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Re-storying place, connection and belonging: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people making space and creating futures in Narrm

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Abstract

Constructs of Indigeneity have been the locus of settler colonial interest and control since colonisation in Australia. Through historical policies of displacement, and contemporary normative processes that question the authenticity and belonging of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, urban places continue to be sites of erasure and non-belonging. However, cities will always be Aboriginal land, and places of cultural resurgence, renewal and regeneration. Internationally, a growing body of literature investigates experiences of First Nations young people in urban places, but in Australia this is lacking. This thesis explores how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young urban people in Narrm (Melbourne) practise and connect to their Indigeneity, as they come into relation with place, community, and their engagement with institutional regimes.

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by articulating how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Narrm engage in processes of re-storying place, cultural resurgence and presencing as assertions of belonging, and enacting responsibilities of relationality in generating desire-based futures. Indigenous women's standpoint theory, and a desire-based framework guide the methodological approach. Yarning methodology was used to develop partnerships with collaborating organisations, to guide the direction and methods of engagement with participants. Theories of relationality, youth refusal, resistance, counterstory, and cultural resurgence are used to understand the key formulations of Indigeneity for young people.

To investigate the research question, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (aged 16-30) living in Narrm were engaged across four sites. These sites included – an Aboriginal youth drop-in program; an arts mentoring program; a cultural support program for incarcerated First Nations men staffed by First Nations and non-Indigenous volunteers; and an Indigenous student centre at a university.

Resistance and refusal are theorised as engagements of power by young people in their interactions with service systems that problematise and imagine their limited potential and future possibilities. Building on this, counterstory is a way to understand these acts of resistance and refusal by participants. The theory of re-storying is offered, to interpret how young people connect and engage with place in ways that are not a counter to colonisation, but a re-storying and continuation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence. Presencing is in the everyday acts of resurgence, it resists colonial erasure and is a reminder of the ongoing relationships and connections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to place. Acts of cultural resurgence and renewal engage young people in intergenerational practises of relationality – a responsibility of ongoing learning and connection to claiming Indigeneity.

Culture, belonging, identity and self-determining futures are protective factors for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. This thesis shows the ways that participants are engaging and practising their identities in Narrm and navigating paths for desire-based futures.

Declaration

This is to certify that:

- this thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD;
- due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and
- this thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Emily Munro-Harrison

Preface and acknowledgements

The places in which this thesis was made always are Kulin Nations places. Primarily, this work was conducted and written on Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung Countries, and these places provided inspiration, encouragement and accountability. I acknowledge the traditional and ongoing custodians of these places and pay my respects to Elders, to the knowledge holders and sharers, to the people who have worked hard to pass on culture and continue our communities. I pay my respects to the Country that has kept us, and that continues to keep us, and to the young people who are creating futures impossible for the generations before to imagine. To all the young people who participated in this work, I thank you for your gracious insights, the ways that you taught me, and your curiosity and openness in investigating this research topic with me. You have influenced me and my desires for the future in ways that I cannot adequately describe.

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Prologue

When I first asked Grace if she'd like to speak to me as part of a research project, she agreed immediately but flagged it would probably be hard to find a time to catch up, because she had lots of things going on. We made loose plans for me to visit her house on a Friday evening for dinner. The day came, and I texted to confirm but didn't hear back. A couple of days later I received an apologetic text explaining that she had been out of town trying to sort out a family thing. We made new plans, which didn't eventuate. I considered not bothering her anymore – unsure if it was the right time, or if she felt like she had to say yes to talking to me. A few days later Grace contacted me and organised another time.

We met at her house, I brought over some food, and we sat in the lounge room with cartoons playing in the background as she told me what she had been up to since we last saw each other. We started by talking about her move to Narrm with her boyfriend.

> we left my Mum's house and moved up here the start of December, end of November, probably two years ago… [we were] staying in different refuges and youth houses, so we were separated for ages… living separately was alright, it was just getting on track with everything that was hard. Usually we are there with each other to talk to each other about it, but when he was in a completely different suburb it was a bit hard because there's rules surrounding each youth home, like I wasn't

> allowed at his but he was allowed at mine for certain hours, so we kind of had to either leave and meet somewhere or not see each other.

