank you to the plants and trees I gathered from and to the Ancestors of that Country. I was careful to only take small amounts from each tree or plant and to spread the collecting out so as not to deplete each place. During this process I learnt to be more observant of different plant species, of Indigenous plants local to Kulin Country and those that may be Indigenous to so called Australia, but not to Kulin Country.

Along the Maribyrnong, close to where I was born in Footscray, my Mother Margie showed me how to collect the sap from the box gum and told me a story I'd not heard before: that her mother, my Nan Rosie, had shown Mum the same thing in her childhood. It is these times we need to reconnect with each other and Country in reciprocity and to find quiet, gentle moments of healing. Mum always says "it's the little things that matter". This observation is humbling considering the gratitude it holds, the refusal to take joy, peace and pleasure for granted in lives that are dominated by trauma, grief and loss. This is quiet resistance and respite from the battles Mum has already had in her youth, physical and emotional, political and personal.

The process of creating bush-dyed cloths includes going for a walk on the river, collecting plant material, preparing the dyeing pot, talking through the process and explaining my PhD project and process, the aim for the exhibition installation, cooking a meal for the collaborators, taking our time to talk through the process, planning out the materials on the cloths after we wet them with water and vinegar, carefully planning the placement of the plant material on the cloths laid out on the kitchen table, the placement of gum leaves and rusty metal objects into the water and onto the fabric, the placement of stringy bark, lilly-pillies, various plants and bush flowers - all carefully considered and placed. Once the materials are placed, cloths are wrapped with gum tree sticks, small branches, string, bound into bundles and placed carefully into the boiling water and bush brew in the pot and left for 1-3 hours.

While they boil, we prepare more cloths, talk, drink tea and coffee, eat food and yarn about culture, family, identity, politics, grief, resistance, life as Black

women, the role of our families, Elders and relatives. These were broad and open conversations, non-judgemental, respectful and confidential.

Once the boiling is done, after we carefully observe the colours seep up the fabric bundles, we decide when to remove them. The longer they sit, they stronger the marks and patterns become. The decision is up to each participant. I give advice, on my experiences of making the cloths myself, but make it clear that the decisions about the cloth belong to the cloth maker. I believe different spirits, of the plants, insects, animals and Ancestors of the place the plant material comes from all emerges into the cloths. A reading process takes place with each cloth, as each one is completely distinct and unique. Even if I tried to replicate a cloth, it will do what it wants to do.

We take them out of the water carefully, with long tongs, and lay them outside on the concrete to cool down and drain the excess water. Once cool enough to touch, they can be unwrapped, and hung on the clothes line to dry. After drying, I iron them with a hot iron, which “sets” the fabric and the images that have emerged.

This is a laborious and involved process. There are very particular steps to each part of the process which I find soothing, the repetition, the attention to detail. It is all meditative and holds all of the attributes of mindfulness practice. Being present is critical to this work, but so is being calm and the work itself brings on a sense of timelessness and presence. The smells from the boiling pot emanate into the air; the eucalyptus oil is cleansing and creates a sense of being in the bush after rain, or fire. It is evocative of the bush and being on Country and it is comforting and gently tiring work. I sleep well after days of eco-dying.

I can facilitate all of the elements for creation, but I can’t control what happens in the pot, or in the water, or in the cloths themselves. I can encourage, I can place, I can nurture, I can observe, I can reflect, but I cannot guarantee the outcome. These are lessons in themselves about the healing process; it is supported by collective knowledge and processes; but ultimately healing is intimately personal even though the context and historical traumas that causes

wounds are political. In waiting, there are also lessons of patience, and of anticipation; there is no way to know exactly how the cloths will turn out; which plants will rise most vividly to the surface of the fabric, which marks will appear, how and where.

Some marks appear as animal, spirit or both; different family members and friends saw different things and shared their ways of seeing with me. It's like looking for the faces in gum trees along the Dungala, Campaspe & Colity (Edwards) Rivers the way my grandmother taught me. To see the Old People and Spirits that live there. These were methods of both cultural and artistic practice; of deep listening to the women and family who walked and gathered with me, deep listening to Country, Ancestors and deep listening to my own reflections and new learnings.

These plant materials – gum leaves, bush flowers, plants and *Old Man Weed*; Wemba-Wemba family bush medicine were gifted to me by my Aunties and delivered to me by Mum during my own healing. I then used these materials to dye white Indian calico, white recycled rags, white second hand bed sheets, white pillow cases, white women's clothing, white baby's singlets, and onesies. This transformation of whiteness into tones, colours and patterns drawn from Country itself is a disruption to historically enforced white garments at Missions, whiteness forced onto the bodies of women and little children. On seeing the babies' clothing drying after being unbound from their steaming bundles, my fifteen-year old son Katen, who has never lived on the Mish at Moonahcullah, but knows it through visiting and memories said, "they're so Mission Mum and so sad." His ability to identify the grief associated with these transformed pieces is a reminder that the imposition of Christianity, and so-called purity was an injustice, a colonial injury we are still healing from. The stains of sexual abuse, violence and subjugation of our women's and children's bodies still wounds.

Having experienced the joy of collaborative workshopping around the Healing Cloth Bush-Dyeing, I wanted to spread this practice more widely. After the exhibition, I facilitated an eco/bush dyeing public workshop in response to the exhibition. I was honoured to have two Moondani Balluk colleagues, Aboriginal

community women, artists in their own right, participate. I had intended to facilitate another workshop, one for Aboriginal Community only, but the conditions caused by the 2019-2020 summer's horrific bushfires limited the opportunity to do this work.

I have been talking about healing for years now and I finally feel closer to it than I have in my life. This process of making, yarning, 'being, knowing and doing,' has been transformational. Not only a healing cultural and arts practice, these processes gave me respite. I needed to be quiet and listen to others, to the bush, to plants, trees, birds, fish, Country itself and boiling water steaming a healing mist and brew into the air.

The family and community work and the new arts practice of bush dyeing cloths underpins the soft ontological space of the first room in the Exhibition. The processes of building a large collection of cloths, a wedding dress and coverage for the Mission house, drew both on matrilineal Wemba-Wemba Country materials and shared practices in my suburban home on Boon Wurrung country.

Bringing the Exhibition together, a long labour and birthing process

The Exhibition was organised to present to people as an immersive experience of what creative Aboriginal women's research, art as research, and practice led research could be, could look like, and could feel like – within and immersed in the research itself. The description of the two galleries of the Exhibition is provided in the next chapter, with some selected photographs. (See Appendix A List of Works: *Unconditional Love Space* and Appendix B List of Works: *Photographic works and studio installation*.) I am grateful to the many hands who helped install the exhibition.

Ghost Weaving the past, the present and the future

In this chapter, the background stories for the creative works have been detailed as part of the memory work needed to decolonise the artistic work and its spatial presentation. The healing work that emerges from the capacity to

express sovereignty does not erase trauma. The body of works created a structure that could hold a self-determined and sovereign space to be immersed in, a space that would allow imagination, memory, embodied experiences, and temporary respite from dominant white colonial narratives.

Ghost Weaving brings together legacy practices in a multi-method art-and-writing, Aboriginal women's research methodology which weave connections across diverse methods, as well as across time. The project is thus able to disrupt old readings of Aboriginality and make intimate connections between the urban and the rural as extended practices of Country.

All stages of the Exhibition and Exegesis writing are held together in a Ghost Weaving, which became a meta-concept for the doctoral project. The Ghost Weaving links together the multiple media and strands of art projects that led to and were curated for the Exhibition and it weaves this work into the specific matrilineal transgenerational stories and practices I have inherited and which I communicate through the combined Exhibition and Exegesis to the wider world. It is also important to emphasise the places and spaces the research and project took place on and with. I say 'with' to honour the living nature personality and philosophy of living Country as a being named as a participant in this project, and woven into every element, including myself.

Having read the stories, research, reflections and descriptions of methods used in making and remaking art works, you are now invited to read about the exhibition's two spaces enfolding this work in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: The Exhibition: Unconditional Love and Matrilineal knowledge work

The Exhibition both embodies and is an outcome of the research process 2015-2019. Art itself is research and creative projects are research. In a range of media, it addresses key questions of how Aboriginal women's art could be curated to voice and disrupt the prevalent 'artistic terra nullius'. By embodying and generating home as a sense of 'unconditional love,' (Bunda 2016), it represents resistance to colonisation and patriarchy as dominant ideologies. It celebrates and platforms Aboriginal women's resistance and humanity, and 'survivance' (Vizenor 2008). As the multiple forms of feedback affirmed, art can be curated to contribute simultaneously to comfort Aboriginal visitors while challenging white visitors.

My choice of the Footscray Community Art Centre was an important and de-colonising decision for me as a place where I would present my PhD final creative works. I needed the work to be in a community-controlled space that was as close to a First Nations determined space that I could find in the city. It had taken over ten years' consistent work, and contributions from various Aboriginal artists and arts workers to FCAC in order for this space to be as culturally safe as possible. White spaces don't just magically de-colonise or become safe for the Mob to work or be in. It takes years of relationship-building and demonstrated action before a space and its staff can be engaged with. Will it ever be possible for us blackfullas to ever actually fully trust a white institution? By "Ghost Weaving" multiple art and cultural practices to conduct the research and community cultural work of the project, I was able to combine historical, cultural survivance practices that respond to the past, present and future.

In this chapter, I introduce the two distinct but related Exhibition spaces I curated, described here for those who were unable to experience them. One was an ontological space: of knowing, being and doing; the other emphasised an epistemological space: the archive, platforming and privileging of Aboriginal

women's knowledge, practices and standpoints as sovereign warrior women and artists. Both spaces worked as siblings; one holding a space of theorised photography, family documentation and theorising of matriarchal experiences of survival, resistance and thriving in the face of colonisation. The two reflected different approaches and outcomes but are read as one work, despite them having visually different environments of their own; in the same way that the exegetical work accompanies the exhibition as a whole work to be read as one.

