THE BLAK WOMEN'S HEALING PROJECT

Supporting Blak Women's Healing through Cultural Practice and Connecting to Country

Moondani Balluk: Indigenous Academic Unit
Victoria University

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge, honour, recognise and respect the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung, Bunurong/Boonwurrung and Wadawurrung (Wathaurong) people of the Kulin Nation on whose unceded land we live and work. We pay respect to the deep knowledge embedded within the Aboriginal communities and their ownership of Country. We acknowledge that the land on which we meet is a place of age-old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal and that the Kulin people's living culture has a unique role in the life of this region. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the contributions of the women who took part in this project. Thank you for sharing your experiences and trusting us with your stories. We hope that this report has done justice to your voices and helps to bring about social justice for Aboriginal women and their families.

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Language statement: We use the word Aboriginal throughout this report recognising the diversity of Aboriginal peoples, communities and cultures. The term 'Blak' used within the title of this project, 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" (Williamson, 1993, p. 20). We use an inclusive definition of "women", and we welcome trans women, genderqueer women, and non-binary people.

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Summary

The Blak Women's Healing project was a two phased project that emerged from and responds to the aspirations and concerns of Aboriginal community in Melbourne's West. The first phase of the project was to deliver culturally informed healing workshops curated by Aboriginal women that engage with Indigenous knowledges, cultural art practice and storytelling to foster the wellbeing of Aboriginal women living in Melbourne's West and to understand their lived experiences, particularly in relation to encounters with the child protection system through research yarns. The second phase of the study was to translate the learnings from the women's yarns into activities to bring about change to policy and practice. The women who participated in the project were all from diverse language and kinship groups who have been in contact with child protection services. In total, eight culturally informed healing workshops were delivered which were followed by two research yarns about the women's experiences of the workshops.

A collective and iterative analysis of the research yarns revealed that the outcomes of the cultural healing workshops include the women (re)connecting to culture and Country, (re) building connections with one another by moving away from lateral violence towards lateral love, and (re)narrating individual stories by connecting their individual story with the collective story enabling the women to shed light on colonial relations of power and dispossession. The workshops also created safety to share stories about the violence they encountered through the child protection system.

Recent scholarship on praxical violence (Daher et. al., 2024), that is, the ways in which violence is reproduced and experienced through services and programs, was drawn on to understand the women's experiences of the violence they encountered. Within this framework the findings demonstrate that praxical violence is enacted through the child protection system at an institutional level within the frameworks and legislation through the epistemic erasure of colonial trauma and the complex needs of Aboriginal families. The findings also demonstrate that praxical violence is enacted by child protection stuff through various forms of symbolic and practice-based violence. In addition, practice-based violence (physical and sexual) towards children by policy workers in residential and home care was also revealed. The violence encountered by the women and their children is far reaching and recreates suffering and trauma in the lives of Aboriginal women, children, families and community.

In the second phase of the project the learnings from the women are used to bring about policy through several pathways. Through the development and delivery of workshops with child protection staff and of curriculum resources for social work students at Victoria University that centre the women's lived experiences/voices. To work towards epistemic justice, women's voices will inform policy and decision making about Aboriginal families through Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee (RAJAC). A community exhibition has been organised to claim a space to showcase the work of the women and bring awareness to the ways Aboriginal women are reviving and engaging in cultural knowledges and practices in the healing of Aboriginal women, families and communities.

The findings from the project demonstrate that cultural healing and projects like the Blak Women's Healing project are central to better understanding and supporting the healing and resilience of Aboriginal communities. It also demonstrates the importance and need for epistemic justice to bring about meaningful practice and policy change relating to Aboriginal women and their families and community. Finally, the findings from the project show how colonial systems are being reproduced throughout taken for granted ideologies/assumptions, policies and practices of the child protection system.

Introduction

Responding to requests from community, the Blak[1] Women's Healing project engages with Indigenous knowledges, cultural art practice and storytelling to foster the wellbeing of Aboriginal women in Melbourne's West. The methodology for this project has been crafted from the lived experiences, knowledges and wisdom of the Aboriginal women leading this group- Karen Jackson (Yorta Yorta), Rowena Price (Yorta Yorta and Palawa), and Paola Balla (Wemba Wemba and Gunditjmara). The project emerged from the strong relationships forged through the team's community-making activities with Aboriginal groups in Melbourne's West and the decolonial praxis we have sought to co-create through intentional dialogues within (and beyond) our research collective (Balla et al., 2023). The project was delivered between 2023-2024 and follows from the first Blak Women's Healing project, *Connecting Aboriginal women to Country through local healing practices*, delivered mostly online during the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns (Balla et al., 2022).

The project was funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and led by Moondani Balluk Indigenous Academic Unit located at Victoria University (Footscray Park campus) in Melbourne's Western suburb of Footscray. Moondani Balluk means to embrace people in Woiwurrung language of the Wurundjeri people. Moondani Balluk works with Aboriginal, non-governmental organisations and community spaces to raise the visibility of Aboriginal people, culture, and issues to develop teaching, conduct applied research and create spaces that privilege the lives, experiences and outcomes for Aboriginal communities and families.

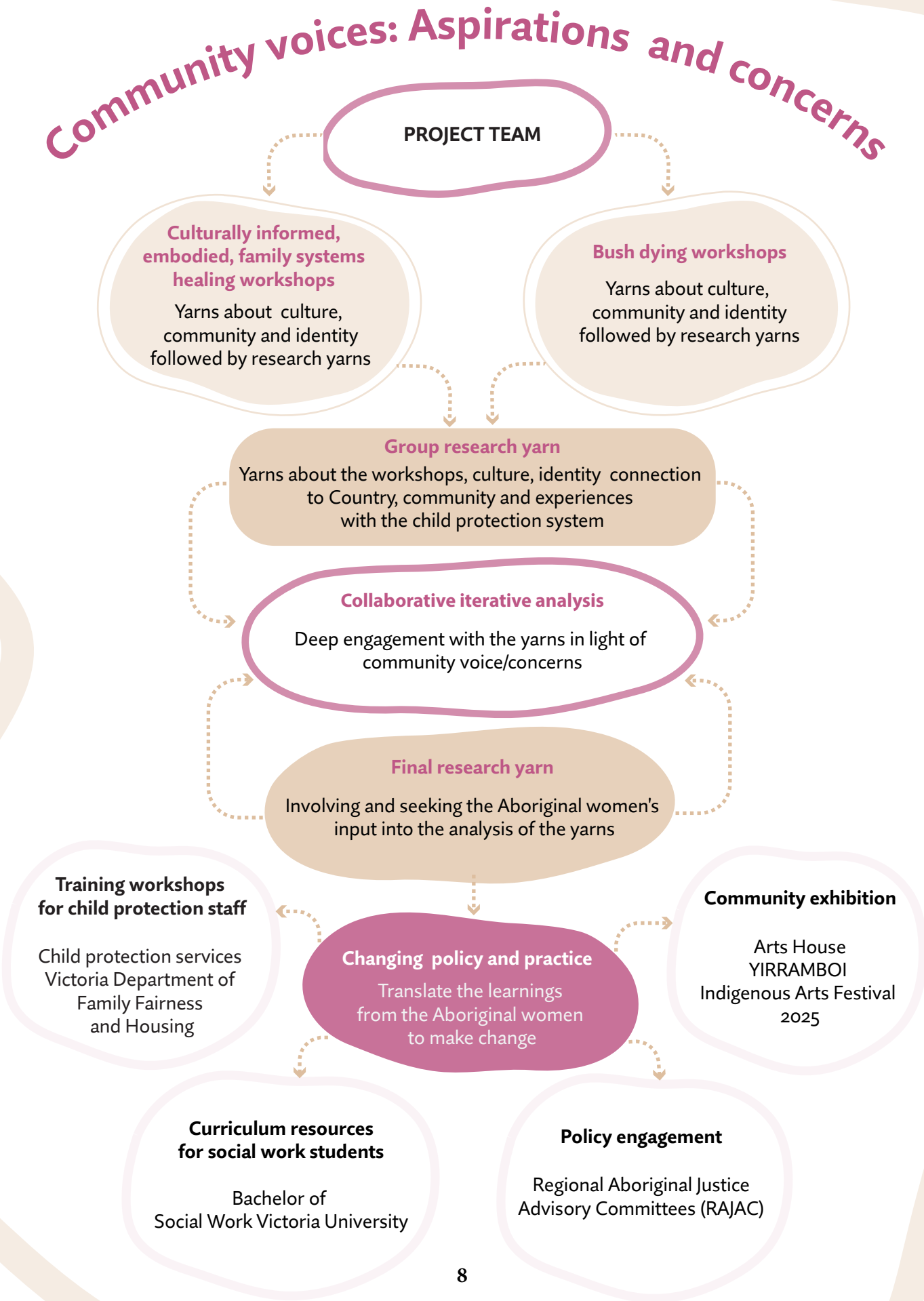
The Blak Women's Healing project set out to address the needs of Aboriginal women living in Melbourne's West and involved two stages. The aims of the first stage of the project were to create opportunities for Aboriginal women to come together to engage in yarning and cultural practice to:

- strengthen their connection to community, culture and Country and in turn, foster their social and emotional wellbeing,
- share stories about how their lives were derailed, as well their experiences with the child protection system,
- explore and understand the impacts of the child protection system on the women, families and community.

The aim of the second stage of the project was to translate the learnings from the women's yarns into activities to bring about change to policy and practice. Specifically, the project aimed to make change by influencing the practices of front-line workers in the child protection system through the development and delivery of workshops drawing on the stories shared by the women. Additionally, the resources developed will be incorporated into units of study taken by social work students at Victoria University. The stories shared as part of the project will also be shared through a community exhibition thereby providing an opportunity to amplify the concerns of Aboriginal women, their children and families. The project approach and two stages are represented in Figure 1.

1 The term 'Blak' (Williamson, 1993, p. 20) used within the title of this project, 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 (Williamson, 1993, p. 20)

Figure 1. Project praxis: Community led, culturally informed healing workshops, research, and advocacy



Background

Melbourne's West is a geographic area situated on the unceded lands of the Boonwurrung and Woiwurrung people of the Kulin Nation. The West has been identified as a growth corridor for many Aboriginal families and communities (Thorpe et. al., 2023). It is home to 7,018 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and 2,785 families which makes up 0.8% of Melbourne West's population (ABS, 2021). Aboriginal community in Melbourne's West is diverse, with many members coming from or with ties to many regions across Australia (Thorpe et. al, 2023). There are many Aboriginal families with unknown language group identity and connection to Country with many a part of or descendants of the Stolen Generations (Jackson, 2019).

Aboriginal communities in Melbourne's West face several disparities. In addition to the limited number of Aboriginal led services, many Aboriginal people living in the region face barriers with accessing mainstream services due to lack of information, wait times, location, transportation, concerns about public safety and childcare services (Jones, Witjes & Killmer, 2024). While Aboriginal led organisations in the West have grown over the years, they are less established compared to other regions across Victoria (Thorpe et. al., 2023). Since opening its Werribee and Melton offices in 2017 and 2019 respectively, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) are still increasing their staffing and programming to cope with the demand for their family and child support, justice, community and cultural strengthening programs.

The increasing numbers of Aboriginal children in Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) and Protective Orders in Victoria, and Melbourne's West have been a long-standing issue (see Koorie Kids Growing Strong in their Culture, 2013). The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) (now known as the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing [DFFH]) Out-of-Home Care and child protection systems in Victoria has been identified as a driving force for family breakdowns and Aboriginal people experiencing disadvantage and incarceration in the criminal justice system (SNAICC, 2021).

VACCA's Footprints for Success (Footprints) Early Years Project, which operated in the Western suburbs of Melbourne's West (Wyndham, Brimbank, and Maribyrnong) between 2017-2021, had several families under the scrutiny of the DHHS child protection. The project saw an exponential growth in Aboriginal women seeking assistance, referrals, and advocacy to keep their children at home and in school. When the Footprints program began in 2018 it commenced with 20 families. By 2019/2020 they had 70 families on their database who they worked with on a regular basis.

At the national level, in 2021, 1 in 17 (19,500) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were in OOHC (AIHW, 2022). As reported in the Family Matters Report (SNAICC, 2023), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were 5.7 times more likely to be reported to child protection authorities, 10.6 times more likely to be subject to a child protection order, and 10.5 times more likely to be in OOHC. The Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023) noted that the number of children in OOHC in Victoria is the highest in Australia, and that the rate "has increased by 51 per cent since the landmark 2016 *Always Was, Always Will Be Koori Children* report and recommendations from the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP)" (p. 179). As reported in the Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report (Victorian State Government, 2022), the "number and rate of Aboriginal children and young people in care remain at historic highs" (p. 33).

The overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC must be understood in the context of historical and intergenerational trauma and ongoing structural violence (SNAICC, 2021) and connected to the increasing number of Aboriginal women in custody, itself a product of this history and its continuities in the present (see e.g., Law Council of Australia, 2018). Chamberlain et al. (2022) described the current situation as a national crisis reflecting a combination of "systemic failures, discrimination, impacts of colonisation and harmful policies (O'Donnell et al., 2019)" (Chamberlain et al., 2022, p. 256). Chamberlain et al. have called for the transformation of the epistemological foundation of health, social and welfare systems within Australia to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, rather than perpetuating the current cycle (see also Wright et al., 2024).

There are some promising signs of change within policy discourse. For example, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020) built around four priority reforms directly informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, namely formal partnerships and shared decision making, building the community-controlled sector, transforming government organisations, shared access to data and information at a regional level. In Victoria, the Self-determination Reform Framework (2019) recognises four self-determination enablers: prioritise culture, address racism and promote cultural safety, address trauma and support healing, and transfer power and resources to communities. However, it is unclear the extent to which this is realised in material practice.

Report overview

In this report we present the Blak Women's Healing project in three sections.

Part one (The Blak Women's Healing project) describes the Blak Women's Healing project by firstly introducing the project team and the women who took part in the project followed by an overview of the Indigenous methodology and the ways in which culture, principles of self-determination and participation are at the forefront of the project. A description of the culturally informed healing workshops and the ways in which these worked towards creating opportunities for the women to reconnect to self, community, culture and Country through culturally informed healing practices is offered. In this section we also describe the method of data collection, research yarns (Atkinson et al., 2021; Fredricks et al., 2011), which took place after the series of workshops.

Part two (Outcomes of the culturally informed healing workshops) is focused on the outcomes of the workshops and research yarns. The section begins with an explanation of how the women came together to engage in the space and the ways in which they engaged in healing. In this section we show the ways the women used the space to (re)connect with cultural identity and Country, (re)build community by fostering relationships with one another and (re)narrate, share, validate and understand the violence they have encountered through child protection services.

Part three (Understanding the violence encountered by Aboriginal women through child protection services) further delves into stories the women shared about the violence they encountered through child protection services. It provides a detailed analysis of the women's yarns. To foreground and understand the women's encounters with the child protection system we draw on decolonial concepts including coloniality, epistemic and praxical violence.

Part four (Changing policy and practice) explains the way in which the outcomes of the project are being translated to contribute to changing policy and practice. Drawing on the women's yarns, culturally appropriate pathways relevant to the specific needs of Aboriginal women and their families are presented. These enhance partner agencies capacity to respond more appropriately and sensitively when engaging and working with Aboriginal women.