The conversation was interrupted when her younger sibling arrived home. They[1] sat on the end of the couch, looking at us expectantly. Grace's sibling had moved in, and Grace had taken on responsibility for looking after them. They were just at the start of high school. They bickered about food for a while in a big sister, little sibling kind of way, but also in a more caring way. Grace was not getting up to make food, but she told them what there was to eat. The marked pauses and facial expressions Grace made were ignored, the younger sibling stayed put. Grace rolled her eyes. We continued our conversation, moving on to what she was doing with her time at that moment.

> I'm not working at the moment, I actually just recently quit a job… I just wasn't getting shifts, and I'd constantly call them up and they were, like, 'nah, we don't need you today' and they're constantly employing new people… because there's so many fullas that want jobs they'll just keep employing and keep employing and then they'll try and evenly share, but sometimes people get left out… it was great money, but – I was the only female… and all the males were like in the 30s or 40s and they're experienced men, and it was like… hard labour – I mean, I could do it but the males would be, 'no, don't hurt yourself, we don't want you to do that', and I was, like, 'give me a break!' Now, I just want a normal 9 to 5

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[1] Gender neutral pronouns used here and throughout to reduce the potential identifiability of participants

> weekday job, so I have times when I know I’m working, and so my roster will be all planned before I start instead of working night shifts… that’s a bit difficult with them [she points at her little sibling], considering I can’t leave them alone… I just want a 9 to 5 job, so I’ve been looking for that stuff but everyone’s like, ‘no, we need well experienced workers’ and I’m like, ‘Well, I need experience!’

Grace and her boyfriend had moved away from family and where they grew up, and had bills piling up and caring responsibilities for Grace’s younger sibling. They were thinking about moving house again, somewhere cheaper. They had no car, no way of getting around. The day I caught up with Grace she had to head back into the city, but her myki card[2] was out of money. I offered her a lift. In the car we continued talking. I asked if she had been up to much – attending any programs or involved in anything else. She was still involved with one youth program, but sporadically. She had stopped many of the activities that brought her joy because she didn’t have time anymore. The fact she had finished school also made it harder to engage with programs because they were targeted at young people still in school, with an assumed support network that included financial and transport assistance. Grace didn’t have a way to get to the programs and activities – moving around to afford rent meant moving further away from locally based supports she once accessed. She didn’t have money left over to pay for things like sports registration and uniforms, let alone transportation.

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[2] Myki is a prepaid public transport card used in Narrm

Despite the life changes and challenges Grace faced, and things that might suggest adversity and precariousness, she was positive as we chatted in the car. She was frustrated at some of the circumstances, like never getting enough hours in the various jobs she had, or not getting the right kind of work to suit her family situation, but she had plans for the future and a desire to care for and support people she loved. The choices she was making were on her own terms, for her own reasons and with specific motivations for a kind of future she desired.

Grace and I talked about sources of strength. She used the term ‘spirit’ to describe her resilience. She laughed and told me that her boyfriend was always amazed at her ability to pull it together and get through anything – she was proud of her identity as a strong Blak woman. She told me about not knowing much about her culture growing up, as she spent most of her time with her extended family – living with non-Indigenous family members. Some of her family spoke badly about First Nations people. It wasn’t until she started attending a program focused on culture and First Nations identity that she really began to learn about and restore her connection to that part of herself. It had become an important part of who she was, how she identified, where she drew strength from.

In this thesis I write about many First Nations young people from different backgrounds and places and with differing levels of connection to identity, community and support networks. Like Grace, they have complicated lives and their circumstances do not always match up with the expectations of others. They have desires to connect with culture and identity, but they also have struggles and challenges to this process.

Through this thesis I hope their voices come through clearly, to tell stories of diversity, strength and desire, to show their enactments of belonging and re-storying connections to place and identity.

Chapter 1. Framing First Nations identities, health and wellbeing

> there's still, like, that racist idea that you're half Aboriginal and they're like, 'Is it your father or your mother?' I'm like, 'I'm not Aboriginal Monday through Thursday. I'm Aboriginal all the time! Also – who are you to ask me?… [laughs]… I'm not Aboriginal six months out of the year, I'm Aboriginal full time. (Dhani, interview participant)

This thesis explores Indigeneity as described and practised by First Nations[3] young people living in Narrm.[4] The key research question addressed is:

> How do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander urban Victorian young people practise Indigeneity?

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[3] The term 'First Nations' is used to acknowledge the many nations to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants of this research belong. This is described in more detail later in this chapter.