As you enter the space, the movable wall to the right had the exhibition signage in black vinyl decal: ***Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius: The ways that First Nations women in art & community speak blak to the colony & patriarchy***. To the right of the exhibition signage was the FCAC visitors' comment book on a plinth, along with the exhibition catalogue that I had printed as a small A 4 colour booklet. The comments book is something that FCAC does for all exhibitions, and I appreciated the documentation of visitors, the number of visitors, and their overwhelmingly positive comments for which I am so grateful. It indicated that around 300 people saw the exhibition during its two-week run. The regular numbers to the gallery were down due to the heat wave and horrific bushfires in Victoria and NSW at the time. Bushfire, smoke and ash from burning Gunai Kurnai Country was filling Kulin skies in Footscray and the city and it had an impact on how people engaged in community, wellbeing and work, and of course visiting art centres and galleries.

I did want to gather as much feedback as possible in extending the research process, so in addition to the visitor comments book, I also invited a few people to give me written responses. The other form of response to the exhibition was the bush dyeing workshop which I facilitated for the public in the second week of the exhibition, responding to the ***Unconditional Love Space***. The public workshop was attended by eight people in total, including FCAC staff, members of the public, including two Aboriginal community women, Pauline Whyman, Yorta Yorta woman, and acclaimed actor, filmmaker, writer, director and community arts worker, and Tarsha Davis, a Kuku Yalangi woman, who is an emerging artist and weaver. Tarsha and Pauline also took images of the

workshop. The workshop numbers were reduced by the climate trauma taking place, which also stopped me from running a second workshop exclusively for Aboriginal community women.

The 'Unconditional Love 'Space: Healing cloths, the recreation of 'Home' and mission house under the matriarchal gaze

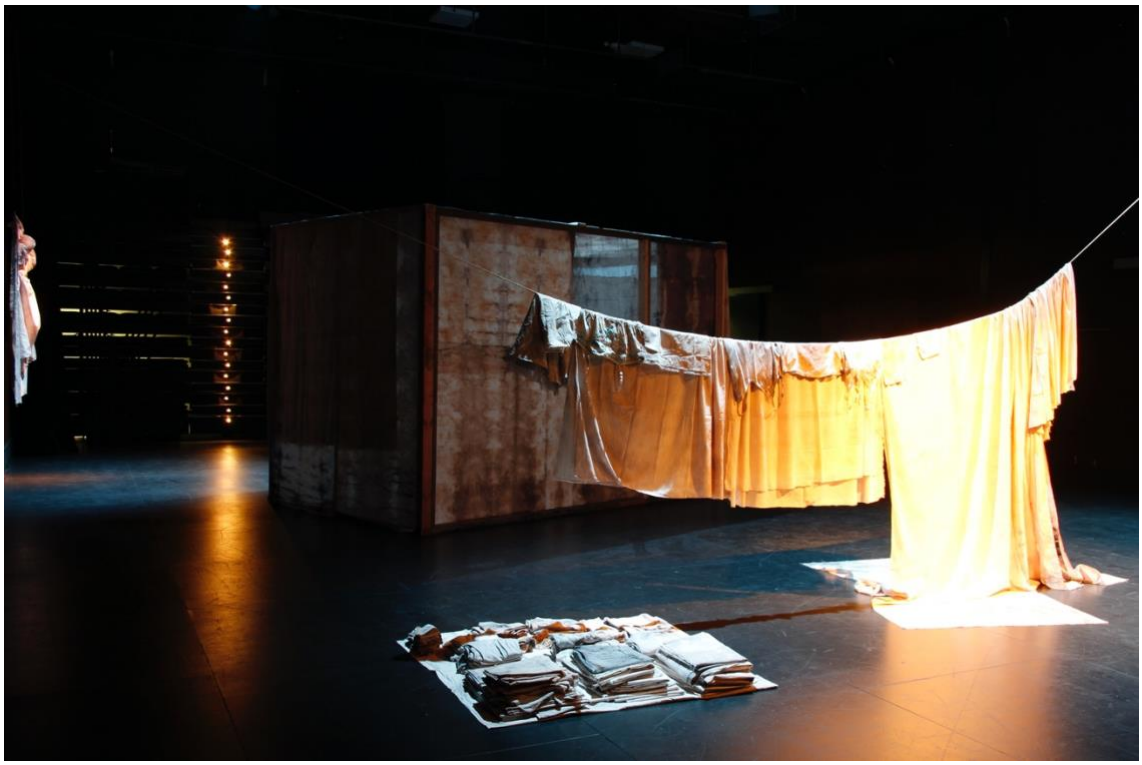


Figure 1. Paola Balla Unconditional Love Space, (2019) Mission House bush dyed Indian calico, recycled timber, gum leaves, voile, interfacing, op-shop bedding, 3m x 3.5 metres by 4.5m *Clothes Line*, op-shop clothing, baby clothing, women's clothing, 10m x 5m x 3m rope. Shown in *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius, the ways that First Nations Women in Art and Community Speak Blak to the Colony and Patriarchy* (2019), FCAC. Image courtesy Anthony Balla (2019).

The '*Unconditional Love Space*' title came from a pre-candidature meeting at Moondani Balluk with Professor Bunda where we discussed my approach to the project and research within the academy. Professor Bunda taught me that, in order to survive as Blackfulla researchers in white universities, and to thrive within our research projects; we "*must find places of unconditional love*." I wrote this on a piece of paper and pinned it to my studio/office wall. I included this

note to self in my studio installation in the Roslyn Smorgan Gallery and its meaning deepened over the period of the project. I've realised that in naming the '*Unconditional Love Space*' I offered, what I've always craved: to be loved unconditionally and to learn how to love others unconditionally amidst colonial caused traumas and inter family and community fractures of violence, sexual abuse and shame. I realised that I as much as I was creating an offering of healing to my people that I was also creating it for my own healing.

The space was created as an immersive installation and when I found out that the Performance Space at FCAC was available, I was so excited. It opened up the development of the concept of 'unconditional love' and allowed me to go bigger and more deeply into the work to fully tell the story in the most immersive way I could. I knew that I would be able to create a theatre set-like work; one that was narrative-driven and immersive in size and scale. The theatre blackness and cavernous size of the Performance Space lent itself to elevating the visual art concepts into an immersive, larger than life installation that played with scale and allowed for emotional resting places, both visual and metaphorical. I have a theoretical approach to curating spaces in which, apart from the gathering, selecting and placement of objects and artworks, that there must be a space for the "eye to rest." A space where there is an apparent "nothing," yet, that space of clarity is a gentle punctuation place where you can contemplate either the totality of the installation or have a breath from particular moments.

Before you enter the space, you encounter a sign on a plinth adjacent to the entry door. This was the only text people would encounter in relation to the space. Hopefully after reading this, people would enter the space via the front door, and would slowly approach the space, as the lighting was very low, I kept the space deliberately dark so that people would slow down their movements and be cautious and deliberate in how they moved in the space. It read:

Before you enter, please know that you are invited to visit this 'place of unconditional love.'

This is a space created out of the artist's own healing processes from trauma & offers respite from ongoing colonial violence, traumas & injuries.

It was created with daily acts of repair & unconditional love & care.

Each healing cloth within has been hand dyed with locally gathered Indigenous plants, bush medicine gifted from the artists Aunties from their matriarchal Wemba-Wemba Country, bush flowers & various eucalyptus leaves. The cloths visualize grief, loss & trauma & hold the potential for healing by offering a space to rest.

The installation is a memory space of Moonahcullah Mission on Wemba-Wemba Country, family & Country & the artist's respect for her matriarchs, in particular her late great-grandmother Nancy Egan (nee Day),Wemba-Wemba matriarch & speaker. Family & community members are advised that her image appears in the featured film footage with Dr Louise Hercus, linguist & co-author of the Wemba-Wemba Language dictionary.

First Nations/Aboriginal/Blak women require respect, respite & care. This space was created out of unconditional love for them.

The 'Unconditional Love' space had four main elements that could be seen as you entered the gallery: Healing Cloths, the recreation of 'Home' mission house, clothes, including piles folded on the floor and the wedding dress hanging on the wall, and the silent super 8 film. Ghost Weaving, with its emphasis on the ghostly and haunting of memory, past traumas and ongoing grief, brought these hauntings to a new space which held memories together with nostalgia and love.

On entering the space, your eyes are drawn to three main creative works, a small Mission House, situated diagonally across the room, facing East (Figure 1 above). To its right hangs a bush-dyed 1970s white satin wedding dress which is pinned to a large bush-dyed cloth hanging by rope behind the Mission House. A ten metre rope is suspended across the space from left to right creating a huge, over-sized clothes line, draped with bush-dyed white calico and bush-

dyed women and children's white clothing, under the line is a large square of bush-dyed white calico that is covered with nine neatly folded piles of freshly ironed bush-dyed women's and children's white clothing and bush-dyed ragged pieces of white linens and laces. Beyond the clothes line, five metres above on the back wall of the space is a projector wall on which is projected a continuous digital loop of an extract of a 1961 Super8 film footage of my Great Grandmother, Nancy, with white linguist, Dr Louise Hercus.

Figure 2. Paola Balla Unconditional Love Space, (2019) Clothes Line, (detail) bush dyed Indian calico, baby clothing, rope. 10m x 5m x 3m. Still, Super 8 Film. Hercus (1961). Shown in *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius, the ways that First Nations Women in Art and Community Speak Blak to the Colony and Patriarchy*, (2019), FCAC. Image courtesy Anthony Balla (2019).