Throughout this report, a multivocal voice is adopted. It is written in both first and third person, and it centres the voices of the culturally informed healing workshop facilitators, and the women involved in the project as knowers. This form of embodied standpoint theorising, challenges Eurocentric epistemological assumptions of 'disembodied knowledge' and speaking from a zero-point epistemology, recognising that knowledges are shaped by personal and collective experiences, and by the social, material discursive and political conditions in which experiences take place (Anzaldúa, 2007; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2010; Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

PART ONE

THE BLAK WOMEN'S HEALING PROJECT

The Blak Women's Healing project took place at Wunggurrwil Dhurrung Community Centre located in Wyndham Vale. Wunggurrwil Dhurrung means "strong heart" in Wadawurrung language. The centre upholds a shared vision to recognise and celebrate the history and perspectives of Aboriginal people. The centre provides a welcoming and culturally safe meeting place for people to gather, connect, learn and share. It is a safe gathering place for cultural strengthening programs for Aboriginal families and communities in Wyndham Vale and neighbouring suburbs.

This project received funding to commence in 2020. Originally, we had set out to conduct the project with women in the community but also women incarcerated at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre (women's prison) as we had originally intended to explore Aboriginal women's experiences with both the child protection and the criminal justice systems and to conduct the healing workshops with both groups of women. To do this, we needed to receive ethics approval from the Department of Justice, Corrections Victoria and AIATSIS. This contributed to quite a lengthy delay in commencing the project with final ethics approval received from AIATSIS in April 2022. We had sought to commence in 2022 but found it difficult given the community was recovering from the extended period of lockdown (2020-2021). The project team recognised the importance of allowing the participants time and space to 'emerge' from the ongoing effects that COVID-19 and the restrictions had on community. While we did gain ethics approval to conduct the project with incarcerated women, ultimately, we were not able to gain access into the prison to undertake the project given ongoing concerns around COVID-19 and other difficulties. The culturally informed healing workshops commenced in May 2023.

The project team

The research team was led by Karen Jackson, followed by Paola Balla and Rowena Price who have strong connections with and are members of the Aboriginal community in Melbourne's West, therefore ensuring that the research was community led and sensitive and responsive to Aboriginal community needs. The workshops were delivered by Paola Balla, Rowena Price, and Laura Jane (LJ) Phoenix Singh, an Aboriginal woman of the Quandamooka and Wiradjuri Nations who is a First Nations Healing Practitioner and researcher. Our (Jackson, Balla, Price, Singh) insider researcher roles and positionalities informed the relational and storying elements of the methodology and ensured our ethical approach was embodied in our methods and engagements. Asserting our cultural connections and responsibilities as Aboriginal women, our relationships to Aboriginal community, and our roles as university scholars, practitioners, researchers were important in creating cultural safety for participants to fully engage in the project.

Christopher Sonn (migrant from South Africa), Amy Quayle (white Australian) and Lutfiye Ali (second generation Cypriot Turkish Muslim Australian) are the non-Aboriginal members of the research team who took part in this project through the dialogical process of critical mutual accompaniment (Watkins, 2019). More specifically, we (Sonn, Quayle, Ali) envision ourselves as "outside accompaniers", standing alongside the project team leaders with a commitment to cultivate interpersonal relationships/practices that support the process of joint inquiry and to work towards transformative action and change (Watkins; see also Quayle & Sonn, 2022). Throughout the project, additional support to debrief for the team was provided by Helen Killmier, a community psychologist from Guidestar.

The women of the project

The women who participated in the project were contacted through the personal community connections held by the Moondani Balluk Aboriginal staff. Up to 18 women were personally contacted through various Aboriginal women's groups and/or relevant agencies across the West of Melbourne. Many of these women were actively interested in participating because of their personal experiences with the child protection system or sense of disconnection with local Aboriginal community or their traditional Country. The deep impact of displacement and marginalisation proved to be major challenges for all the women to engage in the project. In total, five Aboriginal women began participating in this project but only four of the women continued. The women were aged between 30-70 years of age and have all been in contact with child protection services as a child, parent and/or as a grandparent.

In the following section we share brief biographies of the women. To protect the confidentiality of the women who participated in the study, the women have been deidentified and pseudonyms have been used in place of the women's names.

Tanya is a Palawa woman who at the time of the project was 35 years of age. She has adult children as well as grandchildren. At the time of the of the project, Tanya was living in Werribee but then moved to a regional location not far from Werribee with her children. Tanya explained that she was taken away from her family at a young age and expressed that being a ward of the state for 16 years without knowing that she was Aboriginal made her "feel empty". Tanya spoke in detail about her experiences of child protection as a parent and explained that after many years she turned everything around by empowering herself with information and knowledge of her rights.

Susan is a Bunurong Wiradjuri woman. Susan is 25-35 years of age and lives with her husband and children in Wyndham. Susan left home at a young age. She came back home to Melbourne from interstate not long after her mother passed away and was raised by her godmother (Dilara). Susan explained that having a support worker from a very young age helped her mitigate the impact of many adversities she had experienced. Susan works fulltime in the health sector supporting Aboriginal families navigate the health care system. Susan discussed the biases and weight of the child protection services in her field of practice at great length.

Hazel is a Gunditjmarra woman who lives in the inner suburbs of Melbourne's West. Hazel is between 50-60 years of age and has three adult children as well as grandchildren. Hazel is active in the community sector and has contributed to many projects focused on the wellbeing and the recognition of Aboriginal communities in Melbourne's West. Hazel enjoys gardening and engages in Indigenous food practices in her cooking. Hazel explained that she experienced family violence as an adult, is still involved in justice system advocating for her own safety and has limited access to her grandchildren.

Dilara is a Bunurong Wiradjuri woman who lives in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne with her two teenage grandchildren. Dilara participates in many community groups, arts and craft and healing programs and expressed that these groups have helped her to "get out" and "getting to know other women". She explained that on days when she is at home, she is doing arts and crafts. Dilara is also Susan's Godmother. She looked after Susan after

her mother passed away when Susan was still very young. She explained that she took Susan in to keep her safe. During the research yarns Dilara would often observe conversations and would participate in discussion occasionally.

Indigenous research

This project is informed by Indigenous research which recognises that "indigenous communities develop shared ways of knowing guided by how they view the world, themselves, and the connection between the two" (Snow et al., 2016, p. 359). Central to Indigenous research is the recognition of the relationship between history and power and thus of the power imbued in processes of knowledge production and therefore interrogation of "who owns, designs, interprets, reports, and ultimately benefits from the research process and products (Smith, 2012)" (Snow, 2016, p. 359). Indigenous research privileges the knowledge and voices of Indigenous peoples which have historically been subjugated by Western ways of knowing, doing and being (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Smith, 2012).

Challenging Eurocentric epistemological assumptions of 'disembodied knowledge', we recognise the women's stories as knowledge that emerges from the women's standpoints. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Goenpal woman of the Quandamooka peoples, wove standpoint theory, Indigenous research and the work of Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata to put forward an Australian Indigenous women's standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Moreton-Robinson (2013) articulated an Indigenous womans standpoint as one that is ascribed and achieved through struggle. It is constituted by Indigenous women's sovereign and interconnected ways of knowing and informed by intersecting oppressions that situate women in different power relations and that effect the different individual experiences under social, political, historical and material conditions that Indigenous women share (consciously or unconsciously). Moreton-Robinson noted that:

> 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. (p. 339)

Dudgeon et al. (2020) have discussed Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) as a "transformative and critically self-reflexive" Indigenous Research Methodology (p. 18), informed by Indigenous Standpoint Theory and committed to the restoration of Indigenous knowledge systems. APAR aligns with critical participatory action research as articulated by Fine and Torre (2021) as epistemology (not just a methodology or method) which seeks to uncover the everyday stories of struggle and survival of those being studied, act on social injustices, and leverage social science research for social change. Dudgeon et al. (2020) argued that a central component of Indigenous epistemology is a "radical interconnectedness or a dynamic reciprocity between the human and the more-than-human, the seen and unseen, the past, present and future" (p. 25), and thus a holistic view of health and wellbeing, conceptualised through the notion of social and emotional wellbeing. Dudgeon et al (2017), citing Dudgeonet al (2017), noted an Indigenous knowledge framework is "underpinned by (a) a community based approach, (b) holistic perspectives, (c) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander diversity, (d) self-determination, and (e) acknowledging a history of colonisation" (p. 318). They outlined Indigenous specific research protocols as encompassing "human rights and social justice; community ownership; community capacity building; resilience focus; building empowerment and partnerships; and respect for local knowledge" (p. 318).

Our approach was informed by the epistemological and methodological commitments captured by such approaches and was developed through the intentional dialogues we have engaged in as a research collective in seeking to enact decolonial praxis (Balla et al., 2023). We borrow from Moreton-Robinson's discussion on "being in good relations" (The Wheeler Centre, 2020) to recognise and emphasise the importance of approaching healing work and research through an ethics and embodied expression of care, love, and nurturance. These commitments and ethics necessitate deep and prolonged engagement, that is, relationality. This relational way of being and doing with people was necessary for working across boundaries, sharing, and for developing trust between the women, Aboriginal project team members and with non-Aboriginal researchers on the project. We argue that it is also central to developing meaningful practices and knowledge that captures and responds to community voice, desires, and concerns.

This research was also informed by critical Indigenous scholarship on desire over damage (Tuck, 2009; see also Smith et al., 2021). Tuck proposed desired based research frameworks to counter the predominance of damage centred research. Such research is:

> concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self determination of lived lives... desire-based frameworks defy the lure to serve as "advertisements for power" by documenting not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope. Such an axiology is intent on depathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered. This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that.... (p. 416)

It was necessary in this project to explore the stories of Aboriginal women about their encounters with the child protection system, and thus to engage with the painful elements of social realities, that is, with stories that capture the damage created through historical and contemporary forms of structural violence, damage compounded by the silencing of this history. However, by engaging with women through cultural practices and yarning- (re)connecting with culture and Country, we also sought to centre the wisdom and hope of the women, and to share the complexity of their lives beyond singular narratives of brokenness.

The orientation of the project was cyclical and entailed weaving the research and practice components of the project together; this is relational praxis. This research approach informed by community, Indigenous and liberation psychology approaches has been explicated in previous studies and emphasises relationality, collaboration, intersectionality, strengths, and an empowerment worldview (Sonn & Quayle, 2012; Sonn et al., 2022). Within this broader research approach, the role of stories and storytelling and cultural practice and enactment for decolonial/liberatory praxis was recognised (Montero, et. al., 2017; Sonn et al., 2013).

Stories, storytelling and cultural practice

Storytelling has been espoused as an important methodology and way of knowing in Indigenous scholarship (Kovach, 2009; Martin, 2001; Smith, 2012). Storytelling can be understood as an "ontological condition of social life" (Somers, 1994, p. 613) as it is through stories, "we learn about the world, passed down from generation to generation through the family and cultural groups to which we belong" (Bell, 2010, p. 16). Noonuccal woman Karen Martin expressed the importance of stories for Indigenous peoples stating that "Stories give identity as they connect us and fulfil our sense of belonging" (p. 45).

The denigration and removal of culture was central to colonisation/coloniality, a process which Atkinson (2002) referred to as psychosocial domination/cultural genocide. Therefore "Telling...stories from the past, reclaiming the past, giving testimony to the injustices of the past" and reclaiming, reconnecting and renewing culture through story/storytelling, have been important strategies mobilised by Indigenous peoples as part of the process of decolonisation (Smith, 2012, p. 34). Such work has been identified as fostering resilience, self-determination, and healing within a context of historical trauma and ongoing structural violence (e.g., Feeney, 2009; Kirmayer et al., 2011). We recognise that the women's stories that emerge from their standpoints are pivotal to developing meaningful knowledge for change. Chicana–Tejana lesbian decolonial feminist Gloria Anzaldúa (2007) writes that it is: "only through the body, through the pulling of the flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body..." (p. 97).

For this project, storytelling is both a way of knowing and an embodied method (Martin, 2001). Storytelling is at the centre of Paola Balla's art practice with community including bush dyeing (Sonn et al., 2022), Wayapa ®, as well as the culturally informed trauma-integrated practices of We Al-Li that guides both Rowena and LJ's' ways of working with community. The role of storytelling is central to the work of Judy Atkinson and the We Al-Li approach. In their writing on *Trauma Trails*, Atkinson (2002) explains that the first phase of trauma recovery, is people finding and telling their story and connecting with the collective story.

The current project sought to provide an opportunity for Aboriginal women to engage with and through stories and storytelling and cultural practice as part of remaking and reconnecting with culture and identity given the longer history of dispossession of culture, of Country, of family, of identity. Through stories and storytelling, as collective forms of narrative, people are afforded an opportunity to make sense of their experiences, construct a valued identity, ensure cultural continuity and vitality (Kirmayer et al., 2011) but also to speak back to dominant cultural narratives and silences (Quayle & Sonn, 2019).

Importantly, these stories shared from Indigenous women's standpoint are public pedagogical resources important for all Australians and most relevant to this project, those working with Aboriginal families within the child protection system. Further to this, they are resources that can challenge the deficit that exists in the hermeneutical resources available for understanding Aboriginal lifeworlds within the broader Australian context. This deficit reflects what Fricker (2007) discussed as hermeneutical injustice (a form of epistemic injustice).

Responding to the needs of Aboriginal women: Creating a culturally safe space

This project aimed to provide opportunities for Aboriginal women to strengthen their cultural knowledge and connection to Country and community. To this end, Rowena, LJ and Paola brought their practices together and created two components of the delivery in response to Aboriginal women's needs. Rowena delivered three culturally informed, embodied, family systems workshops and invited LJ, whose practice also draws on the culturally informed trauma integrated approach to healing of We Al-li (see We Al-Li, no date), to deliver the fourth workshop. Following these workshops, Paola delivered four bush dyeing workshops. In the workshops, the Aboriginal women were brought together to share stories about their lives, past, present, and future as they engaged in yarning and cultural practice. During the workshops, traumas were acknowledged in a mindful, conscious manner with the intent of not triggering or exploiting trans generational traumas that are unresolved in families and communities. These workshops are underpinned by the principles of reciprocal dialogue, kindness and non-judgment, as mentioned above-- by "being in good relations".

In telling stories about their lives and their connections with culture, Country, and each other (or loss of connection), the aim was to support the women to understand and narrate the impacts of colonial dispossession on identity, family, community connection, and wellbeing. Informed by Indigenous writing on yarning (further discussed below), the idea of stories and storytelling was also mobilised as method of data collection during the research yarns that followed the workshops. Two of these workshops were immediately followed by one-on-one research yarns with the women. Table 1 below outlines participation in the cultural practice workshops and research yarns.

Table 1. Culturally informed workshops and research yarn: Deliveries and participation

Cultural informed workshops/yarns	No. of deliveries	No. of women	Total no. of participations
Rowena's Culturally informed, embodied, family systems healing approach (including one led by LJ)	4	4*	16
Paola's Bush dyeing workshop	4	4	16
Research yarns	4**	4	16

*This figure does not include the woman who participated the one workshop.

** This figure includes the two one-on-one research yarns which immediately followed the workshops, the group yarn (June 2023) and final research yarn (February 2024).

In the section that follows, we explore these two sets of culturally informed healing workshops in greater detail from the vantage points of Rowena, LJ, and Paola.