[4] Narrm (also spelled Naarm and Nairm) is a Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung word. In Woiwurrung, Narrm is the place now known as central Melbourne, in the state of Victoria (Pinto, 2021). Woiwurrung is the language of the Wurundjeri peoples, and the Boonwurrung and Wurundjeri peoples are part of the Kulin Nations and Traditional Custodians of Narrm (and beyond) (Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, 2023). Boonwurrung peoples use the word Narrm to describe the bay area now known as Port Phillip Bay. This area was also once land cared for and in relation with the Boonwurrung peoples (Briggs, 2015). As this thesis is set predominantly on the land of the Wurundjeri peoples, Narrm is used to refer to the land now known as Melbourne, which includes the many sites and places where young people engaged with this research.

To answer this question, I explored concepts and construction of identities using qualitative methods focused on the ways in which First Nations young people see themselves and the communities to which they belong. Participants of this work had very different lived experiences – some were extremely comfortable with their identities as First Nations young people living in an urban place, while others were still navigating their Indigeneity or their sense of belonging in an urban place. Some participants lived at home with their families, some lived on their own or in a university college, and others were living in out-of-home care or between foster arrangements. All participants were navigating the experiences of being First Nations people in a city place, and described the ways this impacted their own understandings of their connections to community, place, each other and their First Nations identity.

Addressing the research question for this thesis involved engaging First Nations young people (16–30 year old) living in Narrm, which was achieved through working collaboratively with four organisations based in Narrm:

- A mainstream youth service administering a Koori youth drop-in program
- the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, through its arts mentoring program
- a human rights law centre administering a volunteer cultural support program for First Nations men in prison
- Murrup Barak, an Indigenous student centre at The University of Melbourne.

These organisations assisted in the development of how this research was designed, and for what purpose. Young people engaging with these organisations – as attendees of programs, as volunteers or as students – were invited to participate in this research across a range of qualitative data collection activities including focus groups, a yarning workshop, interviews and observational activities. Chapter 3 provides a discussion about specific methods and information about the young people involved.

Naming us/them/other

The ways people are named and referred to holds important information relating to status within society, power and position. Not naming specific identities tells a particular story about belonging and non-belonging. Specific identities, such as ‘White’ or ‘European’, are usually not declared because they have been made ‘normal’ – which leaves the categories of ‘other’ or ‘stranger’ for identities that do not fit this ‘normal’ categorisation (Ahmed, 2000). Throughout this thesis, the First Peoples of Australia are referred to in several ways. The term ‘Indigenous’ is a broad-spectrum labelling of diverse groups of people with different cultural practices, languages, customs and connections to place that both delineates these populations from settler colonial populations and flattens the diversity and specific identities held within this labelled group (Anderson et al., 2016). The term ‘Indigenous’ is problematic because it labels a relationship to colonisation and is extremely generic. The other possibility, which still centres settler colonial belonging, but acknowledges the complexity and history that predates the interaction of being colonised, is ‘the people that were here first.’ In the context of Australia’s colonisation, acknowledging the existence of First Peoples, with laws, stories and connections to and understandings of place nullifies the doctrine of terra nullius[5] – that the continent now known as Australia was a land belonging to no one. Labelling people as ‘Indigenous’ (or ‘natives’) strips away the important connections, meanings and ways of knowing that constitute the complex identities of the peoples of all the different places of this continent.

‘Australia’, as it is known today, is a continent of many Countries of First Nations communities and language groups. These First Nations have specific relationships, obligations and connections, with origin stories from these places, and the name ‘Australia’ signifies a structure of colonialism that has sought to and continues to dispossess First Nations communities of belonging and connection, while refusing to recognise the continued sovereignty of these many nations.

None of the labels or names used to describe participants of this research are adequate without also being highly identifiable, and so I have tried to be conscious of the ways in which participants are named in this thesis. Sometimes I have used terms participants have used to describe themselves, such as ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander’; sometimes I have used the descriptions ‘First Nations’ or ‘First Peoples’, and occasionally I have used the term ‘Indigenous’ – though this is usually in the case of describing First Nations people from other colonised places. Ideally, I would use the language group or clan names people have used to describe themselves – which I do when referencing academics who have explicitly stated their identities. I have also used the term ‘Blak’ or ‘blackfulla’ when a young participant has used this to describe themselves (Munro, 2020). I have also referred to ‘Traditional Owners’ or ‘Traditional Custodians’, when appropriate, acknowledging the significant and ongoing connection to place of the First Peoples of this place – Narrm – but this terminology is specific and not appropriate for the majority of the people we hear from throughout this work. ‘Koori’ is a term used in some places, especially in the names of programs, and is a specific name for First Nations people who are from language groups in the areas of Victoria and southern New South Wales. Place and belonging are important features of this thesis, and so by stating the complexities of naming our belonging here, I attempt to contribute to the restoration of this recognition (for more information on naming protocols, see AIATSIS, 2022a; Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and La Trobe University, 2014).