The largest of the three main works is the **Mission House**. At three metres tall, three metres wide and five metres in length, I designed it to be big enough to allow at least three people to be in there at once comfortably. It was also designed specifically for the Performance Space Gallery. I planned the Mission House in size and dimensions using a ladder, measuring tape and floor tape to

walk through how to make it three dimensional. It is a small house frame, constructed from second-hand timber I hand selected carefully. The wooden framed Mission House has walls, an entry and windows that are all completely made of bush-dyed calico, facing (a fabric used in lining clothing), fine curtain sheers, a foam mattress, gum leaves hidden under the foam mattress, a bush-dyed bed sheet), a small foam pillow in a bush-dyed pillow case, while the area under the bed was laid with a bush-dyed cloth to emulate a dirt floor.

Apart from the wooden frame, staples and nails holding the house together (all hidden under fabric), the house and installation was soft, aromatic and all touchable. For the materials of this space, I only use recycled and second hand materials from op shops where possible to avoid contributing to the destruction of Country through land fill and creating more material waste.

The House was designed for people to go inside, spend time, sit, lie on the bed, watch the Super8 film footage through the sheer curtain fabric on the left-hand side, and look out the facing sheer panel to the ghostly hanging wedding dress from the right-hand side. On lying down, or looking up, you can see gaze at “stars” spots of light projected from above through the bush-dyed cloth ceiling, along with the pale, blue moonlight/twilight coloured gels that created a sense of night, dream state, twilight within the Mission House. This created a feeling like you are sleeping in a tent and gazing at the stars beyond. On looking out the left side, you see what appears like soft, orangey pink light spilling onto the clothes line and floor beneath it, creating a sunrise/sunset (birth and death) feeling of time, created from soft gels projected above. I hired a theatre lighting technician to bring the space to life with colour and light. Whilst I had other exhibitions, I had never worked on this scale on my own work and was passionate about presenting this work as an immersive experience. I opted to keep the theatre seating bank closed and, in keeping with darkness and twilight, to keep the soft orange safety lights on, the height of the bank (around 5 metres tall). I loved the soft radiant light they gave; to me they played with bush lights at night – just like the ones I saw with my son in 2015 at Moonacullah one evening, just after dusk.

This performance space as gallery contained around two hundred and forty white cloths that I had dyed using a bush dyeing or eco dyeing practice. The process of transforming white pieces of fabric into beautiful pieces, tells stories in stains, marks and what I believe are spiritual markings. I call the cloths 'Healing Cloths,' as they hold the life of the trees, plant and earth itself they grow in (Figures 2 and 3). These cloths were draped over the rope clothes line strung from one wall at a high point on the left side graduating up to a higher point on the right side and fixed to an existing wall joint using a scissor lift. There are no pegs: the cloths are draped, so their position on the line is tenuous, not fixed. They drape softly, and hang like 'strange fruit,' and include women's nighties and slips, tiny babies' singlets and onesies, and delicate, lacey women's dresses, all stained with bush medicine and bush flowers, gum leaves and rust. The stains make them appear as if they may have just been dug out of shallow graves, or pulled from soft river sand, where they may have been brewing in sun light, river water, clay, mud and blood. The 'Healing Cloths' installation is an attempt to manifest a three-dimensional space that makes visible trauma trails and stains and visualises what respite and healing could look and feel like.

Three of the largest cloths lying over the clothes line touch the floor, and elegantly pool on the floor like fancy house curtains, pooling like water into the black floor and spreading like red gum tree roots into the earth, holding themselves into Country and creating place for all relations, human and non-human. The marks from the trees that the gum leaves and flowers in the bush-dye brew appear in the cloths, emulating the smooth skin of red gums and lemon scented gums, whose wrinkles and folds show us just how related we are to them as non-human relatives. Their skin holds their memories, soft and gentle like an Elder's hand. Some of these cloths are up to ten metres in length, and a metre wide, and one is folded on the floor into a neat square, as a holding place for around sixty pieces of clothing, folded into nine piles of white bush-dyed babies singlets, onesies, women's nighties and tops, table cloths and multiple other cloths.

Figure 3. Paola Balla (2019) Clothes Line, Unconditional Love Space

bush dyed calico with eucalyptus, rust, bush flowers, Old Man Weed, bush-dyed baby clothing, nightgowns, tops, lace, Shown in *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius, the ways that First Nations Women in Art and Community Speak Blak to the Colony and Patriarchy*, (2019), FCAC. Image Paola Balla (2019).

The wedding dress, *Kalina Moonahcullah, 2019*, bush-dyed, marked and stained like a Black Miss Havisham, in perpetual waiting for her love, hangs suspended about two metres above the ground (Figure 4). Her arms are held stiff by pins that hold her onto a two by two metre square piece of bush-dyed calico with lines of black rusted iron marks like scars that create page lines for the wedding dresses stories to be read on. The cloth is held stiff as I hid within it a one metre piece of bamboo like a women's digging and fighting stick. I tucked the bamboo into the top of the cloth, tightly into the knots I tied in the top right and left corners of the cloth. The bottom of the cloth was left to hang. This tension creates a stiffness that makes the cloth and the dress move as one when a breeze touches them, or if someone walks closely past. She is lit lightly from above, so as to 'float' against the dark wood panelled walls. Each corner knot has old rope tied to it, to hang the dress and cloth like a flag against the wall. This work signifies the imposition of western women's clothing on Black women's bodies and cultural practices.

Figure 4. Paola Balla, Kalina Moonahcullah, (2019) (detail) 1970s Kyabram op-shop wedding gown, bush dyed with eucalyptus, rust, tea tree, bush flowers, mould, with bush dyed calico cloth. Shown in *Unconditional Love Space, Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius, the ways that First Nations Women in Art and Community Speak Blak to the Colony and Patriarchy*, (2019), FCAC. Image Paola Balla (2019).

It is a visualisation of the patriarchy and gendered marriage roles, distinct from Aboriginal relationship practices, and acts to disrupt the notion of white as purity in the Christian wedding gown.

Flickering soft, coloured light spills from the continuous digital loop of the **1961 Super8 film footage of Grandmother Nancy** projected high onto the wall

behind the Mission House (Figure 5). It is the only visual literal representation of people, and the 1961 footage adds to the sense of nostalgia and time travelling within the space. In it, we see Nanny Nancy and Dr Hercus setting up a little camp site, with Mrs Hercus' little car, camping paraphernalia and a white canvas tent. In this scene, my great grandmother flicks and folds a white cloth, perhaps a table cloth, while smiling and chatting, resonating with the healing cloths in this space I have (re)created in connection with her.

The Healing Cloths installation, '*Place of unconditional love,'* was created specifically for the Performance Space at FCAC over the six months prior to the Exhibition through 'daily acts of repair' in sharing and collaborating with other Aboriginal women and family members in a new process of eco dyeing fabrics, clothing and rags to become 'healing cloths'. Healing is often an elusive and difficult process; it lacks a visual guide. Creating this space is a way to grapple with and try to resolve this process in an embodied, immersive experience.

Figure 5. Paola Balla (2019), Still from Super8 film footage, Hercus (1961), view from inside the bush dyed cloth Mission House

Unconditional Love Space. Shown in *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius, the ways that First Nations Women in Art and Community Speak Blak to the Colony and Patriarchy*, (2019), FCAC. Image Paola Balla (2019).

The Epistemological space: Refusing exclusion: representing Blak Women's knowledges

The epistemological space was installed in the Roslyn Smorgan Gallery, situated at the northern end of the FCAC's main building, a former warehouse that was refurbished to expand the centre and to create a large gallery. As you enter the main doors, to the centre of the building, Roslyn Smorgan Gallery is on the left.

As the Roslyn Smorgan Gallery is completely open, with no wall to the foyer area, I used the gallery's large movable walls to create a more enclosed, intimate gallery space. I curated it to operate as a "traditional" gallery space by placing two movable walls at the end, offering a more an immersive experience of the works. I allowed a gap of around three metres between the movable walls to create an entry to the exhibition and a sight-line through the centre of the gallery to the eastern wall with a central floor-to-ceiling window that allows natural light and a view. I did not curate this space to direct visitors to move in any particular direction around the works, but allowed each work, or set of works, to draw visitors to move around the gallery to look at and read works as they were drawn.

The moveable walls also served to give additional hanging space for the *Mok Mok* photographic works and for two in particular, on the left-hand side of the gallery looking east toward the city. I chose to have the white opaque window shade drawn to complete the enclosed gallery space – the 'white cube' – to paraphrase Moreton-Robinson's *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* seminal text (2000), subverting the dominant whiteness of gallery spaces. I also chose to hang the photographs at a lower height than the regulation 1500m, down to 1300mm to make the works more accessible, and to allow children to view the works more easily. FCAC is fully accessible and I wanted to honour that by not creating an able-centric exhibition.

The Epistemological space was one of active engagement with photography, installation, and text. This space draws on Blak humour, familial knowledge,

family photographic collections and the culture of story-telling. It also acknowledges the power and influence of Aboriginal literature, Aboriginal women's herstories and Aboriginal art. In contrast to the *Unconditional Love Space*, which was curated to have no text, literature or written components and no labels on the works (except for the external entry signage) the epistemic space included labels, text, literature references and labels on the works.

On entering the epistemic space, you see four distinct bodies of work within the gallery. The first is **the *Mok Mok*** photographic series in the left-hand corner and along the eastern wall when reading the gallery from left to right. All of the works are related and speak to one another. The second body of work is made up of works in particular dialogue with each other. **'*…and the matriarchs sang*'** is a 13-panel work of photographic images and charcoal text, collaged over a blend of housepaint and bark which was installed alongside the northern end corner. It links to the large portrait, ***Margie the Matriarch*** *(2018)* and the dress installation, ***born into sovereignty, live in sovereignty.*** The final piece in this collection, speaking to the Matriarchal line and the historical record, is my grandmother's poem, ***Childhood Memories.*** The third body of work is the **studio/office wall recreation** which served to represent both my conceptual and exhibition developmental space including a **studio wall collage** and a **bibliography table** of colour photocopied references and book and publication covers. The fourth body of work, ***Lovescapes*; *Wemba-Wemba Country***, was the largest work in the space, encompassing photography in two different forms: copies of family and archival photographic images on translucent acetate paper, loaned from my mother's albums and from family collections, and an i-phone photograph I took on Wemba-Wemba Country printed on a large scale onto eco wall paper.