Rowena: Culturally informed, embodied, family systems healing approach

For the delivery of the Blak Women's Healing project, I decided to share the practices and concepts of Wayapa®, We Al-li and bring in my knowledge and skills from my Graduate Certificate in Family Therapy and systems training, my experience as a women's group and generalist group facilitator and my positionality and understandings as an Aboriginal and community woman who also lives and works in the Western suburbs of Melbourne.

The way in which I utilised these practices, skills and knowledge was informed by the learning from the previous project (Connecting Aboriginal Women to Country through Local Healing Practices), the conversations, development and needs of this project and through being able to intuitively adapt to the needs of the project participants, and shift from planned delivery whilst still meeting the needs of the project.

In planning for my delivery, I sat within a process of Dadirri and considered what I was able to bring into the space, what stories I had heard from being a community member and the interactions I'd had in previously supporting community members with departmental and organisation/'care' services staff. I also wanted to gently challenge stories that had become dominant community narratives, listen to whether they had access to supports outside of the space, gain a deeper understanding of the roles they did or didn't play in community.

I also spent time in understanding how to weave together my responsibilities to the creation of space – cultural responsibilities around 'if you open a circle you must close it', the depth of the conversations – whilst being fully conscious of my accountability in attempting to not re traumatise or cause further harm to the women from within and external to the process, my responsibility to story and understanding that the women either had their children with them or would go home to their children and families.

I saw my role as a facilitator as aiming to hold a safe space, that was culturally supportive, trauma informed and integrated and contributed to healing for the participants. The research staff that were present in the research workshops were also invited to participate in the workshop delivery sessions. This was approved by the participants and, I believe, contributed to the richness of the conversations and the depth the conversations and vulnerability could go to. The researchers that attended the sessions, were predominantly 'insiders' and contributed to the sharing of stories, whilst being fully mindful of why we were holding space and who that space was for.

For further information about Rowena's practices please refer to Appendix A.

Wayapa ®cards used by Rowena

Laura Jane: Culturally informed trauma approach

For the workshops I had hoped to show how, when women are brought together, we can work through and develop positive therapeutic responses that try to emulate cultural frameworks and Blak knowledge whilst being authentically honest with ourselves and each other about the limitations and barriers, which is inclusive of our own experiences and how this works as a strength and a trigger. I spend much time during the workshops being relational with all the women getting to know them, acknowledging their stories and sharing some of my own, believing their truths and respecting their agency.

What I have witnessed in this space is the women's relational collectiveness, strength and eagerness to be vulnerable and raw, even though it is scary and perhaps historically has not been safe. During the workshops I observed women sharing their traumatic experiences from childhood, family violence, and structural violence. As a group, we were able to connect these experiences to the effects of colonisation. We recognised the severity and lasting impact of these experiences but also acknowledged that with the right interventions, they can be overcome. This understanding served as the foundation for building safe spaces through relational practices, as Atkinson (2020) outlined.

The essential, natural practice of connecting is the core of my practice as a First Nations healing practitioner. For the workshops, I drew on We Al-li practices and prompts as well as non-Indigenous and Indigenous theories of art therapy in order to assist with reflective story mapping to reconstruct the experiences of grief, loss and trauma - with the hope of promoting connection, confidence and engagement in the healing process.

For further information on LJ's practices please refer to Appendix B.

Paola: Bush dyeing workshops

Bush dyeing is a creative art practice of making healing cloths using indigenous local flora (Balla, 2020). It is a form of journaling as they are about mark making. Creating the bush dyed fabrics, scarves or clothing is a way to respond to Country, trauma, memory, and give healing opportunities (Balla, 2020). The practice of bush dyeing provides an opportunity for people to re-root themselves to culture and Country (Tunstall, 2015). In her arts and healing practice, Balla (2020) has found that, because bush dyeing process it is deliberate, careful, and thoughtful slow work, the women come into a present state of being and doing. These meditative practices are both cultural practices of being with Country and with other Aboriginal Peoples, for women, in women's business, of yarning and listening and gathering. It also involves creating a space to be validated, heard, and to practice just being.

For further information on Paola's practice please refer to Appendix C.

KJ lighting the fire for the group research yarn

Paola preparing the dyeing pot

Wrapped up material after being boiled and removed from the bush dyeing brew

Dyeing pot with boiled bush brew

Women placing plant and metal material on silk material and wrapping

Examples of bush dyed fabrics with their own unique colours and patterns

Learning with the women: Research yarns

Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) have described yarning as "an Indigenous cultural form of conversation" (p. 37) and suggested that yarning is "conducive to an Indigenous way of doing things; its strength is in the cultural security that it creates for Indigenous people participating in research" (p. 47). Bessarab and Ng'andu identified four types of yarning, one being research topic yarning. In research topic yarning, "both the researcher and participant journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study. Yarning is a process that requires the researcher to develop and build a relationship that is accountable to Indigenous people participating in the research" (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 38). Yarning encourages participants to speak freely and therefore makes possible the exploration of the research topic in greater depth than more formal interview styles (Fredericks et al., 2011). Central to this informal approach to data collection is the emphasis placed on "forming relationships that are based on equal and respectful partnerships, support, cooperation and respect" (Fredericks et al., 2011, p. 16).

After eight workshops the women were invited to participate in a group research yarn which took place in June 2023. For this, the women chose to gather around a fire pit to share stories and yarn about their own experiences of healing and to reflect on the process of engaging in the workshops as well as their encounters with child protection services (see Appendix D). During the research yarns, the children who accompanied their mums or aunties were occupied with activities led by members of project team. Many times, the children would come in and out of the research yarns. It was important to create space for the children to be part of the cultural activities and research yarns. This inclusive approach enabled the children to engage the cultural activities and a greater opportunity for the parents/carers to take part in the project.

Photo of the June yarn, 2023

Analysing the women's yarns: Collaborative iterative analysis

These research yarns, which were recorded by Karen using an iPhone application, were transcribed and analysed. The analysis of the yarns was a collaborative effort that was guided by principles of reciprocity and accountability (Balla et al., 2022; Fredericks et al., 2011). This collaborative method necessitated that the analytical phase be flexible and prolonged. This collaborative approach was imperative to yielding relevant and meaningful knowledge that captured the outcomes of the culturally informed healing workshops and the women's experience with the child protection system. The project team met multiple times throughout the analysis phase. These analysis meetings were facilitated by Rowena, Karen and Paola. During these meetings, the aims of the project were revisited, and the emerging themes were shared and discussed between the project team members.

Efforts were made to involve and seek the women's input into the analysis of the research yarns. The final research yarn to bring the women together on the project findings was cancelled and rebooked for a later date as a few of the women were not able to attend on the day. The final research yarn took place in February 2024 and was attended by two of the four women. Various factors made it difficult for the women to attend sessions including time constraints related to parental roles and travel, health concerns and communication barriers arising from not having sufficient phone credit to make and receive phone calls.

During our final research yarn, the themes from the first two research yarns and researcher observations were shared with the women. The women were asked for input on the relevance of the themes, and whether these themes resonated with their experiences. We also asked for the women's perspectives on framing the analysis around the concept of 'violence'. Susan and Tanya explained that using violence to frame the analysis was very appropriate:

> **Susan:** I love the word violence. In terms of the effect, like what, because it actually talks to you, it is violent and if the government wants to go on about how they're against family violence, yes, but there's violence happening within, but you can't put it, you know, do the violence against us.
>
> **Tanya:** It's chaos, it's absolute chaos and violence. (February yarn, 2024)

The collaborative approach to the analysis enabled storying and restorying the themes so that they resonated with the realities of the women. The women validated and/or further expanded on the themes. New themes (e.g., lack of organisational governance, accountability and independence) also emerged during this yarn. The women's insights were recorded and mapped onto butcher's paper. The feedback was summarised and reviewed by the researchers and incorporated into the analysis, as part of the cycle of feedback and co-analysis. In Table 2 we outline of the steps that were taken to explore and identify key themes from the research yarns.

Table 2. The collaborative iterative analysis of the research yarns

Stage	Actions	Description
Step 1	Project team meeting 1	Attended by all team members. Collaborative discussions, setting key areas of focus. What are the community issues and concerns, what are the women saying and what are the aims of the research?
Step 2	Developing themes	Drawing on the project team meeting discussions (step 1), transcripts were read, and themes were drafted by Lutfiye.
Step 3	Project team meeting 2	Emerging themes were reviewed and discussed by the team members. Community consultation workshop was organised to bring the findings back to the women.
Step 4	Project team meeting 3	Lutfiye and Rowena revisited the themes and preparations were made for the community consultation workshop.
Step 5	Project team meeting 4	Refining the analysis and discussion about the workshop.
Step 6	Group research yarn	Postposed due to low numbers.
Step 7	Project team meeting 5	Chris and Lutfiye worked on refining the analysis.
Step 8	Final research yarn	A two- and half-hour workshop attended by Tanya, Susan, Karen and Lutfiye. Themes were reviewed, discussed, and reanalysed.
Step 9	Project team meeting 6	Refining of the analysis by Lutfiye, Chris, Paola and KJ considering the feedback from the final research yarn (step 8).
Step 10	Project team meeting 7	Lutfiye, Chris, Rowena, Paola, KJ, and Amy. Further analysis through process of writing up. Focus on developing the child protection Staff workshop. Foreground the themes on violence.

PART TWO

OUTCOMES OF THE CULTURALLY INFORMED HEALING WORKSHOPS

The aim of this project was to deliver culturally informed healing workshops for Aboriginal women curated by Rowena, Paola and LJ. Along with exploring the women's experiences and understandings of where their lives were derailed, as well as with the child protection system, the aim of these workshops was to create a culturally safe space where they could strengthen their connection to culture, Country and each other as Aboriginal women to foster their social and emotional wellbeing. The cultural practices mobilised within the workshops were vehicles through which a culturally safe space could be created to provide opportunities for connection and for stories to be told. As the workshops progressed, the women increasingly looked forward to the workshops. The workshops became an important space that provided the opportunity for the women to share, reflect and connect with one another and in turn support one another. All the women had a story they shared, named, and at points, transformed. The women used the space to make sense of their life and world. The space became a meaningful part of their lives as reflected in the illustrative quotes below:

> **Tanya:** I have come to this group for the last month, how many weeks we've been going, you know, I actually look forward to it.
>
> **Hazel:** Like, what am I gonna do without this mob every second week?
>
> **Tanya:** There's something to look forward to. It's something to connect with. It's something to talk about. (June yarn, 2023)

Three overarching themes were constructed through the collaborative analysis of the outcomes of the workshops, and are presented below:

- (Re)connection and strengthening cultural identity: Facilitating agency and change
- (Re)building community: Shifting from lateral violence to lateral love
- (Re)narrating stories together: Placing blame and shame where it belongs

In the following section, these themes are presented and are illustrated with the women's voices from the research yarns.

(Re)connecting and strengthening cultural identity: Facilitating agency and change

The women discussed how participating in the culturally informed healing workshops had strengthened their connection to their cultural identity and the safety and healing power of the workshops. The workshops and the yarns offered a space for the women to reconnect with their cultural identity. At points, revelations between kinship connections unfolded, and the women started connecting through these kindship groups. The workshops and yarns offered a space to centre their worldviews and reflect on violence and injustice. Tanya and Hazel spoke about the impact of colonisation, and their survival and strength in the face of colonisation. The women highlighted the importance of centring, retrieving and spreading ways of knowing among Aboriginal people outside of the group:

Tanya: Western medicine is not for us, it's not for our bloodline.

Hazel: Well, it's foreign to us. Like, you know, less than 250 years and our bodies have been exposed to sugar, tobacco and oil and, you know, crap like that. And, yeah, for tens of thousands of years we've survived and done so healthily.

Hazel: Yeah, exactly. (June yarn, 2023)

Tanya: So many of our young people are lost at the moment.

Hazel: So many of our people, regardless of the age like suicide and incarceration rates. We need to find a way to get back to some sort of holistic approach and some sort of realisation that this is not who we are meant to be.

Rowena: Too many Western systems

Hazel: Yeah, exactly. And too much lost in not even translation, just taken and lost. And the good thing is, some people are starting to bring those things back. Well, we all need to start doing it. Whatever we learn from someone else, we go on to increase it and teach someone else. (June yarn, 2023)

Evident here is the sense of responsibility or the commitment to sharing and bringing culture back as a means of responding to issues impacting community "like suicide and incarceration rates".

The women discussed how they have been reconnecting and reengaging with their cultural identity and ways of knowing through their participation in the workshops. The women offered examples of how, since participating in the workshops, they have engaged in cultural practices as 'daily acts of repair' (Balla, 2020; 2023). Balla (2020), using Kim Kruger's description, defines daily acts of repair as forms of maintenance necessitated by and imperative to surviving the oppression of colonial structures.

The culturally informed healing workshops offered the women a space to yarn and reflect about the various reason why they've had limited, or no access, to cultural practices, as well as to reflect on the practices that they have been engaged in since taking part in the workshops and the impact of these workshops.

LJ: for me personally, I do a lot more now. It's not this thing that's out of reach, you know.

Hazel: Yeah. Or something, you forget to do something that's only natural and again, but, you know, before we sort of put it on the back burner, I guess.

Tanya: Yeah, you're very busy in your life. You, you don't, you just don't, you so busy to do it. Like I said to the girls today, I've been really unwell constantly. I said I've got to go to the beach, I've got to *reconnect*. I've got to get back.

LJ: after we did the bush dyeing with Paola, when the girls, I boiled up

some of the eucalyptus leaves and the salt bush and I put it in all the diffusers in the bath and stuff, which is not something I've ever done before, but because of how it smelt when we were doing the bush dyeing. And she said, you know, like I'll never forget what she told us about the, the story of like the story of the women like digging like the, the dirt and the mud and then like putting like you sat in it and put the, the leaves on you and to like, get rid of all different types of sickness.

Hazel: traditionally we've always done, but we've forgotten that we've done all, you know, you don't realize that, that, you know, but it's a part of us.

Tanya: there's also a blueprint. Like when we need information resource, pull it out. It's, it's in our, it's who we are. So, for instance, if I'm out Bush and I see someone injured, I don't have a first aid kit on me. The first thing I do is go Bush. I get what I need from the Bush to look after who I, whoever I need to. So, yeah, it's, it's in our brain.

Hazel: It's in our, well, after tens of thousands of years it's had to be, we've just, you know, it's just been pushed back by colonisation and, and Western cultures.

Tanya: And I love how, you know, we've got people like Rowena and Paola, you know, Susan and all of them that are bringing those traditional cultures back and reminding us how important they are. But they do *connect* us. This is, what gives us our cultural identity, you know, it's good to see it. (June yarn, 2023)

Captured here is the belief that this cultural knowledge and practice is part of who they are, that it connects them, and thus the importance of "bringing those traditional cultures back".