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[5] The ‘Mabo case’ officially nullified the doctrine of *terra nullius* in Australia on 3 June 1992 – with the High Court recognising that ‘Indigenous people had lived in Australia for thousands of years and enjoyed rights to their land according to their own laws and customs.’ (AIATSIS, 2023)

Through this chapter, I examine Indigeneity in Australia using the literature available from First Nations understandings of Indigeneity and the colonial constructions of these identities. Although the experiences of colonisation have created a demarcation of identities that are absurdly and impossibly binary (Indigenous, or non-Indigenous), identities as First Nations peoples from hundreds of clans across the continent of Australia stretch back to creation stories and continue today in connection to the experience of being colonised. Despite the tens of thousands of years of continuing culture, adaptation and ingenuity of First Nations communities and identities, colonial constructions of Indigeneity continue to influence the policies and practices that impact the lives of First Nations communities and individuals. The tensions between these disparate understandings continue to shape the realities, interactions and daily experiences of First Nations people.

These tensions led to the discussions that frame the research question about the realities and experiences of being First Nations and young in an urban place. In this thesis, these discussions are grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, including relationality, which frame knowledge of and belonging to community and place, and interactions between these (Bang et al., 2014; Dudgeon and Bray, 2019; Moreton-Robinson, 2011, 2013; TallBear, 2015; Tynan, 2021).

Locating myself

My place and position in this research are woven into its fabric. I am not ancestrally connected to the Country of this work; I arrived as an uninvited guest but have since been generously welcomed onto Country by Traditional Owners. I am a Wiradjuri woman with family from Wellington in New South Wales, and family from England and Scotland. My background and training are in social science, youth work and public health. I explore my standpoint and the impact it has in shaping this research more in Chapter 2, but feel a brief introduction is an important inclusion in this section, so that the reader may know something of the position from which this research emerges.

Identity and Indigeneity

First Nations identities have been conceptualised, constructed, imposed, negotiated and refused over the duration of colonisation in Australia. In this section I discuss the impact that constructed, expected and performed identities have over generations, and the ways First Nations young people understand this. First, I critically engage with what the literature tells us about First Nations identities.

Discussions about identity and Indigeneity are frequent and ongoing in First Nations communities. In research contexts, identity construction is well explored as a way to think about sameness, difference, self-identity and group belonging (Hammack, 2014; McLean and Syed, 2014). However, research relating to Indigeneity and its framing rarely incorporates Indigenous ways of understanding identity and belonging (Shay and Sarra, 2021; Smallwood, 2023) and is often framed in deficit discourse, or 'narratives of deficiency' (Fforde et al., 2013). Currently, an area of study in Australia on Indigenous identities is emerging (for examples, see Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson, 2016; Carlson, 2016; Harris et al., 2013, 2013 (Eds.); Nakata, M., 2013; Smallwood, 2023). In a paper analysing research centring Australian Indigenous young people's voices relating to their identities, Associate Professor Marnee Shay, an Aboriginal woman with familial connections to Wagiman Country, and Bindal, Birri and Torres Strait Islander Professor Grace Sarra found just 14 studies and concluded that this area of study is limited (Shay and Sarra, 2021). Despite the international body of literature on the experience of being urban and Indigenous, the focus on First Nations urban young people in Australia is sparse, with very few studies examining this experience in Narrm specifically (for examples, see Edmonds et al., 2014; Holmes et al., 2002; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021a, 2021b; Priest et al., 2011). The importance of connection to Indigeneity, and health and wellbeing, has been correlated in research internationally and within Australia (Chandler and Lalonde, 2019; Salmon et al., 2019), which highlights the importance of engaging young people's voices in understanding the ways they make connections to and practice their Indigeneity. This gap – of research on Indigeneity in urban settings in Australia, with young people, undertaken by a First Nations researcher, using culturally specific and appropriate methodologies and methods – is where I position this thesis.