1. Mok Mok

The *Mok Mok* series could be read in any order but was hung to read it in the most linear way with the *Mok Mok Cooking Show I*, and *Mok Mok Cooking Show II* where she is posing as a domestic goddess cook in her suburban kitchen preparing to eat the chocolate cake by sliding a bone handled butter

knife across her tongue, licking the chocolate icing whilst glaring into the camera lens, to the *Mok Mok Eats Chocolate Cake* work where she is smashing cake into her mouth, letting the crumbs and icing fall where it will. These were followed by *Washing Day Sis, Graduation Day, I Woke Up Like Dis, and Mok Mok The Matriarch.*

Figure 6. Paola Balla (2016), Mok Mok Cooking Show I

from the *Mok Mok* series. Digital pigment print on 188 gsm photo rag 710 x 960 mm. Shown in *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius, the ways that First Nations Women in Art and Community Speak Blak to the Colony and Patriarchy*, (2019), FCAC. Image Paola Balla (2019).

2. Family … And the matriarchs sang

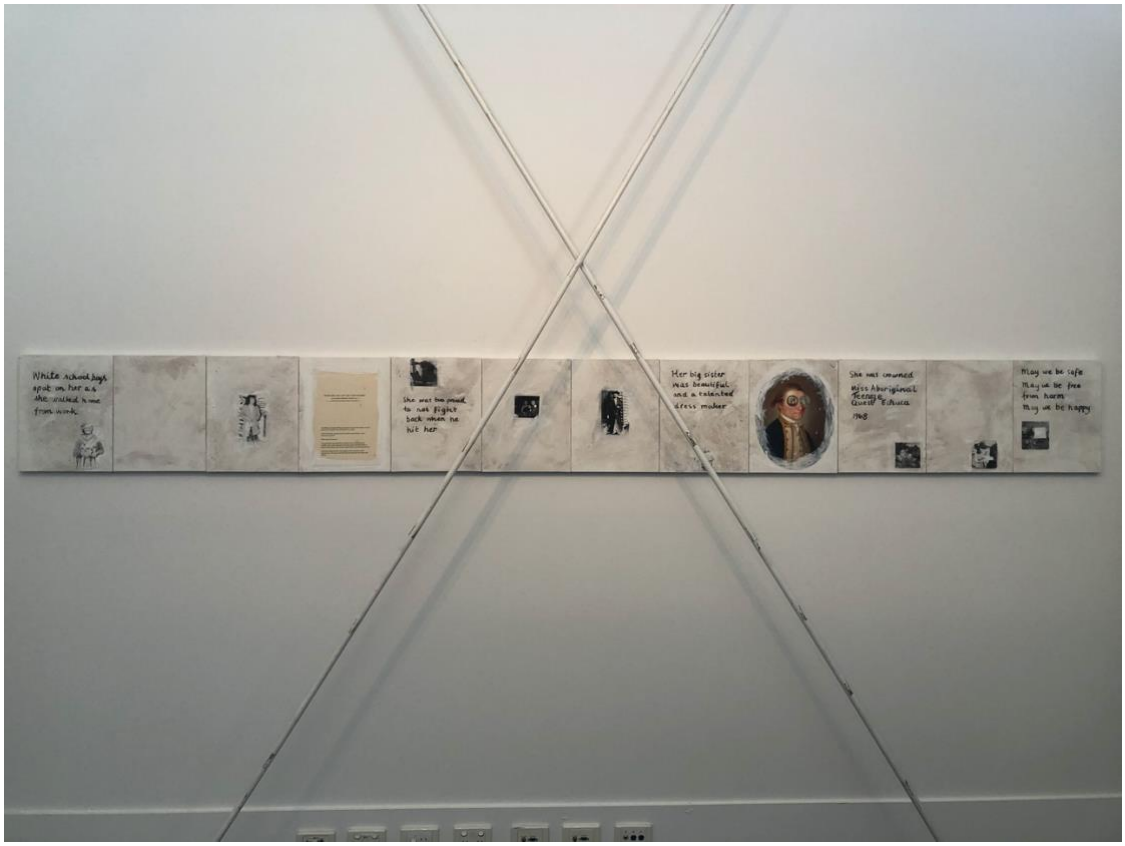


Figure 7. Paola Balla (2015), and the matriarchs sang Ecoboard, house paint, dirt, ground bark, charcoal, paper, pages from 1930s art history book, 2001mm x 800m x 40mm. Shown in *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius, the ways that First Nations Women in Art and Community Speak Blak to the Colony and Patriarchy*, (2019), FCAC. Image Paola Balla (2019).

This work continues the photographic work of the Mok Mok series. It features photocopies of my matriarchs collaged onto hand painted boards, rubbed with bark and dirt from Country at St Albans where I was doing an artist residency at the start of my research. There are 13 panels and they can be read or seen as pages from a book. Each panel features either hand written text in charcoal, or a photocopy, working like illustrations. There is also a page ripped from a 1930s art history book that I wrote new text for and typed over the original page.

Speaking to this history is the large gold framed portrait of *Margie the Matriarch*, featuring my mother, Margie, daughter Rosie and niece Maggie ((Figure 8). This

portrait was way to honour my mother, her role in our family as a matriarch. Honouring my mother in photography way is also a way of honouring our past photography and in documenting our family life on Yorta Yorta Country in the small town of Kyabram.

Figure 8. Paola Balla (2018), Margie the Matriarch

digital pigment print on 188gsm photo rag 1240 x 910 mm. Shown in *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius, the ways that First Nations Women in Art and Community Speak Blak to the Colony and Patriarchy*, (2019), FCAC. Image Paola Balla (2019).

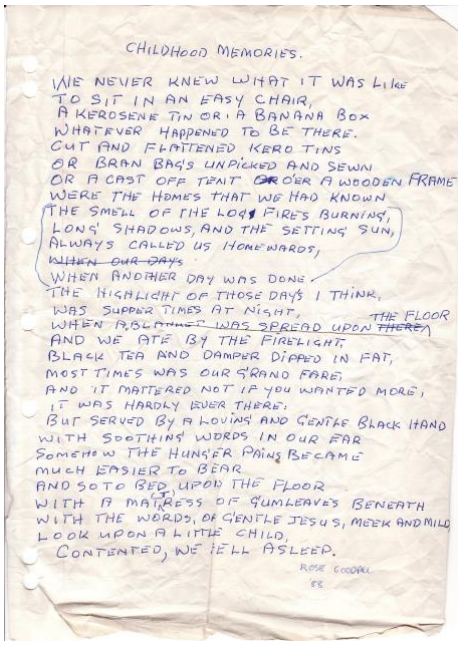
Adjacent to this is the installation ***born into sovereignty, live in sovereignty.*** This is a 1950s green, floral motif house dress adorned with around fifty native bird feathers, which I hand sewed into the hem, collar, arm bands and waist band) at the width end of the wall. This work is seen in multiple places and ways within the exhibition, as I had worn this dress in a performance that I did on the banks of the Maribyrnong River for a 2014 solo show at FCAC, this time in the

Gabrielle Gallery. (One photograph from that show, by my husband, Anthony Balla, also appears in the *Lovescapes* installation.) This piece had been awarded the *Three Dimensional* Award at the 2015 Victorian Indigenous Art Awards. The dress appears here in its own right, as an installation, a flowered and feathered cloak that offered me both vulnerability and protection as a women's cultural garment.

Figure 9, Paola Balla, 2014, Born in Sovereignty, Live in Sovereignty

Image: Courtesy Art Gallery of Ballarat, used with permission.

Completing this body of work is the handwritten poem, *Childhood Memories*, by my grandmother, Rosie Tang, enlarged and printed on foam block mount which was installed on one side of one of the moveable walls, also holding the dress installation. I feature my Nan Rosie's poem to show my respect, love, and reverence for her life, which ended when she was in her early 60s in 1993. Nan's poem speaks of the traumas of colonisation. It speaks of the starvation and the hunger pains' that she, like so many of our Elders, endured.



CHILDHOOD MEMORIES.

WE NEVER KNEW WHAT IT WAS LIKE
TO SIT IN AN EASY CHAIR,
A KEROSENE TIN OR A BANANA BOX
WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BE THERE.
CUT AND FLATTENED KERO TINS
OR BRAN BAG'S UNPICKED AND SEWN
OR A CAST OFF TENT ~~OR~~ O'ER A WOODEN FRAME
WERE THE HOMES THAT WE HAD KNOWN
THE SMELL OF THE LOG FIRES BURNING,
LONG SHADOWS, AND THE SETTING SUN,
ALWAYS CALLED US HOMEWARDS,
~~WHEN OUR DAYS~~
WHEN ANOTHER DAY WAS DONE.
THE HIGHLIGHT OF THOSE DAYS I THINK,
WAS SUPPER TIMES AT NIGHT,
WHEN A BLANKET WAS SPREAD UPON ~~THERE~~ THE FLOOR
AND WE ATE BY THE FIRELIGHT,
BLACK TEA AND DAMPER DIPPED IN FAT,
MOST TIMES WAS OUR GRAND FARE,
AND IT MATTERED NOT IF YOU WANTED MORE,
IT WAS HARDLY EVER THERE.
BUT SERVED BY A LOVING AND GENTLE BLACK HAND
WITH SOOTHING WORDS IN OUR EAR
SOMEHOW THE HUNGER PAINS BECAME
MUCH EASIER TO BEAR
AND SO TO BED UPON THE FLOOR
WITH A MATTRESS OF GUMLEAVES BENEATH
WITH THE WORDS, OF GENTLE JESUS, MEEK AND MILD
LOOK UPON A LITTLE CHILD,
CONTENTED, WE FELL ASLEEP.