The women also used the space to tell stories about their connection to Country. Tanya explained that "you got to use your eyes and ears and listen for Country to reveal itself. Just got to be quiet sometimes and just *connect*". Susan expands on this by sharing how she feels more connected to Country since participating in the group. She explains that "the way Country has been revealing itself mostly in the last few months is incredible". Susan goes on to say that:

Susan: I was at the city council; the council has these manicured gardens all very English manicured looking. There is this gumtree that has been there in pre colonisation. But you can see somehow the tree has managed to keep itself under wraps to look manicured. And I was just sitting there staring at it and I'm like, wow, this tree somehow knows the way to survive is to fit in. So even the, the gum tree, the gum nuts are not, you can't really see them, and it hasn't really let go of any of the gum nuts either. The tree she's holding on to these like they're years old. I'm like, like, it's so they're so weathered. She doesn't want to drop it. She doesn't wanna, I call her, I felt she was feminine and she's, I was like, oh, I don't know if this is well, but I was like... "let it go, let it go, sweetheart. Let it drop". (June yarn, 2023)

Hazel also explained how she engages in cultural practice in her daily acts of repair and recovery:

> **Hazel:** It just really *connects* me back to, I guess to, to traditional stuff. I'll be making possum skin balls like the the ones that we traditionally make. So, yeah, it really makes me think like, you know, how hard it must have been back then. And even, you know, learning that some that the baby before the baby was born, the mum would get the skin ready and then each year, that the tails would indicate how many years old the person was. And, and even, you know, when the little ones didn't survive, they'd wrap them up in the, the possum skins and put them high up in the tree so that the animals didn't get them. Like it just different methods to, to get on with what needs to be done in life. (June yarn, 2023)

As demonstrated in these excerpts, the women spoke about the importance of reviving culture and of sharing cultural practices with community. It was evident in their discussions that by engaging in cultural practice the women are claiming culture to make change. Hazel explained the is finally being recognised as "a champion of my people", and goes on to say:

> **Hazel:** and it's inspired... I'm putting together for NIADOC week at Volunteer West based on my mob's traditional stories and, and, you know, things like that. So, it's inspired me to get back to who I am and, and, and you know, take what matters to me and make everyone know about it as much as possible.
>
> **Tanya:** Warriors. Thats what we are. The groups made us strong,
>
> **Hazel:** Yeah, stronger. I was already strong.
>
> **Tanya:** Stronger (laughter). (June yarn, 2023)

In the space of the research yarns, Rowena spoke about her commitment to culture and being an agent of change. Rowena explains that she is not waiting around for systems to change and meet the needs of the people they are meant to serve. Working from a decolonised model, she has deliberately chosen not to study psychology and social work due to the level of harm these areas inflict on many people. Instead, she holds space for people to reconnect with their own cultural knowledges and histories to create opportunities to heal and restore strong identity and connections:

> **Rowena:** So, the way I've decided to do with this stuff is to create. I've been educated. I've chosen not to be a psychologist. I've chosen not to be a social worker. I'm creating my own model. So, it's gonna take longer to get there. Oh, look. But I'm not sitting around waiting for them to change the system cause they are not going to change. (June yarn, 2023)

For these women, it was understood that by reconnecting and reclaiming culture and engaging in cultural practices, they were reclaiming and reconnecting with who they are and with each other, and this is central to individual and community wellbeing.

(Re)building community: Shifting from lateral violence to lateral love

Lateral violence is the tendency for oppressed groups to direct hostility to one another (Whyman, et. al., 2023). Lateral violence in Aboriginal communities has been attributed to the impact of settler colonialism and domination and oppression. Frankland and Lewis (2011) explained lateral violence as internalised racism and described it as:

> the organised, harmful behaviours that we do to each other collectively as part of an oppressed group: within our families; within our organisations and; within our communities. When we are consistently oppressed, we live with great fear and great anger, and we often turn on those who are closest to us.

Whyman et al. (2024) explained that strategies for coping and dealing with lateral violence include "changes in attitude towards lateral violence, connecting with others, connection to culture and community and improving wellbeing, education, and systemic strategies" (p. 3).

Within this project, the women were able to be more vulnerable and build trust with each other over time leading to them feeling safe. LJ explained that she felt "comforted" and "held" by the group and "surprised" at how much she had shared in the workshops. Similarly, Susan explained she was able to connect more openly. The women reflected on the safety of the workshops and how it enabled them to feel safe. This safety comes from not having to "defend oneself", for "competition", "judging", "criticising" and entailed being vulnerable together as conveyed in the exchange below:

> **Hazel:** What Paola and I were talking about how much we've all grown and how much we've all opened up to each other and, yeah, less defensive when I first see somebody.
>
> **Tanya:** We're not in survival mode when we're in this group. Like we don't have to be in survival mode. We can breathe, we don't have to justify. We don't have to scramble and defend ourselves. We can just be in a space where we're safe.
>
> **Tanya:** That's what it is.
>
> **Hazel:** No competition...we (are not) in survival mode about, in the group
>
> **Hazel:** I've got such a good vibe to it. I just, it, it just ticks so many boxes in that you walk, like you pull in and it just makes you feel good and like its just black fellows, it, it just feels right.
>
> **Susan:** Yeah, I can just come and then, like, normally I would say I'm sick when I wasn't sick. I was just like; I'm not dealing with life today. But I know I could come.
>
> **Hazel:** No expectations.
>
> **Susan:** Yeah. If I was coming, like, even last week I didn't physically do the dying last fortnight. But I sat on the couch but just sitting on the couch and, you know, helping my kids be part of it

LJ: So, the power of being able to be vulnerable safely.

Susan: Yeah, that's one

Hazel: And not judged and not criticised and not, not, having to defend or answer to, to what's, what's the reason for why you like or like anything like it just.

Susan: Yeah. And in that, you know what I learned, so when I get loud and talk, it's me trying to overt talk what's actually happening for me. But here I didn't feel the need to do that. I could just still see in my skin but, you know, I didn't actually know I was doing that like there was, I didn't know. (June yarn, 2023)

In the context of the culturally safe workshops, the women moved from the anticipation of lateral violence to lateral love[2]. Brian Butler and Nicola Butler introduced lateral love as a mechanism for healing to counter lateral violence in Aboriginal communities. They argue that there cannot be culturally safe environments without lateral love and that such environs are central to healing, for "creating opportunities for a positive collective consciousness shift that will impact the way we approach, address, interpret, react and interact with individuals, our families and our communities" (Lateral Love® Australia, N.D.; see also Clark et al., 2024 on lateral empowerment).

The women engaged in the culturally safe space to talk about how their relationships with one another has developed into ways of being that is about care and love for self and others. Borrowing from Lugones (2003), the women travel into each other's world, listen, make space and witness each other's experiences. The women learnt about each other, and themselves through each other's experiences, enabling them to engage in meaningful, authentic, and transparent dialogue (Ali et.al., 2022). This process of world traveling enabled the women to cultivate lateral love or what Lugones calls "loving perception". This leads to the women connecting and displaying lateral love to one another outside of the group. In the following exchange, the women recall how they encountered and connected with one another at a community event. Lateral love is evident in their excitement in seeing one another, how they connected in "such strong ways" and gestures they displayed for one another at this community event:

Susan: Oh, and what about when I saw you at that event? Random event? I just grabbed you and hugged you. Yeah, because it was so exciting.

Hazel: She told everybody she loved me (laughing) and we just met. Yeah. No, it was just, we just connected.

Susan: That was the,

Hazel: the high tea thing the day one.

Susan: Yeah, there's so many people here and I was so excited to see you because it was, like, from one side of the room to the other, you're my person.

Hazel: It didn't feel weird at all for anybody to look at.

Rowena: and I was going to instinctively put a plate away for you

Hazel: That's what I mean, connected in such, in such strong ways. (June yarn, 2023)

2 We borrow the term lateral love from the Lateral Love® Australia campaign founded and directed by Brian Butler and Nicola Butler. This campaign is a decade long that aims to counteract lateral violence within Aboriginal communities with lateral love. See also William Butler (and niece Nicola Butler) discussion the notion of lateral love in response to the issue of lateral violence within Aboriginal communities in Australia: https://thestringer.com.au/understanding-brian-butler-and-lateral-love-653

Lateral love also enabled Susan to overcome her freeze response when she encounters community members. Tanya and LJ also note the value in acknowledging and being acknowledged by others, and how this is not typical of them:

> **Susan:** Oh, and I saw you (Rowena) yesterday... because I struggled with not being in control in that situation where I've walked in and then you're there, I would normally freeze hard. Like *'I am seeing, I'm not in my natural environment. I can't control the situation right now'*.
>
> **Tanya:** I hesitated to touch you because I saw you first. I went, I trust this person. I do it and I stepped forward. I normally wouldn't do that, I would normally go backwards you know it, you, and wanted to identify that I was in your space.
>
> **Susan:** Bless you.
>
> **Tanya:** It was big
>
> **LJ:** But just, I was grateful when you came up to me in the shopping centre and said hello. Normally I would be quite lucky if they don't see you or say something first, you sort of like, oh, I won't say anything.
>
> **Susan:** I would feel out of control and a bit.
>
> **Tanya:** Yeah, but we were ok. We are had our yarn and then we were on our way. (June yarn, 2023)

(Re)narrating stories together: Placing blame and shame where it belongs

The connection between the women enabled them to collectively narrate and re-narrate their stories about themselves and about their suffering. Fuelled with lateral love and loving perception, workshops offered a culturally safe space for the women to express and challenge the narratives they each have internalised. This is clear in the above extract when Tanya reminds Susan that she was "ok" at the community event, meaning she overcame her pattern of running away. In the following two-part exchange, the women (re)narrate Susan's internalised story of being a bad mum. It is important to note when Susan speaks about being a bad mum, she speaks in third person, indicating an internalised narrative, a narrative that others have narrated for her/ about her:

> **Susan:** I used to think that "you were a bad mom". Yeah, it happens every day, but we still won't. I think that will forever happen. And there's some parts where I kind of like, my parenting faux pas.
>
> **Hazel:** But yeah, exactly. Now, you know, they're faux pas, they're not real and the fact of always,
>
> **Susan:** yeah, I trust people a little bit, trust people enough. I think everyone's bad. (June yarn, 2023)

The space enabled the women to share, learn about and validate one another's struggles. Through story sharing the women were able to see how their individual experiences were not unique and isolated issues- the women connected their stories with the collective story (Atkinson, 2002). Together they transcend colonial binaries that have functioned to disconnect personal struggles from historical intergenerational trauma and ongoing structural violence. Together the women found the broader common ground to shed light on the colonial relations of power and together they (re)narrated where blame and shame belongs:

Susan: I think through this group I've learned to be able to connect... Instead of just, okay, when things got really bad, I would run away.... Definitely, the connection. It's only this group that have I started to connect (with) as opposed to either just ranting or... And then running... I don't know what I'm saying. Describe what I said.

Karen: But why did that happen?

LJ: Self compassion.

Susan: Yeah, but also, even though my experience is unique, I'm not alone. My journey's not unique, but it's unique. It was great to hear other people's stories as hard as they were and hearing about other people's traumas because I've always felt alone and ashamed... Well I probably because there is that hearing other people's similar upbringing and traumas is believing.

Karen: Yeah. And it's the things you carry that you don't show, but now you can show bits of it but still *connect* without having to run.

Susan: Would that be ashamed? For some reason I've always... Even though I know nothing, none of it's my fault like my childhood was never my fault. I've always felt this burden of presenting together and presenting functionally. And as I've gotten older, especially in the last five years, has gotten almost impossible sometimes to function. But then I'd run away and hide and people wouldn't hear from me for months or I would deal with it privately, but I'd been able to *connect*. Does that make sense?

Hazel: I'm so surprised at how I've opened up in this group. (June yarn, 2023)

Part 2 Conclusion

Overall, these findings have highlighted that the women experienced the space created by the workshops as culturally safe. The space allowed the women to reconnect and strengthen cultural identity, rebuild connections and be vulnerable with one another. Within this safe space, the women felt comfortable to speak about difficult experiences and the various forms of violence that they have experienced throughout their lives. In doing so, the women made connections between their individual experiences and collectively renarrated and challenged internalised narratives. While a couple of the women spoke briefly about physical and sexual violence within the family context, all the women spoke at great length about their encounters within institutions, in particular, the child protection system, and how these encounters were experienced as forms of violence. The following section focuses on the various types of violence the women encountered through the child protection system.

PART THREE

ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S ENCOUNTERS WITH CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES

The conception of violence that informs our analysis is influenced by Indigenous scholarship on the everyday violence of whiteness or what Moreton-Robinson (2009) described as patriarchal white sovereignty, a regime of power that relies upon a discourse of Indigenous pathology and "enables law and government to intervene in the lives of Indigenous people to let them live and to make them live as welfare dependent citizens, not as property owning subjects with sovereign resource rights" (p. 77). Moreton-Robinson (2003) therefore used the concept of postcolonising (rather than post-colonial), emphasising that the colonisers never left and the post-colonial here remains based on whiteness. As articulated by Moreton-Robinson (2004) "whiteness is constitutive of the epistemology of the West; it is an invisible regime of power that secures hegemony through discourse and has material effects in everyday life" (p. 75). This understanding resonates with writing on the coloniality of power (Grosfoguel et al., 2015; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2000), where power is understood as expressed in and through actions and discourses within institutions, social and cultural systems tied to longer histories of settler colonialism. Violence is expressed epistemically and in everyday social relations with varied implications for differently positioned actors within settler colonial power relations (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015).

Central to coloniality is epistemic violence. Post-colonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" (Spivak, 1988) characterises epistemic violence as a process in which colonial subject's voices, worldviews and knowledges are denied, silenced or delegitimised. Epistemic violence is a slow violence, often invisible to those who practice it (Pérez, 2019). Epistemic violence can unfold in diverse ways (Pérez, 2019). For example, Fricker (2007) identified two forms of epistemic injustice; testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs "wherein a speaker receives an unfair deficit of credibility from a hearer owing to prejudice on the hearer's part" (Fricker, 2007. p. 9). Hermeneutical injustice refers to "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resources" (Fricker, 2007, p. 155). Arguably, within the Australian context, the dominant cultural narratives drawn on to understand Aboriginal people typically "locate the source of the problem in Aboriginal people and culture, and deny, minimise, or silence the reality of coloniality, by and within which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal subjectivities are constituted" (Quayle et al., 2017, p. 92).

In seeking to make sense of the women's understandings and experiences of violence, we also found recent scholarship theorising praxical violence (Daher et. al., 2024) particularly useful. Daher et al. (2024) explain that although services are designed with the intention of meeting community needs in mind, violence may still occur. They introduced the concept of praxical violence to bring to light violence that occurs in policy and programs, arguing that the concept of epistemic violence is limited to violence in knowledge production processes. They define praxical violence "as the exercise of asymmetrical power in symbolic and practical dimensions, by a subject who exercises it and an object towards which the violence is directed, establishing a relationship that is detrimental to the actors involved and the aims of public policy". Praxical violence takes shape symbolically and through practice. These two elements of praxical violence are interlinked whereby one produces the other. Daher et al. (2024) further explains:

we understand praxical violence considering, on the one hand, these symbolic elements that refer to discursive or theoretical aspects, for example, how they are named or they think about people, roles, programs and, on the other hand, practical elements, associated with actions, but also with inactions, for example, how the different actors treat each other or relate to each other.

In the following analysis we draw on the concepts of epistemic and praxical violence to understand the violence the women experienced in their encounters with child protection. During the yarns the women also spoke at great length about the impact of violence which the women refer to as "transgenerational welfare trauma". Figure 2 provides a visual overview of the violence encountered by the women, as well as its impacts for individuals, families and communities-transgenerational welfare trauma. As detailed in the section above, we situate the violence depicted in this figure, or more so experienced by the women, within and enabled by the post colonising context of Australia.