This thesis is not about exploring who ‘is’ or ‘is not’ a First Nations person; rather, it is about understanding what it is to be a First Nations young person in an urban place, framed through experience and belonging. Through this thesis I am not interested in interrogating people’s claims to Indigeneity, or in making judgements about identification. Nor does this work interrogate identity development models. This research focuses on the stories young people have generously shared, and the ways they feel their sense of belonging, how they make and participate in communities, and where the strength and wellbeing arises from identity claims. Through these stories, I explore the ways First Nations young people are negotiating, articulating and expressing their identities in relation to place, community and institutional regimes. This is a unique contribution to research as it engages the concept of relationality and place in contributing to the specific identities and connections that First Nations young people are expressing and making. Place is remade in a different way through this lens. We see this in the refusals, resistances, responsibilities and relationships being navigated by young people participating in the different sites of this thesis.

For this thesis, identities are theorised as the expression, experience and exploration of being First Nations in the context of belonging and not-belonging in the specific place of Narrm. The stories that emerge from this work, as discussed in the findings chapters (Chapters 4–7), describe the ways that young people are navigating, maintaining, resisting, reinterpreting and re-storying their experiences and relationships to place and their Indigeneity.

Embodied identity and blood talk

About halfway through this PhD, as I was getting blood taken for a routine check-up, a nurse asked what I did for work. As I tried to explain my thesis to her, she squinted and said, ‘Ah – you don’t really see any Aboriginal people around here, do you?’ Two streets away from us was the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, and, of course, I was right in front of her. I watched as she placed vials of my blood into a tray. I told her that people might not be able to tell who is Aboriginal based on what they look like, to which she replied, ‘What percentage do you have to be again?’

Indigenous identification in Australia comes with a burden of proof that is not required for other identities. Claiming Indigeneity carries different expectations depending on the circumstance and arenas in which such claims are made. In the context of obtaining a certificate of Aboriginality, there is a specific government-sanctioned process for identifying as Indigenous in Australia. The process includes three criteria:

- being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- identifying as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person
- being accepted as such by the community in which you live, or formerly lived (AIATSIS, 2022c).

For First Nations people, talk about identity is fraught with questions of admixture, belonging and blood. Although involving more than just descent, Indigenous identities are intrinsically linked to descent, and talk about descent has been linked to blood or, more specifically, blood quantum. Blood talk and talk of descent or heritage have specific links to eugenics and social Darwinism in Australia's political history (Hollinsworth, 1992:141). Bond and colleagues (2014) discuss the ways that blood is used as a concept to measure and question one's wholeness when identifying as First Nations.

Using blood talk, or blood quantum, as a measure of identity has its own specific history and privileging of specific knowledge. Whilst discussing the Indigenous experiences in Northern America, Anishinaabe scholar Kim TallBear (2013) questions the way in which blood, or more specifically DNA, has been and is used as a measure to categorise, classify and identify tribal belonging for Native American tribal groups in ways that do not pay attention to relationality and connections. TallBear's (2013) discussion is familiar in that it points to a colonial process of surveilling, categorising and making decisions about specific populations and identities using a tool of measurement that has not incorporated localised community understandings of belonging and identity.

Although the confirmation of Aboriginality process for identifying as Indigenous in Australia does not involve blood quantum, First Nations people in Australia are 'forced to engage frequently with blood talk in response to non-Aboriginal inquisition and policing of… identity' (Bond et al., 2014:6) on a regular basis, not only as a way of questioning claims to belonging, but also as an inquisition into validity and authenticity. Colonial knowledge processes have framed concepts of 'mixedness' in ancestry and blood relating to ‘race’ as processes that are somehow diluting or impure. This is despite the realities of history, that for as long as there have been ways for people to travel and meet, there have always been histories of connecting, mixing and changing. In Canada the experience of Métis communities, who have specific relationships and histories relating to place and trade, is one of constant questioning and interrogation of identities, couched in discourses of ‘mixedness.’ Métis academic Chris Andersen (2014:6) describes this discourse as a negation of ‘families, the histories of our communities, and the authenticity of our aboriginality, reducing us to in-between, incomplete, “not-quite-people”…’ These conversations roll on internationally, and clearly influence perceptions of Indigeneity across continents.

Identity is a way of being included, but it can also be a site of exclusion and control (Brough et al., 2006), and this has especially been the case for First Nations people and communities throughout the history of colonised Australia.