ROSE GOODALL
88

Figure 10 Childhood Memories, Rosie Tang, nee Egan, (1988)

original hand written poem digital pigment print on foam mountboard, 800mm x 507mm. Shown in *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius, the ways that First Nations Women in Art and Community Speak Blak to the Colony and Patriarchy*, (2019), FCAC. Image Paola Balla (2019).

3. The studio/office

Figure 11. Paola Balla, Studio Wall Collage (2019)

studio ephemera, test prints, PhD Coursework ethics poster, feathers, lace, paper flowers, photographs, notes, Victorian Aboriginal Languages Map. Shown in *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius, the ways that First Nations Women in Art and Community Speak Blak to the Colony and Patriarchy*, (2019), FCAC. Image Paola Balla (2019).

The studio space was explicitly situated in the field set before me by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and collectives, and, particularly Blak women, through their writing, catalogues, and artistic work. Some of this is from my visual arts “literature” review, some of which now appears elsewhere in this Exegesis.

I recreated this space by installing a collage of my office posters, research materials, personal and family photographs, a Victorian Aboriginal language map-adorned with a selection of paper flowers I created throughout the research period. I drew them in pencil and then cut them to replicate life size flowers (around ten centimetres in diameter) and painted them with water

colour. I used them to create family Country punctuation points and of matriarchal places on the **studio wall collage** (Figure 10), including native bird feathers, hand bush dyed lace, my ethics poster (made as a creative work in itself) and reference to my research processes.

In the window space I placed two large kitchen tables end to end (on loan from FCAC) and draped a bush dyed table cloth over the centre of the tables, not to cover the entire length, but to act as an anchor point, a grounding space, for the bibliography table. This cloth, one of the first I dyed, was one of only two dyed pieces outside of the *Unconditional Love Space*: it hinted at the relationship between both bodies of work. On it I placed photocopied coloured covers of text and literary references.

In the corner of the studio/office space I placed more paper flowers and a few personal items, a 1980s photo album that I had used as my eldest child's first baby album. Sadly, this album was water damaged in the early 2000s in the many house moves and temporary spaces I had stored things, so the precious first and only copies of my baby girl's photos were left as watery abstract half landscapes within the photos themselves, I also placed a drawing journal from when I was twenty-one, a new mother to my little baby girl. I propped open the book to a sketch of her, relaying the difference between drawn impressions and photos as an amalgamation of memory.

On the small bookshelf, loaned from another space within FCAC, I placed my developmental journal for the works and exhibitions, where I took notes from meetings with my co-supervisor, or to remember thoughts of concepts or ideas. I also placed some textbooks relevant to my research, Helio Oiticica's catalogue from *Delirium*, and a copy of an English 1800s journal of drawings about the colony, including depictions of Aboriginal Peoples from different nations.

The ethics poster from my PhD presentation was comprised of a *Mok Mok* photograph, *I Woke Up Like Dis*, printed on photographic rag paper. During the PhD coursework we were informed we would be required to create an ethics poster for a mini conference, and explain our research methodologies, key

theories and motivations for the project. I was inspired to make a hand drawn poster for a creative thesis, knowing that graphic-design posters were not for me. The ethics poster was a collage of text, images and citations pasted on top of the 750mm x 900mm photographic print ; I felt it really captured the emotive, cultural and theoretical approach I was taking to my project and one that visualised my standpoint and early readings of Aboriginal feminist theory by Prof Aileen Moreton-Robinson. It included lines of poetry by Black poet, Warsan Shire (2012), who featured in Beyoncé's phenomenal *Lemonade* album which had just been released, fortifying me whilst grappling with early stages of the PhD work.

The poster included images of our Wemba-Wemba Old People and relatives from Moonahcullah Mission, to cite our place as central to my standpoint, responsibility and respect to our Homelands and People. I made a collage of copies of myself, mother, grandmother, great grandmother and great-great grandmother. Cascading down the left-hand side of my face and the poster, next to each matriarch, I placed lines of text from Warsan Shire (2012), about the magic that grandmothers hand spin: gold from nothing, goodness and nourishment from impoverishment.

4. Lovescapes, Wemba-Wemba Country, 2017

To the right of the table and studio space, on the South wall of the gallery I hung the largest work in the gallery, *Lovescapes, Wemba-Wemba Country* (2017).

Figure 12. Paola Balla, Lovescapes: Wemba-Wemba Country (2017) eco wallpaper, 5m x 1.5m acetate film, 5m x 3m. iphone image of Wemba-Wemba Country with archival & family images of matriarchs, L-R Papa Mariah Day, Nanny Nancy Egan nee Day, Rosie Tang nee Egan, Margie Tang, Paola Balla, Rosie Pepeny Kalina. Shown in *Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius, the ways that First Nations Women in Art and Community Speak Blak to the Colony and Patriarchy*, (2019), FCAC. Image Paola Balla (2019).

The Lovescapes work can be read from any angle and invites the visitor not only to look at the translucent photographic images of my matriarchs, but also to look through them into the Wemba-Wemba Country behind them, thereby demonstrating the relation between my matriarchs, myself and my daughter and with Country. That relationality (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) is a lived experience represented here in the genealogical use of photography responding to Country.

Lovescapes, Wemba-Wemba Country, 2017, begins with a 5m wide and 3m high work which includes a 5m wide and 1.5m high eco wallpaper that I had printed from an i-phone photograph I took of Wemba-Wemba Country,

specifically at Tumudgeri Creek. Set up in relation to this large print of Country are archival and family photographs printed onto 3m high x 800mm wide translucent acetate photographic sheets. The images from left to right are of my matriarchs, my great-great grandmother, Papa Mariah Day, great grandmother, Nanny Nancy Egan, née Day, my grandmother Rosie Tang, my mother, Margie Tang, myself and my daughter, Rosie Pepeny Kalina. I had originally intended for this work to be on translucent fabric which was hard to source. I researched and found acetate photographic film to be a good alternative.

I wanted to have the images installed so that the matriarchs would be in a matrilineal line, with the eye level of each woman at the same height, so that you could read our eyes in each other's. It proved really complicated to install this idea as I intended, placing the acetate films on a 45-degree angle, to create a triangular space between the films and the wallpaper, a space to walk or be between my matriarchs and our Country. This allowed the acetate film images to be viewed from multiple angles and gave the work an additional immersive element.

As the image stopped 30mm short of the top of the translucent film, it meant that I needed to line the top of the images exactly with the next, and it also had to match exactly the top of the wall paper image of Country, against which it was angled. The i-phone image of gum trees on the creek was flipped to mirror themselves, creating bush and tree like spires and mirror images that were fascinating to look into.

Reflecting/exhibiting

The Unconditional Love Space grew out of the longer-term photographic practice, resulting in the epistemological space of photography, documentation and active research with family, the archive and the theorised field of Aboriginal women's work. The epistemic space was a replication of my conceptual and thinking space – my working space from a critical place of interpretation and documentation, while the Unconditional Love Space was about my internal processes of going deep within my embodied memories of place, Country, lived

experiences of surviving and thriving in the face of colonisation. For the *Unconditional Love Space*, I reflected on the healing processes of my own trauma within intergenerational traumas and repressions.

I thus worked as curator to provide an exhibition space that would challenge the settler and provide comfort to Aboriginal People – and perhaps to other peoples who have experience trauma and displacement. As a temporary exhibition, however, it underscored that healing can only be temporary while transgenerational historical traumas and injuries continue.

The emotional and psychological curatorial intention has been to create a temporal place of respite, contemplation and listening as an unconditional love space that we all crave: the unconditional love of Black women, the unconditional love of Aboriginal culture. It is also a space for deep listening; in Wemba-Wemba language, an active deep listening is *nyernila* – which translates to mean sit, listen, and learn. This space replicates the sense of home of our Wemba-Wemba homelands and Moonahcullah Mission, where my Old People come from and where I spent significant time camping with family as a child.

The Epistemological space was a more explicit representation of Aboriginal women's knowledges, passed down and re-made, their legacies of practice, of art, of making – and Speaking Blak to the 'white cube' of the dominant 'artistic Terra Nullius'. The presence of both spaces asserts Matriarchal Sovereignty, both 'born into' and reclaimed through multiple actions, including researchful artistic creation.

Chapter 4: Speaking Back and Speaking Blak

The invisibility, erasure and disrespect for the work of Aboriginal women's work, art and activism is a focus of significant struggle that is necessary in the white arts world, in academia, and in broader society. These politics cannot be avoided. Moreton-Robinson, following in the footsteps of many Blak women writers and artists, points out the demand for Indigenous activists and researchers:

> *that indigenous work has to 'talk back to' or 'talk up to' power. There are no neutral spaces for the kind of work required to ensure that traditional indigenous knowledge flourishes; that is remains connected intimately to indigenous people as a way of thinking, knowing and being; that it is sustained and actually grows over future generations (Moreton-Robinson 2007).*

The relationship between activism, research and art must be clearly stated. The historical legacies of previous sovereign warriors in art, community and literature must be acknowledged and placed within one's work as a reference and foundational touchstone for ensuring that the work of others gone before us is not forgotten, neglected or dismissed as irrelevant, not current, or 'sexy.'