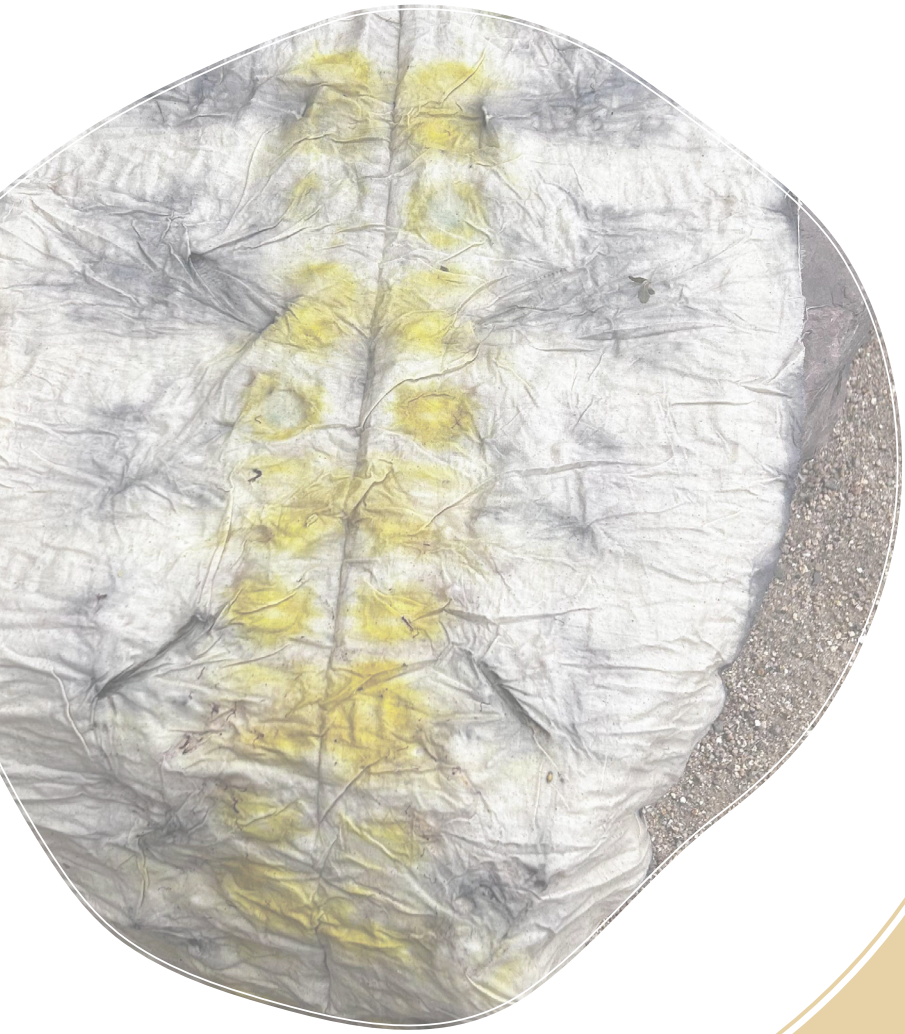
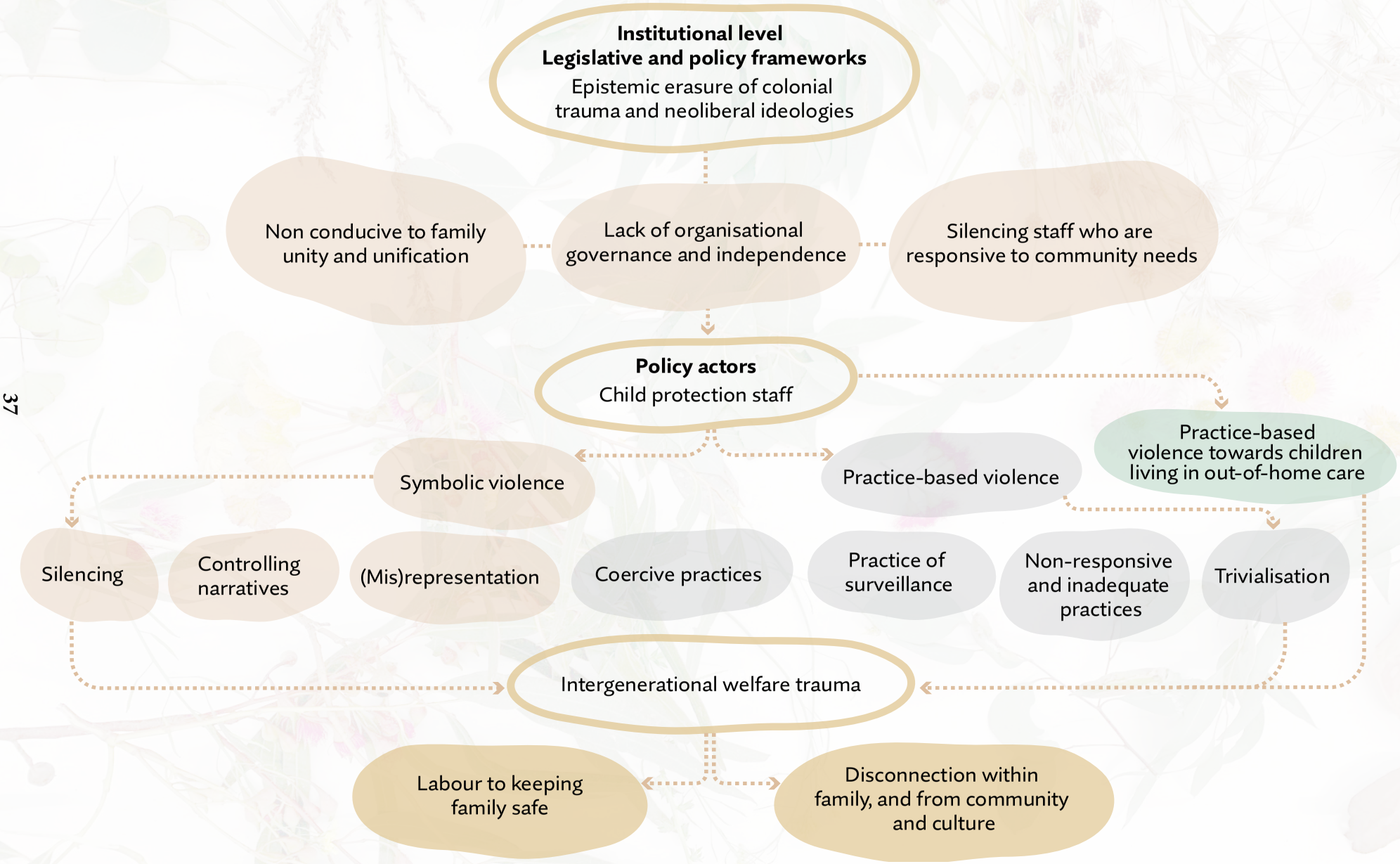


Figure 2. Child protection services and praxical violence



Praxical violence: Epistemic erasure of colonial trauma and neoliberal ideologies

Praxical violence occurs at an institutional level, within the frameworks and legislation that inform child protection services. Praxical violence works at an institutional level and occurs through the epistemic erasure of history and denial of the continuity of colonial trauma within Aboriginal families and through neoliberal discourses.

The *Aboriginal Child Placement Principal Guide* and the *Children Youth and Families Act 2005* which includes *the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles*, emphasise the importance of child protection and placement services ensuring Aboriginal children remain connected to family, community and culture (Department of Family, Fairness and Housing [DFFH], 2021). While explicit emphasis is placed on cultural connection, protecting kinships and connection to community, these legislative and policy frameworks fail to recognise the historical and contemporary trauma that continues to impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. This erasure is concerning given that the structural drivers of children entering out-of-home care, and the impact of intergenerational trauma resulting from Australia's colonial systems on Aboriginal families are widely recognised (see SNAICC, 2020).

The women's yarns demonstrate how neoliberal framing (e.g., time frames and KPI's), and this erasure becomes non conducive to family unity and unification, the way it shapes ACCO's and their lack of independence, and the implications for staff who try to advocate for families in a meaningful way.

Non conducive to family unity and unification

Throughout the yarns, the women spoke about child protection services not being conducive to a positive outcome as the processes do not adequately recognise or respond to the trauma and the complex needs of Aboriginal families. In addition to working within frameworks that do not recognise the complex needs of Aboriginal families that has resulted from settler colonialism and trauma, the women point to time frames and KPI's that texture the work of child protection staff. They explain that these are not conducive to positive outcomes for families. The women's concerns speak to the neoliberalism of child protection frameworks that require staff work with families in neoliberal ways that construct families through timeframes and KPI's.

> **LJ:** A support worker the other day and she said you have three months to engage with the family and then after that, you close and then there's a certain waiting period before you can reopen with them. Like that doesn't make sense to me because there's still, it doesn't really address the generational systems-based trauma. (June yarn 2023)

> **LJ:** Time limit on how often you can work with a family or how often you can see them or where you can refer them or how much, how much you can do for them is so limited and often isn't conducive with the needs of Aboriginal families
>
> **Hazel:** Any family, but especially First Nations and, and people with disabilities or families with kids with disabilities as well and, and also family violence and rape survivors. It, it just, it's not conducive to a positive outcome for anyone if you're all about just the time and the time frame and the KPI's. (June yarn, 2023)

This issue was also highlighted in the Yoorrook for Justice report (2023), which stated:

> Once a child is removed from their family, the strict time limits for family reunification operate unfairly for Aboriginal parents, who are less likely to be able to access supports needed to address protective concerns within those timeframes. (p. 20)

There is an epistemic erasure of the continuity of colonial trauma in the lives of Aboriginal women within child protection frameworks. This, coupled with neoliberal undertones of frameworks and policies, results in the removal of children from their families, which is further explored in the following section. While this is enacted by protective service workers, it is enabled through these institutional policies.

Lack of organizational governance and independence

Child protection services work with authorised Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation's (ACCO's) to deliver responsive and culturally safe services to Aboriginal children and families. Efforts have been made to transition the care of Aboriginal children involved with child protection to the care and case management of ACCO's through the *Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program,* pursuant to section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Victorian State Government, 2022). The percentage of Aboriginal children and young people under the authority of an ACCO between 2017-2018 was 1.6% and increased to 8.6% for the period between 2021-2022 (Victorian State Government, 2022). According to the transition guidelines (Victorian State Government, 2018) ACCO's:

> are funded to deliver services as outlined in the Department of Health and Human Service's policy and funding guidelines (volume 3), which provides organisations with information about the department's policy framework, objectives, budget, service deliverables, desired outcomes and reporting requirements, program guidelines and funding initiatives. (Victorian state Government, 2018; p.12).

Despite the transfer of services to ACCO's, the framing of services remains the same. So, as noted by the women, changing the content therein can only achieve so much. Under the banner of self-determination, ACCO's are required deliver child protection services that comply with the legislative and frameworks set out by the Department.

During the yarns, the women shared concerns about the continued governance and lack of accountability and independent oversight of child protection. Susan explained how even case managers meant to advocate for families are constrained by the policies of their organisation.

> **Susan:** It's its own body with its own finances. They can make up their own rules. VACCA and VACCHO, because they're paid by child protection, they have to adhere to child protection. So, all these people are not independent.
>
> **Tanya:** Child protection has too many fingers in the pie.
>
> **Susan:** Even though they're advocating. someone who's not child protection that money comes with the, with rules and that, that money comes with, you must abide by "our" (child protection) way.
>
> **Tanya:** Unofficially, they're still continuing- the removal of children. Why are they not being held accountable for this?
>
> **Susan:** Because there's no one to hold them accountable because all the money comes from, there is no independent body... that money comes with attachments of conditions and stuff, services, case managers advocating for you (are not independent). (February yarn, 2024)

Silencing staff who are responsive to community needs

Daher et al. (2024) explains that because institutional frameworks and policies view families as numbers, staff are required to work in ways without developing relationships with families. During the yarns, the women spoke about what happens to "better workers", meaning those who are responsive to the needs of Aboriginal clients. They were cognisant of how these staff members were problematised and treated badly by the system. In the following excerpt, praxical violence is directed from the institution to its own staff. Susan explains that a case worker who had built rapport and wanted to help build her sisters capacity had left his role as a child protection officer, in turn impacting her sister. The staff member is told that he cannot be responsive to the family's needs, because he needs to meet the time frames and KPI's. He is silenced by the child protection policy framework:

> **Hazel:** And the better a worker, the more that they're treated badly and seen as somebody who's not just like doesn't conform to, to what they see is what a worker should be.
>
> **Susan:** The worker just now. He was incredible. He understood that my sister has never, ever, not been sexually abused ever. And he wanted to help build her capacity and safely. He had such the, the carer and her got along with it. It was such, it's beautiful. But he's like, I can't deal with the child protection system. He was, he, she talked about things she's never talked about before, but he had to leave because of his about he's been shut down. No, that's not. You got, you ain't got time to do that. Usually with 10 other people, blah, blah, blah
>
> **Hazel:** legislation that doesn't allow in a policy. (June yarn, 2023)

The negative organisational culture of statutory child protection agencies and the negative outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities that stem from this was highlighted in the work of Fiona Oates (2019, 2020) who interviewed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection practitioners about their experiences (see also Lonne et al., 2013). Specifically, participants within this study, resonating with the voices of Aboriginal women in our study, had emphasised a perceived unwillingness of child protection agencies to implement practice changes to reduce the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in the system as well as the inadequacy/lack of cultural responsiveness of the services and programs provided. Participants also emphasised the lack of recognition of underlying trauma as the cause of parental dysfunctionality and the time required to make change to "negative lifestyle patterns fuelled by trauma" (p. 175), sentiments clearly expressed by the women in this study also.

Policy actors: Praxical violence towards the women and their families

Institutional frameworks, that are built on asymmetrical power relations and understandings of families that are decontextualised with neoliberal undertones, enables praxical violence to occur by the people who act out the policies towards Aboriginal families. At an epistemic level, it creates problematic subjects, as well as violent practices enabled by a negative organisational culture (Oates, 2020). The following section explores the symbolic and practice-based violence experienced by the women in their direct encounters with child protection staff. While we present these separately, it is important to emphasise that they are inextricably linked- the symbolic violence informs and legitimates the practice-based violence; the one feeds the other.

Symbolic violence

Symbolic forms of praxical violence were evident in the way women are denied epistemic authority and instead silenced, and narrated without context as incapable, and (mis)represented and pathologised as 'bad' parents by child protection workers.

Silencing

Child protection workers are afforded with epistemic power as they are constructed as having legitimate knowledge. Aboriginal mothers on the other hand are seen as incapable of conceptualising their own realities. In the context of their encounters with child protection, the knowledges of Aboriginal mothers are disqualified, and they are seen as being incapable of parenting. Epistemic injustice is evident in the way they are denied their capacity as knowers:

> **Tanya:** You have to, when child protection is coming in that door, you switch off as a parent, as a person and put yourself on autopilot and hope for the freaking best...We're constantly on eggshells. It's the best way to explain it
>
> **Susan:** Yes, because you're told not to listen to your gut instinct. You've got to listen to everybody else. Absolutely unnatural.
>
> **Tanya:** We, we're not allowed to be parents, we're puppets. That's all we are. (February yarn, 2024)

In the following discussion, Dilara shares that her grandchildren were taken to a hotel, because her daughter (grand children's mother) returned to her home. Child protection staff decided that her home or the hotel was not safe, and her children were taken away. Decisions about appropriate housing and children safety are defined by the child protection officer.