> When all it takes is a drop of black blood to stigmatise and oppress an Aboriginal person, it is important to address the importance of blood talk that reclaims that same drop as a symbol of Aboriginal strength and pride. (Bond et al., 2014:7)

Reclaiming the ways in which connection, belonging and identity can be defined is a political, active and ongoing process for First Nations communities and peoples across the continent. The process of identifying as First Nations today is a different experience, with different connotations and associated responses, than it was a generation ago, and different again from two or more generations ago. Identifying as

First Nations is an act of resistance, of reassertion of presence and a denial of colonial success. First Nations people are, of course, more than a denial of colonialism and exist well beyond this frame. The ways in which First Nations people identify, connect and continue relationships with Indigeneity are worthy of exploration. Hearing the voices of First Nations young people on the ways in which they connect to, understand and practice their Indigeneity is an important step in acknowledging the expertise and knowledge held within these processes, and the continuity and resurgence of cultural practices – and is the point of this research.

Construction and control of Indigenous identities

For Indigenous populations across the world, the imposition of particular identities has been, and continues to be, used as a way to subjugate and control populations by settler colonisers (Alfred and Corntassel, 2005). Kahnawà:ke Mohawk activist and scholar Taiaiake Alfred and member of the Tsalagi Cherokee Nation teacher, activist and scholar Jeff Corntassel discuss the ways in which Indigenous identities in Northern America are constructed and reinforced through government and international processes that seek to control through a process of ongoing colonisation. They argue that the very term 'Aboriginality' is used as a mechanism for constructing controllable groups and organisations that are easier to deal with through policies and legislation – in effect becoming objects to be controlled. In Australia the categorisation of 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal' was also socially constructed by the colonising powers, in contrast to those considered 'non-Indigenous'. Prior to colonisation, such categorisation and homogenisation of culturally, linguistically and spiritually diverse communities did not exist, and was not necessary (see, for example, Hollinsworth, 1992:138). Communities were identified along geographical, linguistic and cultural lines – through clan and language groups, through family groups. The moves of homogenisation and control were deployed specifically to disrupt and destroy the existing relations, power dynamics and balance of the First Nations.

Constructions of Indigeneity seem to be largely based on notions of an imagined 'pre-(European) contact' individual, or community, who does not live in urban and city places or in modernity. 'Authentic' Indigeneity is often demanded or questioned in public domains, such as by the media or by non-Indigenous (and sometimes Indigenous) peoples (Fforde et al., 2013). This questioning extends into other domains, including historical policies, legislated requirements regarding claims to traditional lands, education, justice and health. This includes specifying a need for the continued practice of particular kinds of culture and connection to place in the face of dispossession of land, culture and language. The conditions created seem perfect for questioning belonging and non-belonging – and who gets to make decisions about other people's claims to identity.

Aboriginal Professor Bronwyn Carlson (2016) discusses the deliberately confusing and contradictory policies in Australia that sought to control and legislate First Nations identity in Australia up until the mid-1960s. Carlson quotes historian Peter Reid, who states that these efforts were confusing by design:

> to puzzle, divide, and ultimately cause to vanish, the indigenous people who continued to pose a problem by their unwillingness to disappear. These seemingly mutually excluding definitions [of identity], at first sight

> idiotic, were no accident. Likewise, the division in the minds of Aboriginal people as to what exactly they were supposed to be was [sic] no coincidence. (Reid, 1998:170 quoted in Carlson 2016:23)

The story behind the construction of a specific kind of Indigeneity, and who can claim it, is of loss and degradation of culture and identity. Without denying the violence of colonial processes that continue to this day, this narrative contributes to what Distinguished Professor and Palawa woman Maggie Walter (2016) describes as '5D data' – 'disparity, deprivation, disadvantage, dysfunction and difference'. It renders pictures of First Nations humanity into datasets, which, when interrogated, follow a logic of inevitable demise in keeping with colonisation's goal of elimination (Wolfe, 2016).

In Australia Closing the Gap is the current government approach to addressing 'Indigenous disadvantage' at state and federal levels (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). This national agreement between state and territory governments and the federal government focuses on specific definitions of health and wellbeing that hold non-Indigenous, predominantly white and privileged population health as the standard against which outcomes of Indigenous health and wellbeing are measured. This positions First Nations health and wellbeing in an ever-widening hole of dysfunction obliquely referred to as 'the gap'. The language of the agreement offers little in the way of self-determination for First Nations communities or the possibilities of what health and wellbeing might look like from a First Nations-centred approach that does not focus on non-Indigenous health and wellbeing. Interrogation of the language and logic behind this policy poses a question: what kind of futures are imagined for First Nations young people using this model?