This project responds to community, the academy and the art world by breaking silences and honouring the stories previously made invisible. As an Aboriginal matriarchal sovereign woman, I speak back and Blak (Deacon 1988) to the violence, trauma and silencing brought by colonisation and ongoing structural trauma that I encounter in daily life, the academy and public spaces. My work and the work that informs it are described as matriarchal and imbued with Aboriginal women's authority, that of the Sovereign Warrior Woman named by Bunda (2016). A descendant of basket weavers, and emu feather wearing women who are guided by birds as totemic, spiritual and physical guides, my matriarchs are also poets, writers, painters, photographers and activists. Papa Mariah Day, my great-great grandmother undertook a 1500-kilometre round trip alone to represent our family, and our Wemba-Wemba People to attend the first Day of Mourning in Sydney, January 26th 1936, in protest at the loss of lives of

Aboriginal Peoples in the invasion and colonisation of Australia. The early landscape paintings of my grandmother Rosie were instrumental in teaching me how to ‘see’ Country.

Remembering and re-making are acts of disruption of artistic terra nullius. Whilst disruption can be an action of the moment, requiring acts that alert others, a calling out, a naming and sometime shaming of erasure and deliberate exclusion, it is almost always done with our Old Peoples in mind, their sacrifices, and to honour our Ancestors and the suffering of our families and communities. My research project was in part a disinterring of memories, of personal, family and community stories, many of which spoke of trauma. The project thus became in part a journey of articulation of my own healing from trans generational trauma derived from white and settler colonial injuries.

Breaking silences is a powerful practice in healing transgenerational and colonial wounds. Shame is so embedded into our lives that the word shame has enormous cultural and intellectual power in the Aboriginal vernacular. To be shame, to cause shame, to act shame, to feel shame, to be a shame job! To shame someone up, to be too shame to do something. It’s funny, it’s Black, and has no equivalent in white Australian English-which is inadequate for understanding this concept.

Art is not only working to refuse shame and heal from the past but about creating prospective futures. Working on art built my ‘Standpoint’ as part of a Wemba-Wemba matriarchy and contributes to the ongoing reclamation of Wemba-Wemba language and culture. We work together to maintain boundaries: the very word Wemba-Wemba means ‘No,’ and ‘Wemba-Wemba’ means, ‘no, certainly not.’ We say “No, certainly not” to ongoing colonisation, violence and patriarchy by asserting our sovereignty, by talking back to our enforced erasure in public stories and by telling other stories instead, in multiple media.

Reasserting curation and criticism

Curating is an act of care. For First Nations' works, deep attention needs to be paid to curating for Country and stories of Country, and all that comes with it, including trauma stories. Art that addressed previously silenced stories is a gift to community and can be a way of writing back into academia and the arts world, making new spaces and opportunities for reciprocity and healing. In curating other Aboriginal Peoples' work, and my own, I care for and facilitate a process to place and protect that work in a context that is ethical, responsible and respectful. An exhibition and academic writing provide a different experience for community members, and a different one again for the academy, the art world and for readers of this exegesis as a public work.

However, curating in colony Australia is not oriented to such work. Despite museums and galleries having major and significant collections of Aboriginal art, artefacts and stories, the curators of these collections and managers of galleries are almost all white, or non-Aboriginal people, an appalling situation (Eshraghi 2015). Despite calls for Indigenous communities and collaborative projects, these projects and exhibitions usually have one off or limited time spans which often leave community members proud of their achievement but suspicious of further engagement without permanent appointments, structural changes and shifts away from white and anthropological representations of Indigenous narrative, histories, lives and lived experiences.

This is not only a local problem. The Persian and Samoan academic and curator, Leuli Eshraghi has undertaken a global survey of Indigenous Curatorial positions and argues that, when these positions are held by non-Indigenous people, Indigenous people's autonomy and authorship will always be managed and controlled by non-Indigenous agendas. For example, the Senior Curator of Indigenous art at the NGV is a white woman. Further, Melbourne Museum's only Senior Indigenous curator, Yorta Yorta woman, Kimberly Moulton states that 'the number of Indigenous people in leadership roles within the industry is completely inadequate and this leads to what is often absent – our voice'. The lack of Indigenous curators at the Koorie Heritage Trust and NGV is in fact

symptomatic of a ‘societal dispossession’, not just an artistic one (Eshraghi 2016).

“Aboriginal art” has been kept, and to some extent still does get kept separate from the Western Canon and contemporary art. It is still spoken about in binary terms, as either “traditional,” or “urban”, i.e. as “authentic” or not Aboriginal enough. Bell argues the advent of Aboriginal art is a ‘white thing’ (Bell 2002), accompanied by exploitation of “traditional” artists. We don’t see ourselves in major collections, or contemporary art or “Australian” art collections because we are categorised in the Aboriginal or Indigenous gallery. There are a few exceptions, including Tracey Moffatt, whose work is held in the “Australian” collections. Do these galleries function as contemporary equivalents of last century’s Aboriginal dioramas where we are frozen in time, the same way that mid-20th century ashtrays and 2020s stilted Aboriginal kitsch objects, still produced and found in tourist shops, maintain representations of us?

Activists find it necessary to make visible our resistance to being described and controlled by white Australia and its storytelling, as Alexis Wright points out:

> *we were not in charge of the national story about Aboriginal people when other people needed to create the narratives for the diorama in which we should exist, of how we should be visible in the eyes of Australia’ (Wright 2016, 8-9).*

Visual and performative arts have important roles to play here for constructing and reclaiming our story. Subversion is necessary to assert a visual sovereignty within art. Play is important, imagination is central to ‘the meticulous struggle to be…This is the weight that infiltrates everything we try to do, the burden in all creativity, the handicap in vision’ (Wright 2016, 9).

Most contemporary art texts focus on the work of Aboriginal men, though renowned Aboriginal women painters – often relegated to being either traditional ‘bush or desert’ painters such as Sally Gabori and Emily Kame Kngwarreye – are compared to ‘less authentic’ Aboriginal so-called urban artists, such as Tracey Moffat and Brenda L Croft, whose works are understood as being in response to Aboriginality as opposed to ‘being Aboriginal.’ And

urban Indigenous identity is questioned, critiqued and dissected as opportunistic, inauthentic, or not really black. Aboriginality becomes tied to a male, nameless body in the colonial project in Australia; colonial narratives, notes Moreton-Robinson (2016) tell the story of a male or genderless pan Aboriginality that establishes an erasure of Aboriginal women's presence, contributions and humanity.

The white art canon continues to struggle to describe or critique Black art in uncolonized ways, such that some Aboriginal artists and First Nations artists reject and even uninvite white reviews and criticisms. For example, Queer 2 Spirit Ojibwe/South Asian performer, playwright and poet, Yolanda Bonnell, requested 'that only Indigenous, Black, people of colour (IBPOC) review the show' in her online piece *Why I'm Asking White Critics Not to Review My Show*, (Bonnell 2020). This demonstrates that making Blak art for Black communities is not the same as making art for white or non-Aboriginal audiences.

The marginalisation of Aboriginal curators and the challenges they face in working in what essentially remain white galleries and museum institutions means there has been little opportunity for ensuring appropriate cultural protocols, especially in recognising community. The Aboriginal woman curator and critic is often ignored, particularly whilst she does not hold senior roles. While the *Who's Afraid of Colour* Aboriginal women's exhibition at the NGV was 'long overdue.' (Delaney 2017) it was still curated from a white perspective and lacked community collaboration and engagement with local Aboriginal women.

However, critical dialogue of Aboriginal women's arts writing is found in Indigenous women's blogs, social media platforms and emerging opportunities through independent media such as *The Lifted Brow* and select art publications. Aboriginal women writers, Eugenia Flynn, (Flynn 2016), and Kimberley Moulton (in Balla & Delany 2016) contributed critical texts in response to the *Sovereignty* exhibition in reviews and essays for *Art+Australia* magazine. Writing on treaty, black feminism and violence against Aboriginal women, particularly in academia and social media platforms, Dr Chelsea Bond, Amy McGuire, Nayuka Gorrie

and Celeste Liddle (Liddle 2016) have made critical contributions to community and public debate.

By moving on from curating in the Mission Manager's house (i.e. white institutions, galleries and museums), First Nations artists and curators attempt to de-centre whiteness, and work toward de-colonising or in de-colonising ways. Such collective work helps build a community and communities who support one another, through projects and exhibition building, to create a cumulative public set of knowledges and pedagogies, so they can see and walk through their stories, hear the unheard in the field of art whilst disrupting its whiteness.

Speaking Back to the university

Breaking silences speaks back and Blak not only to the art world, but to universities themselves. There are necessary questions about our participation and ongoing contributions in tertiary institutions, which are colonial sites of power, built on our lands, using our resources, intellectual property, human remains and belongings. University requirements for research degrees tend to look to assimilate Black ways of working by Black thinkers, scholars, artists and creators, including creative PhD projects and research.

Our disruptions are ongoing and required within the academy; we are required to apply for ethics approval to talk with our own Mob, our own families, our own communities, within University protocols which don't actually respect or know our protocols. It is galling to be required to follow institutional ethics procedures, as our category of ethics is deemed "high risk." I believe the risk is to us as Indigenous Peoples, in dealing with white peoples, settlers and those newly identifying as Indigenous, who perpetuate reconciliation agendas, assimilation and capitalism. Yet, in order to progress through the system as post graduates, we have to comply with existing policies and procedures.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 99) argues that the 'mix of science, cultural arrogance and political power continues to present a serious threat to Indigenous peoples'. She lists a number of ways in which research continues to colonise, including patenting DNA/cell lines and commodifying Indigenous

spirituality and cultural knowledge, including art (1999, 100-103). University research and ethics processes themselves must be decolonised and Indigenised to respect distinct and diverse Indigenous ethical systems of knowledges specific to communities and the country of that community (including its history of resistance and cultural practices. Universities need to pay attention to Indigenous ethics and collaborative and communal ways of working, which rely on history and re-creation, accountability and collaborative processes that embody our sovereignty.

Being a PhD candidate positions you differently. Us Blackfullas are not seen in the academy or valued. It is a white man and woman's world, where we are always in a position of contestation. It is hard work to maintain a sovereign and self-determined position that is true to family and community goals of community controlled and self-determined community work and engagement, rather than to the goals of the academy and its white middle-class agenda of "success". Sometimes known in Aboriginal vernacular as Blackademics, we are politicised whether or not we like it: the personal and the political merge.