> **Dilara:** Look they took the girls off me because their mother come to my place and they were scared and then they shipped us off to a hotel and they, and they reckon it wasn't safe enough for them. So, they took the girls away and gave them to Susan, then they took off, sent them off to WA (Western Australia) didn't they?
>
> **Hazel:** But yeah, like it's not centred to assist or support or promote the family unit and, you know, and I help them achieve things. It's the opposite. (June yarn, 2023)

Controlling (decontextualised) narratives

Pointing to testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007), Susan and Tanya discussed how case notes about families are often biased. The women highlight that part of problem stems from the lack of consideration for context with a seeming preference to problematise and pathologise parents rather than contextualising their struggles.

> **Susan:** I find, those people like Salvation Army, their case notes go like this "So and so presented as, radically heightened" which all gets written up, which it all goes back to the case...they are playing judge and jury before they even get to the court because they set a narrative of what they think is going on
>
> **Tanya:** And the information they provide to the judges influences the way they think about those families. So, they already have done that. (February yarn, 2024)
>
> **Susan:** I have private conversations with the child protection worker. They have their own system, they have their own little narrative going on that doesn't actually resemble (what's going on). (June yarn, 2023)

(Mis)representation: Framing of Aboriginal Mothers as incapable

In addition to communicating a perceived lack of empathy or understanding shown by child protection workers of the intergenerational cycle of trauma stemming from the Stolen Generations and colonisation more broadly, during these yarns, the women spoke about the biased assumptions held by child protection officers. For example, the women explained that parents are misrepresented to their children:

> **LJ:** I struggle with kids being told all the horrible things that their parents have done. Like it's not about how your parents struggled. It's all the shit things they did that resulted in you being removed. Child protection will happily tell that. And then at the end it's like, "oh and by the way, you're Aboriginal so you know". It should be "your parents are Aboriginal. They struggled, as a result you've been removed".
>
> **Hazel:** And what colonization is done
>
> **Susan:** And put the blame where it belongs like make it very clear that because of colonization, make it very clear where the problem (sits). (June yarn, 2023)

These representations are gendered. Mothers who were once a ward of the state find themselves under surveillance and their children removed based on deficit understandings of being a parent:

> **Tanya:** you can't get any recognition for the trauma that we've been put through and the fact they're still doing it. Like as soon as I left my husband in 1996 within a month of me leaving my husband, they were trying to take my son within a month because my family dynamics changed. I was no longer married. And they said to me because you're a ward of the state, you can't have children. (February yarn, 2024)

In the following extract Tanya and Susan speak of how these narratives and misrepresentations impact court decisions about their families. Thier concerns point to the testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007) that is evident in the biases that workers bring to their work:

> **Susan:** Yeah, but they're still playing judge and jury before they even get to the court because they set a narrative of the, of what they think is really going on
>
> **Tanya:** and the information they provide to the judges influences the way they think about those families. So, they already have done that.
>
> **Susan:** So that goes back to many families telling me the judge has pulled child protection up. So, we've put the pressure on, the judges who must sit there and be the independent person. (February yarn, 2024)
>
> **Tanya: ...**when we were at family courts in Little Lonsdale Street for my girls and son, my lawyer suggested that we see the court psychologist to assess my parenting skills because the thing that the child protection services were doing was basing everything on my parenting skills And the social worker turned around said "we can't do that. That's abusing the Children". The magistrate turned around and said, you're kidding me, right, how could that be abusing the children? ...when we did do the psychology assessment, everything the social workers said about me, had no facts. It turned out that they were lying, and it counteracted them. So, they do, do it. They lie and they are bitches about it and they embellish and exaggerate as well. (February yarn, 2024)

Hazel problematised a perceived culture of 'competition' to get more kids removed. Testimonial injustice is evident in the biased assumptions that lead child protection workers to focus on "removal, removal, removal":

> **Hazel:** they quite often see it as a competition who can get the more families on like the more kids removed and that it shouldn't be, it should be more about how many families can we keep together or put back together or not destroy because a lot of workers with Indigenous families that they go in with nothing but removal, removal, removal and destruction from the word go. (June yarn, 2023)

These extracts are illustrative of the ways child protection workers narrate Aboriginal families, borrowing from Spivak (1988), from an absent position without acknowledgment or awareness of their epistemic privilege to do so. This issue remains unnoticed by those who practice epistemic violence, as this practice sits within institutional and legislative context which denies and erases the historical and continuity of colonial trauma- hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007). Aboriginal child protection workers have similarly expressed concerns about the way behaviour exhibited by clients is interpreted by non-Indigenous child protection without a trauma informed lens (Oates, 2020).

Practice-based violence

The praxical violence the women encounter through the child protection system is also enacted towards the women. This practice-based violence takes on many forms through coercive practices, surveillance, nonresponsive and inadequate practices and through the process of trivialization.

Coercive practices

Tanya explains that many parents going through the child protection system are not informed on their rights and responsibilities, and the knowledge to advocate for alternatives. Coercive behaviours often result from the lack of transparency and awareness of rights and responsibilities. Tanya explained that the "lack of education, knowledge and transparency" enables coercive

practices among child protection staff:

> **Tanya:** Those parents who have their children taken from them are not given that they're just like here we're taking your kids. You're a bad parent. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. These are your rights. These are your responsibilities. This is, these are the policies, these are the procedures, this is the core procedures. Give them the knowledge and that's what hasn't been given to parents for generations. They haven't been given the knowledge and resources to be able to counteract the power of children protection. Who should be, who should be doing that? (February yarn, 2024)

Tanya also recounted her experience of coercive practice by a social worker:

> **Tanya:** ...they were sneakily giving me this form at the courts telling me to sign it and I wouldn't sign it. There was a gut instinct not to sign it. And they wouldn't let me read the document. And then I found out what they were trying to make me sign- sign over guardianship of my son... I realised these, these %#*% were lying to me and they were being sneaky, and they were trying to take my babies from me. They weren't transparent and because I knew there was something wrong. (February yarn, 2024)

Practice of surveillance

Reaching out for help comes at the cost of surveillance and the risk of being seen as parents who cannot care for their children. In the excerpt below, Susan discusses the challenge of supporting women to feel safe enough to receive support from child protection services, which LJ perceives as an impossibility given the way the system is built, highlighting the cost that comes with seeking support.

> **Susan:** I also don't know how to help them feel safe enough to utilize the child protection system to help build them capacity and get them to support. I don't know,
>
> **LJ:** I don't think you can because I think that the child protection system isn't built like that. What they do offer help. It's at a cost. The cost is surveillance will help you if you do what we say and then they use it again to agree with us that you're, you're the problem that will assist you
>
> **Hazel:** or they go to court and say we, we supported them by paying for accommodation because they couldn't support, don't do that anymore where you sort it out because I've had enough. (June yarn, 2023)

Non-responsive and inadequate practices

The women's stories of encounters with the child protection system highlighted inadequacies in the practices of child protection staff. As previously noted, (non-conducive to family unification), underpinned by policies and legislation that fail to recognise the historical trauma and complex needs of families, child protection services become non conducive to keeping or reuniting families. Women shared stories about how child protection services are inadequate and not responsive to the needs of their family in ways that enable the families to stay together. They also highlighted that there is far greater support for carers. Neoliberal discourse and the epistemic erasure of colonial trauma in the lives of Aboriginal families, as evidenced by the decontexualised responses to families, provide little scope to support Hazel, resulting in her child being taken away-- she is constructed as not capable of looking after her daughter

> **Hazel:** When Sky was born, they removed her because we couldn't look after her...But, but anyway, like it was more about, like defending the carer and, and all that sort of thing than, than getting us into a situation where they believed that we were capable to have her at home. It sort of, it became just about supporting the carer... It's not conducive towards family reunification or family unity. They support the carers but not the family...Like it's not centred to assist or support or promote the family unit and, you know, and help them achieve things. It's the opposite. (June yarn, 2023)

In the excerpt above, Hazel expressed that there was no support provided for her to be able to keep her family together.

LJ also raised concerns about plans for families not being responsive to challenges faced by community leaving families unsupported

> **LJ:** Heaps of the workers are from, you know, they might be from Footscray but they're not from out here. So, they come out here and they have no idea about what the demographics are like, what the need is or even access to health. So, they'll be like, "oh, just go to a paediatrician" where everyone's booked out here for about 18 months. Then they say, "you'd have to go to the city". They don't understand, no idea. (June yarn, 2023)

Trivialisation

Finally, some stories shared by the women pointed to the trivialisation of family unification. This is captured in the excerpt below in relation to the practice of drug and alcohol screens. LJ explained that the Aboriginal mums she encountered through VACCA did not see the value of screen testing as it was not making a difference. The women's efforts at unifying the family are brushed aside.

> **Susan:** I can have one family who've done clean screens for twice, three times a week and they still don't get their children back. Then there are people who don't do any screens.
>
> **LJ:** A lot of mums especially at VACCA were like, why would I keep doing this (the screens)? Because it doesn't matter how many I do, they don't care anyway.

> **Hazel:** Well, I thought I'm gonna keep doing it because I'll prove it and I'll get my kids back and you do it for two years ...And as I said, if I wasn't peeing in a bottle with someone watching, I thought I couldn't go to the toilet, but they just didn't mention it anymore.
>
> **LJ:** The woman I worked with after two years, she just gave up, she ended up using worse because after two years it didn't matter. (June yarn, 2023)

Similarly, in the excerpt below Hazel recounts how her request for contact was never followed up on.

> **Hazel:** I was at VACCA at Christmas time, and I heard the names and of my grandkids and I said, "they're my grandkids". And so, she shows me pictures and all that. She says, "oh, yeah, I'll be in touch ra ra ra" . And then I contacted them again a couple of weeks later. Eventually she rang me back and this was about April, and she said "oh, send me your email address. I'll set up some facetime or whatever". I haven't heard anything from her since- like you are joking. That's why I hate VACCA. Don't tell me that you're gonna call me or you're gonna let me see my grandkids or talk to them or whatever and then just don't. (June yarn, 2023)

Together, these coercive, surveillance, inadequate and non-responsive practices and the trivialisation of the women's efforts at unifying the family result in a deep lack of trust in child protection services.

Practice–based violence towards children living in out-of-home care

The women also spoke about their concerns for their children in out-of-home care. They explained that children who are removed from families because of violence are re-subjected to violence and abuse without family while in out-of-home care. The women's concerns are reflected in the number of children who are abused in care. According to AIHW (2024), between 2021-2022, there was 1,200 substantiated cases of abuse towards children in care. Five hundred and seventy (46%) of these children were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Types of abuse include physical, sexual, emotional and neglect (AIHW, 2024). In the section below, Hazel speaks about the physical and sexual violence her daughter was subjected to while in foster care, and the impact this violence has had on her daughter:

> **Hazel:** I had three kids that were thriving, and they didn't even know I was pregnant. And then like I have a child with, with disabilities, they don't allow her to come home. But in foster care she was nearly killed over and over. She's been sexually abused so many times that she thinks if somebody doesn't have sex with her, they don't love her. (June yarn, 2023)

The women spoke about the use of physical violence in residential care. They explained that the way they treated children was unsafe and that it lacked compliance and accountability. The lack of safety including the experience of sexual exploitation in residential care has been well documented (e.g., Commission for Children and Young People [CCYP], 2021, 2023). As asserted in the CCYP (2019) "In our own words" report, "residential care in its current form is often unsafe for children and young people and places them at an unacceptable risk of harm" (p. 42). While the Department of Health and Human Services (2016) Roadmap for Reform: Strong families, safe children report acknowledged that "Residential care needs to be transformed from a placement of last resort to a program of intensive treatment and stabilisation for young people with complex behaviours" (p. 32), it is evident that this transformation has not yet occurred based on the women's accounts of the experiences of people known to them who have been in residential care. The harm that the experience of being in residential care does to children is evident in the extracts below, with the women communicating the psychological impacts they are now dealing with.

Susan: You go into resi-care (residential care) and your child is no longer yours, you must have said goodbye to your child.

Tanya: Yeah. So, because like when Kai went into resi-care, I was getting phone calls from resi[3] (residential care) one saying that he could hear the resi-worker abusing the female person in the room and that he was being thrown through freaking walls. So, I rang the police station, and I said my son is in this resi-unit. You need to go around there. The Children are unsafe. Oh, no, we don't. They're being looked after by Children protection, and they completely swept it under the rug...Kai came out with bipolar with psychosis and hallucination and he's on medication for the rest of his life. That's what resi-care does to kids and, and that came up as well. (February yarn, 2024)

Rather than a place of 'intensive treatment' the women described residential care as comparable to the prison system. They explained that children and young people in residential care are neglected, and the lack of freedom and autonomy:

LJ: Our kids that are in care now, I think as someone like Tanya who was in care, I think they have given less ability now to make decisions than even I was in residential and out-of-home care because they're not allowed to do anything.

Hazel: And also for them. Not really necessarily involving them or what's good for them. Just what works.

LJ: I've got kids (as part of her client list) who sit in resi by themselves, only with youth workers, who aren't even allowed to boil the kettle. They have no idea how to make food. No idea how to live. Don't go to school, the decisions that have been made for that.

Rowena: How do they grow and engage in healthy risk-taking behaviour so that they learn and how do they become thriving adults?

LJ: Yeah, I think it's almost, it's on par with the prison now works in, it's just not about them. (June yarn, 2023)

Intergenerational welfare trauma

The violence the women and their children experience in their encounters with the child protection system undermines their struggles for survival, and creates suffering (Dutta, 2015). During the yarns, Tanya identifies this suffering as *intergenerational welfare trauma* (February yarn, 2024). Two sub-themes were evident in this discussion of intergenerational welfare trauma: the labour of keeping safe, disconnection within families, and from community and culture.

3 Location of the residential care centre has been omitted for confidentiality purposes

Labour to keeping family safe

From the way the women narrated violence, it was clear that it informed the ways they keep safe in the face of oppressive practices and representations. To keep safe, Susan explained that they are required to focus on "what to say as a parent" rather than "what you do as a parent", in the presence of child protection workers.