The need for continuing matriarchal art and activist traditions

Moreton-Robinson lays out the contemporary history of Aboriginal women activists and their pivotal roles in the resistance of and assertion of Aboriginal rights. The articulation of Aboriginal women's rights within this is in stark contrast to the aims of white feminism which, she insists, is largely individualistic, aligned with ensuring white women's equality with white men, while Aboriginal women's activism was and remains concerned with the collective wellbeing of their people. She points out that

> *as knowing subjects, middle class white feminists and Indigenous women speak from different cultural standpoints, histories and material conditions. These differences separate our politics and our analyses. Indigenous women do not want to be white women; we want to be Indigenous women who exercise and maintain our cultural integrity in our struggle for self-determination as Indigenous people.' (Moreton-Robinson 2000, 151).*

Art is a risky process for Blak women who manifest and materialise intimate thoughts, ideas, memories and Blak concepts that make others, including white women, uncomfortable. Responses to my work, and that of other tidda artists, has shown that many white women are unaware of the depths of our pain and trauma, and of their own complicity in its continuation. Our work confronts and speaks back and Blak to them, redressing the widespread gaslighting of Aboriginal women who name these injuries by writing and making art in response to them. It is foregrounded by speaking Blak and creating a new space, a different world in which to break silences and continue healing which needs to be regularly revised and renegotiated as traumas continue to surface and erupt.

By participating in culture, we maintain culture and resist colonisation. The embodied memories of little mission house life, for example, live within my memories from matriarchal stories. And, '[i]n the telling of our stories, in the speaking of the words, decolonisation commences' (Phillips & Bunda 2018, 107). I am speaking to and with my family and community in this project and speaking back to the academy and the art world about the significance of Blak women's lives, stories and contributions. In making my own work, I had to reflect on what was mine to tell, what part of these stories were ethical to repeat and place in public. This work is about the ethics of story, knowledge and what is and isn't included in art making and how as a curator, I care for this work. What I tell is to honour past generations, share knowledge with current generations, and pass on knowledge to future generations.

The creative work found in Aboriginal women's biography and autobiographical work (Ginibi Langford, 1988; Tucker 1977) situates my own work by placing herstory as significant to the understanding of Aboriginal women's resistance, expressions of identity, country and community. Moreton Robinson (2000, 1) notes that 'the landscape is disrupted by the emergence of the life writings of Indigenous women whose subjectivities and experiences of colonial processes are evident in their texts.'

Aboriginal women's work subverts various forms of art and resistance and we constantly have to create and re-create strategies to respond and express survivance whilst colonial violence and the rights of Aboriginal Peoples continue to be violated. We do this whilst avoiding perpetuating any replicant white-appeasing versions of cultural purity or appropriations of decolonising efforts and attempts to return to or maintain a romantic binary representation of "Aboriginality," and pan Aboriginality. These stances can be exploited by newly identifying and fraudulently identifying white people pretending to be Aboriginal – a practice which is rife in the arts and academic sector – for power and positions stolen from actual Aboriginal People who have Ancestry, community connectedness, blood lines and community accountability. Questioning this lack of responsibility is often met with accusations of lateral violence; which becomes a violence in itself.

While informed by the personal and the political, by intergenerational and trans generational traumas and resistance, creative work is contributing to something much bigger: whilst informed by this, it is not framed by it. The framework it works within is Aboriginal women's matriarchy, sovereignty, self-determination, contributing to an Aboriginal women's feminist standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson 2013). Aboriginal women's standpoint claims a bigger and new space of Blak women's work as disruptors to artistic terra nullius, but it is not limited to the fields of visual and performing art.

The works of Aboriginal women writers such as Tucker, (1977) Langford-Ginibi (1988) , and academics such as Linda Tuhawi-Smith's *De-Colonising Methodologies (2000)*, Aileen Moreton-Robinson's *Talkin Up to The White woman (2000)*, have begun to be read more widely. And there is an growing collection of major artistic bodies of work by Tracey Moffatt, Brenda L Croft, Destiny Deacon, Karla Dickens, Lisa Bellear's photographic archive and poetry collection, the music of artists such as Tiddas, and Tiddas member, Lou Bennett, her recent work with Romaine Moreton and her *One Million Beats* performance, the work of the *Boomalli Artist Co-operative* founded by ten Aboriginal artist activists (predominantly women) in Sydney, 1988, the work of

the *proppANOW* collective from Brisbane, 2003 (predominantly men) to name only a few. There is the *Birrarung Gallery* at *Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre/First Peoples Gallery* at Melbourne Museum, the work of more recent collectives, the *Unbound Collective* of Ali G Baker, Simone Ulalka Tur, Faye Rosas Blanch and Natalie Harkin, the WAR (Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance) and *thismob* by Kate Van Buren, curatorial projects by Kimberley Moulton, and *fempress* by Hannah Bronte in Brisbane.

My work is in dialogue with each and all of these artists, writers and collectives: it is situated in a decolonial, intersectional Aboriginal feminist, matriarchal, critically self-aware movement of sovereign political art that is responsive and responsible to Ancestry, Country, family and communities. My project positions the work of Aboriginal women artists as visual authors of their lives and the lives of their families and communities as 'collective memories of inter-generational relationships between predominantly Indigenous women, extended families and communities' (Moreton-Robinson 2003, 23). Through dialogically-based critical analysis, my work is generating insight about how Aboriginal women are at the intersection of colonial injuries that include their gender, race, class and social positioning. By subverting various forms of art & resistance in diverse contexts of community and 'cross spaces' like academia, public life and social media, Aboriginal women create and recreate strategies to respond to and express survivance.

Artists such as Moffatt (1989), Deacon (1995) and Dickens (2016) each speak to me because of their clear disruptions to how Aboriginal women's art, community work and activism has been previously represented. In particular, Deacon's series on Blak urban identity dating from the 1990s allows me to speak to the complexity of what it means to be an urban living Aboriginal women artist. Lisa Bellear's photographic work and poetry, in particular 'Dreaming in Urban Areas (1996), is a critical example of how biography is not always a written document but can be presented in other ways. Bellear's photographic archive of around 20 000 images archive of Victorian Aboriginal community life is testament to Indigenous women's insider documentation of

community collaborative practice. These approaches are de-colonial or non-colonial (Garneau 2016) in praxis, art, community and activism.

My project revealed that we as Black women, need physical and emotional places, spaces and resources to support this work where we can safely cultivate healing processes and practices to give us respite from constantly having to deal with trauma caused by institutional and social violence, murder, deaths in custody, poor health, low life expectancy, sexual assaults, rape, child sexual abuse, and toxic racisms in systemic, institutional ways and the micro aggressions we are constantly exposed to online, in person, historically and in our daily experiences. The bush dyeing body of work was a place to allow the traumas and trauma stains, but also those of spirit and strength and survival to float to the surface of each piece of the hundreds of pieces I dyed on my own and with others. In creating these works I could only name what was able to be brought to the surface. The stains that drifted to the surface of the healing cloths, for example, held these wounds and traced the trauma trails named by Judy Atkinson (2002) in *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines: The transgenerational effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia*, one of the first times I encountered the naming of trauma and its legacies.

Whilst this project honours and remembers my matriarchs, it was not my aim to romanticise my matriarchs. My grandmother once told me that we must never romanticise ourselves, but I fear that, in trying to remember them publicly, that white people might misunderstand this honouring and miss critical points about the complexities of trans generational traumas. In naming my matriarchs as warrior women and central to my standpoint, I also know that this is complicated and bittersweet work. I am cautious of romanticising them because their stories of survival are complex and have had undesired consequences. Their lives were altered by extremely difficult decisions forged by traumas out of their control, in which their sovereignty and agency was not respected, but violated.

I also made this work to honour and remember my vulnerability and gentleness, and that of other Blackfullas, because these qualities made me a target for white male sexual violence, racist bullying, and coercion by people willing to use

my childhood body and adult body for their own purposes, both within my community and by whites trespassing in it.

Embodied memories, *my body remembers,* haunt me daily, and confronting them, particularly in the writing of this exegesis, has been triggering and exhausting work. It has brought multiple repressed and bound memories to the surface, affecting my sleep, my moods, my energy, appetite, relationships, ability to concentrate and contributes to infections and illness that have delayed the completion and submission of this work. Creating these bodies of work has pushed me to the brink emotionally and physically to confront trauma triggers and wounds, making an effort to subvert their power in my life. The photographic series were a way to present myself courageously, in various guises, and through all my grandmothers, my matriarchs, my mother, my daughter, my niece, and my son.

Figure 13 Paola Balla (2014) Untitled,

digital pigment print on 188 gsm photo rag, 960mm x 710mm

The sharing of this process has been reciprocal and emancipatory, like the collaborative photographic work '*untitled'*, 2014, (Figure 13) I created at the

request of and with Prof Tracey Bunda, featured in *Research Through with and As Storying* (Phillips and Bunda, 2018 p108), who described this process as an act of emancipation.

Expressing unconditional love and the need for spaces of unconditional love for Blak women is embodied within this project as a response to needing healing and respite from the exhausting work of resisting, naming and responding to ongoing traumas, because these complex trans generational traumas damage relationships in families and communities by binding them with silencing, shame, by projecting traumas on others, and making love and acceptance conditional on complicit behaviours. Breaking silences is complicated work and, in this project, could only be done in small increments in my art practice. This is where the practice led research created the greatest meaning for me personally.

Anger has a role in healing. There is energy to be found in sustained and justifiable anger because as Blak women, we are not allowed to be wild, to be angry. The tropes about us as 'wild gins' work against us in telling our truth publicly: when we do, it causes discomfort and withdrawal. But healing is not forgetting. Healing is not always forgiveness and whilst this work centres on healing, it does not centre forgiveness. In 'Refusal to forgive: Indigenous women's love and rage,' Leey'qsun scholar Rachel Flowers points out that for Indigenous wome, '[o]ften our love and positions we hold in the community make us targets of colonial violence; ultimately, our resentment and anger are in response to the modes of gendered colonial violence that exploit our love.' She deepens this point in describing

> *those moments when we come together in protest or in remembrance for our sisters (and brothers and non binary relations) our anger is not abandoned, our resentment is not relinquished; it is because of our profound love for one another and our lands that we are full of rage. Anger and love are not always mutually exclusive emotions' (Flowers 2015, 40-41).*

Aboriginal women's work, including this body of work, is not only defined and limited to responding to trauma; it celebrates our ongoing resistance and

evolving cultures previous to being disrupted and violated by invasion and colonisation. The work continues the cultural work of truth and storytelling, of art making, performance, reframing and re-creating language, culture, art as disrupted, not “lost” not “disappeared” not faded into nothingness within the colonial project. It addresses the everything and the everywhen of Aboriginality, rich in story, theory, context and subtext, vernacular, and spectacular and brilliant Blak and Blackfulla beauty and intelligence, ingenuity, cleverness, inventiveness, imagination and joy.

The positive responses and embracing of the *Mok Mok* series in its several incarnations demonstrate that self-representation of Aboriginal women matters; that it is necessary to subvert stereotypes and narrow tropes of Black women as backbones of our communities, or as striving to be “successful” and palatable by white standards, or the uncontrollable, angry, aggressive, wild Black women.

I created my own Blak Woman Superhero character in *Mok Mok*, making a positive use of fear in Aboriginal community, as opposed to the negative use of fear in western or white society, through the use of imagination, creativity, and respect for the spiritual world and the unknown. While legendary Yorta Yorta artist Lin Onus’ Captain Koori addressed a lack of Aboriginal heroes, even though Condomman heroized safe sex, even though Superboong disrupted Australian television screens on the ABC in the 1970s, and started Black comedy in this country, they were all hetero and cis gendered males. As Aboriginal women, our lives, bodies, gender, and sexualities are politicised as are labour and contributions. This drove me to position myself as Mok Mok, because Mok Mok also embodies Blackfulla humour. Dr Angelina Hurley underscores the importance of humour in *What’s so funny about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander humour*?

> *‘the diversity of our humour is prevalent and exists embedded within the diversity of our culture…Shared values among Indigenous peoples worldwide note humour existing as a resistance to oppression, an expression of identity, a means of survival and a tool for healing….the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples prevails through*

humour' (Hurley 2015,*'What's so funny about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander humour?'*)

We are still missing the Blak female identifying or non-gender conforming Black Superwoman. We need her strong and non-exploited labour for our own Peoples.

Ghostweaving Sovereignty

Matriarchal sovereignty has been embodied in this project through the making of new art that draws on my matrilineal line and community and collective collaborative ways to create works, woven across the 'everywhen'. This is perhaps best expressed in my work *Born in Sovereignty, Live in Sovereignty* 2014 (See Figure 9, chapter 3). It is also a concept I apply to theorising this body of work, to find places of sovereignty and to re-instate my sovereignty as a birthright and a life right. Sovereignty resonates because it is entwined with my matriarchy, its continuation and the struggle it always asserts:

> *'Sovereignty itself is an inalienable, innate and intimate right; its expression can be found buried within artistic works, gently emerging from inherited practices, or boldly spelled out in new artistic forms adorned with confident lines, camouflage, electric lights and bling (Balla 2016:11). The sovereignty of Indigenous peoples is being asserted in a cultural revolution…This is happening now, across South East Australia, in the calls for treaty and the increasingly prominent role of art and activism by Victorian Aboriginal peoples…In this charge we see incredible courage and leadership by Victorian Aboriginal women…[who] continue to be marginalised and subjected to various forms of violence, both historical and contemporary. Despite being at the forefront of political, social and cultural resistance, our knowledge and practices are often omitted and rendered invisible in colonial academic, art and cultural institutions and public life. It is critical that this…be addressed by situating Aboriginal women's contributions to practices of survival in art, academia and public spaces.*
>
> *(Balla 2018, 275)*

In ‘Critically Sovereign, Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies,’ Lenape scholar Joanne Barker speaks of gendered categories and relationships to

> *matrilineality and patrilineality -not necessarily indicative of matriarchy or patriarchy-defined social identities, relationships, and responsibilities in contexts of governance, territories, and cultures. Lineality would seem to indicate then, an insistence on a biological relationship, but not one that can be used to stabilize gender and sexuality in the reckoning of social identity, desire and pleasure’ (Barker, 2017 p13-14).*

My son Katen’s contribution to the Mission Hut, in creating the largest and most graphic piece of healing cloth, took on a significance for how I learn how to hold my son and patrilineal lines as an Aboriginal woman, a mother, an Aunty and hopefully one day as a grandmother. However, I also know that mothering and mother work as named by Patricia Hill Collins (2002) is done by multiple people in Aboriginal communities and is not bound by biological mothering and birthing. Everyone has or had a mother and, in this sense, this work honours mothers and their work of supporting, caring, nurturing, mentoring, and providing a safe place of unconditional love.

The *Unconditional Love Space*, of bush dyed fabrics, and memories of my great grandmother and her little Mission House drew emotional responses that I both witnessed and had re-told to me by visitors. The responses I witnessed to this space from Blackfullas were very different to those of whites and settlers. Blackfullas responded to me with emotions of nostalgia, longing, familiarity, homesickness, sadness, grief and memory. Some whites responded with crying and feeling overwhelmed, struggling to describe their responses; they commonly talked about “not knowing” these stories. Blackfullas however focussed on how familiar it felt and how similar their home Missions or their own matriarchs’ images were. Part of my intention for these works was to comfort Mob and to make white people uncomfortable, or at least question their comfort.

After the completion of the show I invited a small number of people to write responses to the exhibition. Two selections articulate for me that the project

addressed my problematics and answered key questions for the research. Eugenia Flynn, a Tiwi, Larrakia and Chinese and Muslim woman writer and curator writes:

> *The most striking thing about this exhibition is that it makes visible the work of Aboriginal women - both the products of that work and the cultural processes that underpin the pieces. Paola's practice as both artist and community practitioner is not just hers, but it is shared between her and the women in her family and her community. Her ways of doing – Aboriginal ways of doing – are just as important as the works produced, and this comes across throughout the entire exhibition as genuine and intrinsic to the work. In particular, the mission hut is a shared space where the viewer feels as though they are witness to Aboriginal women's ways of being and doing. Approaching, then standing inside the hut, we are transported through time and space through sights, sounds and smells that evoke deep memories for those of us who share the experience of being Black women. It is not about clamouring for space or pushing our way through to be seen: Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius is a compelling example of how Aboriginal women can confidently assert themselves with strength through art.*

Bryan Andy, Yorta Yorta, writer, critic & performer, responded:

> *The Wemba woman in this print has been like a guardian to me since my teenage years, and she still is. In my mind and in my world she's the epitome of a Blak Matriarch.*
>
> *This print has been in my life for three years, and was a gift from Paola after she first presented her Mok Mok (Mok rhymes with 'book') series in 2016 in honour of a Dreaming story that has been told around the campfires of home on Yorta Yorta country, and in Wemba Wemba country too, which is no doubt where* Paola first heard of Mok Mok and her malevolent ways and came to understand her ferocious appetite for young Blak kids. *[Having said that, I'm sure Mrs Mok Mok's appetite'd extend to white kids too, so lookout you mob!]*
>
> *Mok Mok served a purpose in our mobs' past, and Paola has reinstated her relevance today and for our future through an imposed lens of heteronormative domesticity within the patriarchy of so-called Australia.*

Future Work

The future work I want to do after this project has a number of focuses. There is a project with my sons and nephews and non-binary siblings, acknowledging that Matriarchal honouring does not exclude males or non-binary relatives, and that as a straight, cis gendered woman I have privileges that trans Black women and men and non-binary Mob are denied. another is working towards collective family healing from matriarchal ways of being and naming this work within academia and Blak community.

Another focus is writing into this space more and continuing to advocate for Aboriginal women's voices and spaces in art and community to tell untold stories and healing opportunities. During the PhD project, I lost my Aunty, my cousin, and my Tidda. During this project, my mother's cousin Aunty Tanya Day died in police custody, her coronial inquiry was held and no one single person, police officer, has been found accountable. Her children, my cousins, Apryl, Belinda, Warren and Kimberley have fought for their mother publicly and courageously. There are multiple stories which require anger to fuel telling and healing, political activism and personal connection.

I also want to continue the bush dyeing projects and workshops with other community members. I have been part of a successful Moondani Balluk collective AIATSIS grant to conduct healing workshops with Aboriginal women inmates at Dame Phyllis Frost Detention Centre in Melbourne, and *This Mob* young Aboriginal art collective has invited me to do workshops with SIGNAL in Melbourne for Koorie young people both in 2021.

My post-doctoral dream is to create a book about Blak women's art. I would like to return to my earlier plan to interview more Aboriginal women artists to further platform and document so much of what is undocumented of Blak women's work. Beyond temporary exhibitions and performances, there is a permanence created and a larger truth when photographs and documentation are made public as a lasting record.

By this creative work and exegesis, I fill a gap in the scholarship of Aboriginal art and community and familial research processes. In speaking Blak and back to the ‘white cube’ and academia, I express resistance to making Black art that makes white people comfortable and the commercialisation of Aboriginal art for consumption. By taking up Deacon’s Blak, I continue to disrupt the status quo of those who shy away from the C in Black, repositioning the power of Blakness and Blak women’s power as sovereign Aboriginal warrior women.

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