> **Susan:** Parents who are dealing with child protection, they're preoccupied with the conversations they're gonna have and to feel some sort of control, "ok, maybe they say this, we'll prepare this and prepare that. We can say this, we'll do that. If they say..." It really hurts me to see people become so worried
>
> **Hazel:** Worried about what to 'say' rather than about what you need to do as a parent- and that's the system gas lighting. (June yarn, 2023)

To stay safe, families are reluctant to seek our services. Reaching out for help comes at the cost of surveillance and the risk of being seen as parents who cannot care for their children. This in turn creates a barrier or reluctance to seek services:

> **Susan:** I also don't know how to help them feel safe enough to utilize the child protection system to help build them capacity and get them to support. I don't know,
>
> **LJ:** I don't think you can because I think that the child protection system isn't built like that. When they do offer help. It's at a cost. The cost is surveillance will help you if you do what we say and then they use it again to agree with us that you're, you're the problem that will assist you
>
> **Hazel:** Or they go to court and say we, we supported them by paying for accommodation because they couldn't support, don't do that anymore where you sort it out because I've had enough. (June yarn, 2023)

Demonstrating intergenerational trauma, Tanya also explained that her experiences with child protection services has also impacted her daughter, who to keep safe, does not want to have children out of fear that they will be removed by child protection services:

> **Tanya:** The impacts it flows on, flows down to the children. It does, it does. It's an intergenerational welfare trauma. That's exactly what it is. And now you look at my daughter, she tells me in a casual conversation. She's never gonna have kids because she's scared, they're gonna remove her kids. (February yarn, 2024)

The labour of keeping safe, of dealing with child protection, also impacted the women's daily life conditions. In the extract below, Tanya and Susan described how the requirements of complying with child protection services makes functioning as a parent nearly impossible given cost of living, and the time and labour required to engage with the system. Interacting with child protection constitutes a full-time job which prevents parents from working, being parents and taking care of their own wellbeing:

> **Susan:** How does a parent get to be a parent, also work like in a 9 to 5 job, and go to all these appointments and try to look after their children... it's a lot of work like, you know. Today's world cost of living is through the roof. You cannot live on a Centrelink wage.
>
> **Tanya:** I'm struggling living on my wage at home. It's a nightmare like
>
> **Susan:** So how are our families meant to survive this, intergenerational welfare trauma. Interacting with child protection is a job in itself. Would you say interaction with child protection is a job itself?
>
> **Tanya:** It's a fulltime job, machine. (February yarn, 2024)

Disconnection: Within families and from community and culture

During the yarns, the women spoke about the challenging relationship within families and within and among community members. In the following except Tanya, in conversation with Susan, speaks about how child protection shaped the dynamics of her family:

> **Tanya:** It changes the dynamic of the family...I mean, you look at my family, my son...now has psychosis hallucinations,
>
> **Lut:** the impact on the children.
>
> **Susan:** accumulative harm
>
> **Tanya:** And then you've got my four girls, we can't communicate in the house. We argue and fighting is the way we communicate. (February yarn, 2024)

The driver of intergenerational trauma, that is colonial institutions and practices, is named by Tanya who went on to say that:

> **Tanya:** So that abuse is continuing in a different way. It's not being done by the children Protection Services. They've instilled it in the children and the children are now abusing the parents...We're just going around in a big circle... Children Protection Services are basically perpetrating the violence through our children; you can hear the children Protection services voice in our kids voices and it's just this continual cycle that's not been broken. (February yarn, 2024)

The women also spoke about the various ways the violence they encountered through child protection services has impacted their lives. It particularly manifests in intergenerational trauma whereby children are disconnected from family and community. The Hazel and Tanya explained that their children blamed them for what happened to them while they were in the care of a carer or in residential care. In the following extract from the yarns, Tanya explains that she has no relationship with her son because of the segregation and how she was mispresented to her son by child protection staff:

> **Tanya:** I don't have a relationship with my son anymore at all. It's destroyed because of the lies, the abuse. When Kai first went into a unit, a resi-unit, they, I didn't know this until he came back into my care. Five years later at the time he was 11 when it happened, and he came back to me when he was 16...And he told me that they were telling him that I didn't want anything to do with him. I didn't want to see him. I didn't want to speak to him. I didn't want to call him. But they were telling me that he was in a contingency unit, and I couldn't contact him. So, he was getting one story, and I was getting another story. They started that segregation between me and the family- disconnection complete and utter disconnection. (February yarn, 2024)

Connection to community and family is central to developing Aboriginal identity (Krakouer et al., 2018), cultural continuity and wellbeing (Dudgeon et al., 2021). Children in out-of-home care, learn and experience their Aboriginal identity in this context, rather than through their experiences and connection to family and community. The lack of connection to community was raised by the women during the yarns. LJ explained that the violence flows down to the children in the form of cultural violence whereby children become disconnected and feel shame about their Aboriginal identity.

> **LJ:** That, that, thing that you're talking about flows down to the kids that are involved with child protection from little to teenagers because now they are so disconnected and so ashamed to say that they are Aboriginal because all that means for them is meetings and questions about families and you know. (June yarn, 2023)

Part 3 Conclusion

The findings presented in Part 3 highlight the need for epistemic justice and expanding epistemic possibilities through the inclusion of Aboriginal women's voices. Importantly, Oates (2020) reported a consistent theme from their analysis of interviews with Aboriginal child protection workers was "the unwillingness of statutory child protection systems to critically analyse their effectiveness and to implement new knowledge and ways of working despite the information being available to them" (p. 177), with these practitioners reporting "that they are either excluded or tokenistically included in discussions regarding practice reform..." (p. 177).

Dotson's (2012) concept of contributory injustice can be considered useful here. Dotson sought to extend Fricker's (2007) conceptualisation of epistemic injustice through the notion of contributory injustice, a form of injustice "caused by an epistemic agent's situated ignorance, in the form of wilful hermeneutical ignorance in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that result in epistemic harm to epistemic agency of a knower" (p. 31). The concept of contributory injustice was proposed to recognise that there is not just one set of collective hermeneutical resources that a perceiver can draw from; marginalised communities circulate their own hermeneutical resources amongst themselves and communicate these within the broader society. These resources could be utilised (instead of the structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources) however there is a wilful refusal on the part of the perceiver to engage with these resources and therefore a refusal to "acknowledge and acquire the necessary tools for knowing whole parts of the world" (Poulhous, 2012, as cited in Dotson, 2012, p. 32). Indeed, the problems within this system, as articulated by Aboriginal people who encounter it have been documented in many reports and inquiries, including most recently, the Yoorrook for Justice report (2023).

Within Oates (2020) study, solutions from the perspective of Aboriginal child protection workers were proposed, which included Indigenous practitioner-led and developed staff training packages and professional development (such as the workshops developed in the second stage of this project and discussed in the next section), as well as the creation of specialist Indigenous practitioner-led practice units within statutory child protection agencies and recruitment of properly qualified Indigenous staff. In line with these the first proposed solutions, the aim of the second stage of the current project was to translate the learnings from the Aboriginal women into activities (i.e., training and professional development resources/workshops) to bring about policy and practice change, which is the focus of the next section.

PART FOUR

CHANGING POLICY AND PRACTICE

The aim of the second stage of the project was to translate the learnings from the Aboriginal women into activities to bring about policy and practice change. Clear avenues were mapped out to expand the inclusion of women's voices and translating the project findings for the purposes of making change. More specifically, the aim was to make change by 1. delivering training workshops to staff working in the child protection service sector and 2. embedding the project findings into the social work curriculum at Victoria University, 3. through policy engagement and influence, and 4. by curating a community exhibition[4]. These four translation activities are detailed below.

Training workshop for child protection staff

DFFH delivers cultural competence training, which is important and remains relevant for child protection staff's understandings of culture. However, the project findings, more specifically women's understandings and experiences of violence captured in the yarns have revealed the need for training that foregrounds the lived experiences of Aboriginal women who come into contact with the sector against the longer history and legacy of colonial dispossession and that guides staff in developing their capacity for identifying and mitigating violence through critical reflexive practice.

Informed by the learnings from the project, which centres the voices of Aboriginal women, a customised 5-hour workshop entitled *Identifying and Preventing Violence (IPV) was* developed for staff in the child protection service sector in Victoria. The aim of this workshop is to make direct and tangible impact on how service providers respond to Aboriginal women, their children and families. The workshop consists of four modules that aim to achieve the following five learning outcomes:

LO1: To understand the different types of violence encountered by Aboriginal women through child protection services

LO2: To identify the driving forces of violence

LO3: To understand the impact of the diverse forms of violence on individuals, families and community

LO4: To demonstrate the ability to critically reflect to identify and to mitigate violence in future practice

LO5: To develop an understanding of the Aboriginal families and community of Melbourne's West

4 At the time of writing this report, this second stage of the project had commenced however was not finalised.

Module 1 provides an overview of the Aboriginal communities living in Melbourne's West. This will be followed by the aims, rationale, and the method of the Blak Women's Healing project (LO 5). **Module 2** engages with the women's voices on violence, to foreground the various types of violence encountered by Aboriginal women through child protection services. This module also develops staff understandings of the drivers and the impact of violence for individuals, families, and community (LO 1, 2, 3). **Module 3** uses case scenarios to develop staff skills in analysing violence. Staff are guided to critically reflect on their assumptions, values and practices, and to identify ways to mitigate violence in future practice (LO 4). **Module 4,** utilising We Al-li's community of care and practice framework as well as art practice, involves inviting staff to project into the future and imagine what a community of care looks like (LO 4).

In keeping with the project's commitment to relational pedagogy, the staff are invited to take part in a Dadirri practice at the start of the workshop. Based on ancient Indigenous knowledges, this practice provides the opportunity for the participants to relax, to engage in conscious conversations—to listen, reflect, share, unlearn, and learn from one another. Wayapa® is incorporated into the end of the workshop as a way to decompress and ground themselves as they create space to recognise the impact of violence.

The first iteration of this workshop was delivered to child protection staff from the Brimbank, Melton and Western Melbourne Areas (West Division) at the Footscray office on 18 June 2024. In total 12 of the 20 staff that signed up for this workshop attended. The workshop was delivered by Rowena Price and Lutfiye Ali. In total, 10 staff members completed the evaluation form at the end of the workshop.

On a scale from 1 to 10, the staff rated the value of the workshop between 8-10, with an average of 9. All the respondents stated that they would recommend the workshop to all child protection staff in the Department, as well as to VACCA. Staff were asked to comment on the new learnings from the workshop. The responses indicated the workshop afforded the staff a greater understanding of the different types of violence the women experienced and child protections involvement in this violence and the barriers that families face within the system.

The staff responses on the implications of the workshop for future practice, included,

- importance of consistency in service delivery,
- importance of listening to voice and understanding families, and asking people to tell their stories,
- importance of siting with silence and uncomfortability,
- importance of reflecting throughout practice,
- importance of humanising families,
- a greater sense for compassion and
- the confidence to advocate for clients and a sense of strength in challenging decision making.

At the time of writing this report, plans are being made with the Principal Practitioner to deliver future workshops for child protection staff from other divisions across Melbourne, Victoria.

Curriculum resources for social work students

Victoria University offers a bachelor's degree in social work. Many student graduates from this degree are often employed as child protection officers in child protection services, or work in government and community service sector where they will work with Aboriginal women and families. To better prepare students to work with Aboriginal families, curriculum resources were developed by modifying the IPV workshop. In consultation with the course chair and the unit convenor, curriculum changes will be made to a family violence unit with the aim of embedding the women's voices and learnings about violence into the curriculum. The decision to embed the project findings on violence into the curriculum rather than delivering a standalone workshop was informed by the teaching experiences of the project team and by past research (Morda et. al., 2007) which has found integrating knowledges into the course are often more successful in terms of student attendance, and by extension, learning outcomes.

Policy engagement: Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees (RAJAC)

While the above pathway is aimed at making immediate and tangible impact by influencing the understandings and awareness of frontline workers, the women's voices and project findings more broadly, point to the importance of making change at a broader policy level to ensure that policy directions and decisions are embedded in and more closely reflect the realities of community. The concept of praxical violence highlights how practices of actors is shaped and constrained by organisational policy and culture, therefore increasing awareness of frontline workers needs to be accompanied with policy and practices that aligns with this awareness (e.g., time and resources for better supporting families). To translate the findings into to the policy sector, members from community will be identified to join Aboriginal Justice Caucus to be an advocate for regional justice and make decisions around policy and practice in the state government. Members from community will lead discussions, decision making and be a strong voice for Aboriginal communities on issues relating to child protection services.

Blak Women's Healing exhibition

An exhibition will be held between April and May 2025 at ArtsHouse (City of Melbourne). We were approached by ArtsHouse to participate in the Curatorial Takeover Program (2025-2027). This exhibition is funded through Art Houses' Curatorial Takeover Program and will be presented in partnership with YIRRAMBOI Indigenous Arts Festival (City of Mel). It will be open to the public and will have public programming that is arranged in collaboration with YIRRAMBOI. It will be an immersive exhibition that presents some of the outcomes of the Blak Women's Healing project. The aim of this exhibition is to provide a platform to amplify the voices of the women to engage in what Watkins and Shulman (2008) described as counter-memory and counter-memorial, where liberation arts are used to disrupt dominant narratives, awaken to silences/injustices and articulate "modes of forgetfulness that prevent dialogue" (p. 233). Not only will the exhibition elevate counter-stories that show up Aboriginal women's lived experiences/encounters with the child protection system, but it will also showcase stories of cultural reclamation, renewal and healing, Aboriginal women's future imaginings for self, community and Country, or what Vizenor (1999) called survivance.

Conclusion

The Blak Women's Healing project aimed to support the healing process among Aboriginal women through culturally informed and healing practices led by Aboriginal women. The practices included WAYAPA WURK and Bush dyeing, which provided pathways into various aspects of healing such as cultural restoration and connection, reconnection with cultural identity, creating community by remembering and sharing of stories, and making sense of things together. These practices created the space for the women to mend their fragmented realities by reconnecting and strengthening identity, rebuilding community through their relationships with one another and by re-narrating personal experiences as collective experiences that are informed by the context of their lives.

The space created by and for the women also provided safety for the women to share and reflect on their experiences of violence. The findings from the project demonstrate the various ways violence is enacted through child protection services. The impact of violence in the lives of the women is far reaching. It impacts family relationships including parenting, community relationships, connection to community and cultural identity. These findings demonstrate the persistent suffering of Aboriginal women from not only past trauma, but through the institutional, praxical (symbolic and practice-based) violence enacted through child protection services.

Throughout the yarns, the women framed their experiences of violence as colonial legacies making connections between past injustices with present realities. The women spoke about the violence connected to the silencing and erasure of a history of dispossession and its continuities in the present which ultimately decontextualises the challenges currently faced by Aboriginal families and fails to recognise the experience of intergenerational trauma that is triggered in interactions with child protection services. The women's experiences of violence are consistent with the Yoorrook for Justice and the truth telling process about the impacts of colonisation on First Peoples in Victoria:

> For First Peoples in Victoria there is an unbroken connection between their experiences with colonial child removal practices and their experiences with the current Victorian Child Protection system. These traumas, historical and contemporary, continue to impact First Peoples families and communities. (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023, p. 108).

The women's voices also resonate with stories shared as part of previous research with Noongar people in Western Australia (see e.g., Quayle & Sonn, 2019) regarding the continuity of the colonial power relationship and the impacts for individuals, families and communities including community fragmentation and intergenerational impacts.

As noted by the women, these personal experiences of violence and oppression are systemic and demonstrate the continuity of colonisation and its legacy. Womens stories lead to a new way of thinking and expand ways of thinking about the complex entanglement of violence within institutions. The women's stories gathered through the workshops and yarns have shown us how colonial systems are being reproduced throughout taken for granted ideologies/assumptions, policies and practices of the child protection system. Although current policies aim to mitigate violence, racism and discrimination in institutional policies, women's experiences demonstrate the continuity of colonial violence through epistemic violence/injustice and what Daher et al. (2024) have described as praxical violence. This violence is insidious and rendered invisible as its embedded in the policy and practice of child protection services.

These findings highlight and call for the need of epistemic justice- expanding epistemic possibilities through the inclusion of women's voices. This project aimed to make changes in the child protection system through the development and delivery of workshops with child protection staff and of curriculum resources for social work students at Victoria University that centre the women's lived experiences/voices. To work towards epistemic justice, women's voices

will inform policy and decision making about Aboriginal families through RAJAC. A community exhibition has been organised to claim a space to showcase the work of the women and bring awareness to the ways Aboriginal women are reviving and engaging in cultural knowledges and practices in the healing of Aboriginal women, families and communities.

The project findings demonstrate the importance of creating safe spaces for Blak women to engage in cultural practices to connect, share, reflect and explore/trace the interconnections of violence and the impacts of colonial dispossession on identity and community connection. The Aboriginal women have a collective set of practices that they know and that can work for others. It is not just cultural practice. It's about how Aboriginal people are reviving histories and creating opportunities to heal and restore cultural identity. Cultural healing and projects like the Blak Women's Healing project are central to better supporting the healing and resilience of Aboriginal communities.

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APPENDIX A

Culturally Informed, Embodied, Family Systems Healing Approach

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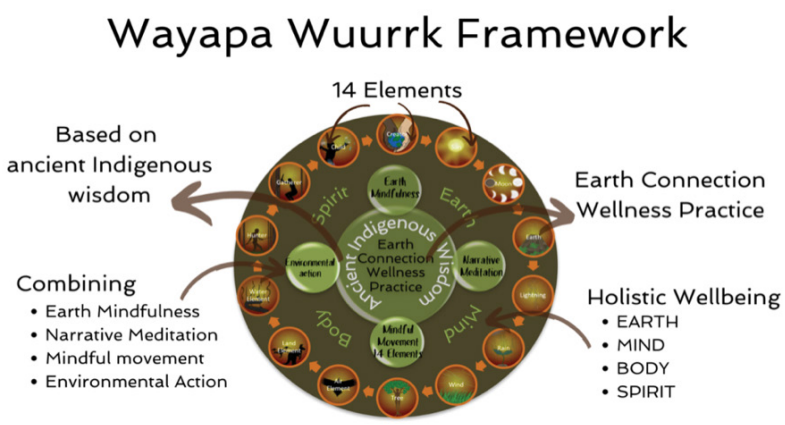
Wayapa®: I find Wayapa to be a powerful personal and professional practise as it is centred in Indigenous wisdom. Whilst the initial learning of Wayapa® may be perceived as being quite simple in nature, the layers and the depth of connection provided are quite sophisticated. People are able to meet Wayapa® 'where they are', as in, within the 14 elements they are able to find connection and meaning through their own learnings and stories. The modality ties the learnings together through movements that have a narrative meditation based on the elements.



Note: Wayapa Wuurrk framework is part of the Wayapa Wuurrk Early Years Education Program. Source: https://Wayapa.com/education/

Through exploration of the 14 elements we can yarn about Country through storytelling, provide invitations for difference, foster a place for curiosity, provide enactments of resistance and healing, counter dominant narratives of shame and guilt, gently plant seeds of change, give people the choice of what they bring to the space and the level in which they share, can be utilised as a process of recovery and Decolonization and a counter to the violence of colonisation and what has been taken from Aboriginal communities.

The Modality speaks to the body through connecting to the elements. The movement can enact childhood or ancestral memories of being connected to nature/Country, create energy flows and releasing of stored trauma. Movement can counter the freeze response, provide mind/body connection at all levels of ability, promote connection to breath and provide grounding.

We Al-li: From attending my first Dadirri workshop, I have felt deeply connected and grounded by and with We Al-li and Dadirri. The experiential learning from the workshop, the online courses and the embodiment and grounding of the concepts through professional practice have had a profound impact on the way I'm now able to hold space for myself and others. Through We Al-li, I connected to the deep listening and contemplative ways of Dadirri, the culturally informed trauma-integrated processes of Educaring, learning the words for practices I already knew at an intuitive and ancestral level – Communities of Care and Communities of Practice, developed an understanding of who I am, spent time unpacking my own trauma or as Aunty Judy would say "Burning your own wood", and growing confidence in my own role and purpose - skills and knowledge's. All of this whilst understanding that We Al-li and Dadirri also appear to have the simplicity that Wayapa® does but are also deeply sophisticated and multi layered.

With both practices, I embodied the processes and they both spoke a truth to me. It's taken a lot longer to intellectualise the process as they both grow and develop over time and with each new experience my connection to them grows deeper.

Family Therapy and systems theory: In deliberately wanting to stay away from the Psychology and Counselling models of how we should sit with and/or pathologise people, I explored what Family Therapy could offer. It fits with Aboriginal/Indigenous systems. My training in Family Therapy consisted of First Steps in Family Work Skills, family and cultural genograms, attachment, trauma and healing, engaging without blame, lateral violence, vicarious trauma, self-care and self-reflexivity, Dadirri, the ongoing impact of transgenerational trauma, neutrality, colluding, and family violence/community recovery, ethics, systems theory and the 6 C's – Culture, Connectedness, Circularity, Context, Constraints, and Curiosity.

At the commencement of training, I was able to access monthly x 2-hour supervision session over 12 months in which we were able to put our training and experience to practice and seek feedback.

It was the combination of these practices and learnings and my own ways of being, doing and knowing that I brought to the project and delivery.

APPENDIX B

Culturally Informed Trauma Approach: Theory, Approach and Art Directives

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Theoretical framework and approach:

Cultural safe art therapy practices are built upon successfully implementing the Culturally Informed, Trauma Integrated Healing Approach (CITIHA), which necessitates intertwining personal and professional development, recognising that Indigenous educational approaches prioritise self and community learning, personal growth, and healing (Smith, 2020). Creating safe, respectful environments and providing culturally safe services are essential for social and emotional wellbeing (Williams, 1999). The CITIHA framework empowers Indigenous practitioners to create safe spaces for healing, particularly in group settings where discussions about historical and current trauma, such as those related to child protection systems, take place (Atkinson, 2002). This framework also facilitates cultural healing practices, including Indigenous-led art therapy, which serves as a tool for reflection and addressing trauma symptoms (Taylor, 2018). Relationality is vital when working with Aboriginal peoples, as demonstrated trust and safety within relationships allow people to begin to evaluate how they are moving through the world and explore their identity story (Andrew & Hibberd, 2022). Listening is pivotal in fostering healing and trusting relationships, and mapping stories aid in understanding experiences and documenting resilience (Atkinson, 2002; Brown & Richards, 2021). It also entails being culturally respectful, valuing clients' voices and perspectives and supporting choices while minimising re-victimisation (Taylor, 2018).

When thinking about First Nations healing practices, they have always incorporated some form of art and storytelling. This methodology promotes connection, the ability to learn, teach and understands beliefs, values and experiences (Dudgeon & Bray, 2019). By combining Westernised art therapy methods such as the 'inside/outside box with Indigenous art healing practices, the elements of cultural safety are more accessible and conveyed both consciously and subconsciously (Farrell-Kirk, 2001). This methodology allows the participant to express the intersections of identity and culture, providing avenues for self-exploration and self-determination (Gilroy, et. al., 2020). When we engage in an intersectional approach to art therapy, we are practitioners who acknowledge how First Nations cultural practices promote individual and collective healing, thus demonstrating collaborative art as a culturally appropriate tool for counselling professionals.

LJ's work outlines art therapy directives and therapeutic approaches used to support Indigenous women in their healing journeys. These practices integrate traditional Indigenous knowledge with contemporary therapeutic techniques, emphasising the importance of cultural humility, safety, and reflective practice.

Art directives/questions used in the workshops

Women are provided with a choice of boxes in which to complete the activity.

The following steps guide the activity:

Step 1: Ensure safety:

The primary resource is the Culturally Informed, Trauma Integrated Healing Approach (CITIHA), which is the framework developed by We-al li (Judy Atkinson, 2002), which is an Indigenous methodology framework that centres the processes strengths-based service delivery model that is rooted in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma on culture and community that emphasises physical, psychological, and emotional safety. For the purpose of this project, it is adapted specifically for reflective practice modelling. This approach emphasises the use of reflection, senses, story, and feelings (i.e., senses: I see, I hear, I feel, I taste, I touch).

Step 2: Reflective questions:

Participants are invited to ponder the following questions, serving as prompts for discussion and reflection:

- Who am I?
- How do I see myself?
- How do I think/feel others see me?
- What parts of myself do I openly and easily show others? What parts do I hide from others?
- Why do I hide these parts?
- Would I like to show these parts of myself to others? Why or why not?

A significant aspect of Indigenous healing is truth-telling and supporting each other through the process.

Step 3: Reflecting on time together:

Participants are encouraged to reflect on their shared experiences and the reasons that brought them together. This activity acknowledges the layers of loss, grief, and trauma, allowing women to share their experiences of discrimination, adversity, courage, commitment, and hope.

Step 4: Writing reflections:

Women are invited to write a small note, a few words, or a poem, which they place in the box. At the end of the program, they can revisit these reflections and reflect on their experiences.

Inside/outside box activity: Combining Indigenous and non-Indigenous practices:

The inside/outside box activity, originally conceptualised by Farrell-Kirk (2001), has been adapted

to integrate both Indigenous and non-Indigenous therapeutic practices to support First Nations women in their exploration of trauma. This approach fosters a holistic healing environment, acknowledging the cultural significance of traditional Indigenous knowledge while leveraging contemporary art therapy techniques.

Description of the inside/outside box activity:

The activity involves decorating a box representing various aspects of the participant's self-perception and internal experiences. This creative process allows individuals to explore their identities, the impact of trauma, and the potential for healing and empowerment.

Step 1: Decorating the outside of the box:

Participants decorate the outside of the box to reflect how they see themselves or how they believe others perceive them. This external representation is a metaphor for the public persona or the visible aspects of their identity. The use of various materials—such as paint, glue, collages, stickers, and drawings—encourages creativity and personal expression (Farrell-Kirk, 2001).

Step 2: Adorning the inside of the box:

Conversely, the inside of the box is adorned with objects and symbols representing the participants' hidden feelings and emotions. These internal representations often include elements that participants keep private or struggle to express openly. This process helps uncover and acknowledge the deeper emotional layers shaped by trauma (Farrell-Kirk, 2001).

Integration of Indigenous practices:

Indigenous practices are incorporated to enhance the activity's therapeutic efficacy and cultural relevance, emphasising reflection, storytelling, and the senses. This integration aligns with the principles of cultural humility and trauma-informed care outlined in the work of Jackson (2020) and Malchiodi (2020) - which centre the principles of cultural humility and trauma-informed care. Cultural humility involves recognising and respecting the cultural differences and expertise of the participants, creating an environment of mutual learning and respect (Jackson, 2020). By incorporating culturally significant practices, therapists demonstrate an openness to and appreciation for Indigenous knowledge and traditions. Trauma-informed care emphasises the importance of understanding the impact of trauma on individuals and creating a safe, supportive environment (Malchiodi, 2020). Using familiar cultural practices and symbols helps create a sense of safety and comfort for participants, making the therapeutic process more effective. By weaving Indigenous practices into therapeutic activities, facilitators like LJ can create culturally relevant and emotionally supportive environments that honour the participants' cultural identities and enhance their healing journeys.

Indigenous mindfulness and reflective practice:

We al-li serve as a foundational resource; its approach emphasises reflective practice through the senses—seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and touching—grounding participants in their bodily experiences and cultural contexts. Participants are invited to engage in reflective questions that prompt self-exploration and truth-telling, essential components of Indigenous healing (Jackson, 2020; Malchiodi, 2020).

Storytelling and cultural humility:

Storytelling is a powerful tool in Indigenous cultures, facilitating the sharing of personal and communal narratives. By incorporating storytelling into the activity, participants can connect their experiences with broader cultural and historical contexts. This practice validates their journeys and fosters a sense of community and collective resilience (Linklater, 2014).

Supporting exploration of trauma:

Combining these practices creates a comprehensive therapeutic approach that supports First Nations women in exploring their trauma. The box's external and internal aspects allow participants to engage visually and tangibly with their identities and experiences. This dual representation helps them process trauma, embrace hidden parts of themselves, and emerge stronger and more compassionate (Kaufman, 1996).

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APPENDIX C

Bush Dyeing Workshop Overview

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This practice on the day of the workshop begins by preparing the dyeing pot, with eucalyptus oil and leaves and a rusty object, while talking through the process with the women. Soon the smells from the boiling pot emanate into the air. The eucalyptus oil is cleansing and creates a sense of being on bush after rain, or fire. It is evocative of the bush and being on Country, creating a sense of comforting and welcoming space for the women.

For the workshops the women are gifted with a plain silk scarf and then invited to go for a walk in local landscape and environments to collect plant material and artefacts to use in the workshop. This process walking together and taking time to talk through the process yarning about the plants, which many times lead to the women to sharing stories about how they connect with the plants.

The plants were then brought back to the room and laid out on the table. The silk fabric is placed on the table after it has been soaked in water and brown vinegar. The placement of the various plants and bush flowers and artefacts- all carefully considered and placed onto the silk. The decision on which plants and materials to use and how to bring these together is up to each participant. While Balla gave advice on her experiences of making the cloths, she also emphasized that the decisions about the cloth belong to the cloth maker (Balla, 2020; Balla, et all, 2022).

Once the materials are placed on the cloths or silks, they are folded and rolled tightly and can have a gum tree stick, or small branch or piece of rusty metal placed at the end of the silk, then the bundle is bound with string or wool-or strips of scrap calico-and then placed carefully into the bush brew in the pot and left to boil for 1-3 hours. Gum leaves along with a rusty object that have been boiling in the pot to serve as a mordant to draw patterns and oils from the eucalypts and plants. The longer they sit, the stronger the marks and patterns become (Balla, et al, 2023).

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

When removed, the plant materials are removed carefully from the silks and put aside to be returned to Country or used again. The silks are then left to cool slightly and drain excess water and then hung to air dry. A cultural “reading” process takes place with each cloth, as each one is completely distinct and unique to another. This is viewed as different spirits, of the plants, insects, animals, and Ancestors of the place the plant material comes from and appears on the surface of the cloths (Balla, et al., 2022).

The healing cloth pieces are finally ironed to set the fabric and the images that have been created. The silks or cloths are used by the women for display or to wear and yarn with other Aboriginal women about the process and potential outcomes, but also about everyday life as Aboriginal women including the need for healing and acknowledging traumas (Balla, et al., 2022).

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APPENDIX D

Topics explored in the research yarning sessions

Yarning sessions will not be overly structured, rather a conversational style will be essential. The main aim of the yarns is to invite the women to share stories about:

– who they are,

– their connection to culture and Country,

– how connection with culture and Country impacts individual and community wellbeing (as well as how dispossession and displacement has impacted Aboriginal individuals, families, communities)

– their experience of participating in the workshops

– what they got out of their participation in the workshops

– how such programs might contribute to improved individual and community wellbeing

– their hopes for the future and aspirations for their community

Questions will be adapted to be asked through a yarning methodology.

Early on in the project

– Can you tell us a little about yourself?

– What do you think you will learn from participating in the workshops?

– What do you hope to get out of it?

– Can you tell us a little about your connection to culture and country?

– What does wellbeing mean to you?

– How do you think connection to culture and country impacts individual and community wellbeing?

- What does dispossession and displacement mean to you and your family?
- What have the impacts of colonial dispossession and displacement been for Aboriginal people particularly in west Melbourne?

- In what ways might projects like this (and practices like Bush dying, Wayapa, and yarning) help individual and community wellbeing?
  - Why are projects like this important?
  - What is it about these projects that is important?

Later stages of project

– Can you tell me what it has been like to be involved in this Blak Women's Healing project?

– What have you enjoyed about this project?

– Was there a particular activity/workshop that you particularly enjoyed?

  – What was it?

  – Why was this particularly enjoyable?

– What have you got out of the project?

  – Has it met your expectations?

– Can you tell me a little about your hopes for the future and what you want for your community?

– What parts of the project are you using in your daily/weekly life – as part of your cultural practice?

– What have you learnt about the local environment, about Country and what this means for you? How do you think you might share this learning