Intersectional-feminist and non-Indigenous writer Sara Ahmed (2016) argues that institutions deliberately use words in order *not* to do things, as though saying something or writing a policy or a commitment for something is the same as actually doing it, or, perhaps worse, even stops something from being done. She discusses the ways in which institutions make commitments to such things as ‘diversity’ with no actual action as a ‘way of not doing something by appearing to do something’ (Ahmed 2016:1). Closing the Gap has reached a level of saturation of national recognition across sectors and population groups. Its mechanisms – so large they are hard to ignore – include national partnerships between state and federal governments, implementation plans and annual reports, and the creation and capture of data used to track the government’s progress in ‘addressing’ Indigenous disadvantage.

Alternative possibilities for understanding and defining health and wellbeing incorporate elements acknowledging historical influences and ongoing experiences of racism and discrimination. Social determinants of health are ‘non-medical factors that influence health outcomes’ (World Health Organization, 2023) and are essential for contextualising ‘the conditions of daily living [including] – aspects of birth, growth, education, living, and working; use of health care; and structural factors such as socioeconomic policy that shape the conditions of daily life’ (Anderson et al., 2016:152). Building on these concepts, cultural determinants of health use First Nations knowledge and map ‘the elements that form cultural identity and act as protective factors of health and wellbeing' (Lowitja Institute, 2021). Another concept, the assemblages of health, incorporates the 'complex, relational, and often transient nature of health' (Chenhall and Senior, 2018:182). The concept engages with the relationality of humans, objects and the environment from which they emerge.

First Nations communities across the continent continue to adapt and practise culture, and share and incorporate different, continuing and emerging elements of identities while maintaining and reconnecting to place and culture (Kingsley et al., 2018, 2021). First Nations young people are an integral part of this process, and cultural continuity and futurity is important for their health and wellbeing (Chandler and Lalonde, 2019).

First Nations individuals have many questions, internally and externally, to contend with in relation to their identification as Indigenous. The choices relating to declaring Indigeneity, or passing as non-Indigenous over generations (as acts of survival) have not been extensively studied in Australian contexts, though there is a small amount of non-unified research emerging (Eastman, 2023; Ellinghaus, 2018; Ellinghaus and Wickes, 2020). Some key issues identified through this emerging body of work describe the many processes and impacts of colonisations, including being moved off country, or removed from family, or staying in place, or applying for exemption to leave missions or reserves in order to be reunited with other family, or work, or travel, have been imposed differently across the continent. The findings of these studies provide insight to feelings of sensitivity regarding knowledge of self, connection to and acceptance by communities and place, and what individual, family and community histories are. For some individuals and families, not having specific cultural knowledge or strong connections has a specific meaning, depending on the ways in which the absence has made itself present.

Identity questioning is a challenging, divisive and often violent process that First Nations peoples negotiate regularly. In this space authenticity has come to symbolise a questioning of the very essence of someone's identity and belonging, the identity claims that are made, and the right of an individual to make them.

Authentic identities

The construction of confusing and contradictory 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' First Nations identity markers throughout colonised Australia's history is not an accident. Moreton-Robinson's (2015) 'White possessive logic' explores and discusses the ways that colonised constructs of Indigeneity creep into understandings, discourses and public conceptualisation of 'authentic Indigeneity' in Australia. She states that colonisation has created rigid ideas about what it is to be 'Indigenous' and, over time, has ensured that these ideas limit the ability of individuals and communities to belong to this constructed identity.

Not conforming to particular expected First Nations identities can be seen to undermine the 'authenticity' of individuals and groups, but for many individuals, this is also a form of resistance, or a reality of being a First Nations person with complex layers of identity. The reality of complex and layered identities that do not conform to preconceived notions of 'Indigenous identity' can, however, be in tension with understandings of group belonging. Social norms and expectations within some communities are inevitably influenced by problematic concepts of binary identities held across broader non-Indigenous society and internalised in various ways. Acts of just being whatever an individual wants to be, whether it is deliberate resistance to imposed assumptions about Indigeneity or not, can also be at the cost of an individual's group belonging (Harris et al., 2013).

The concept of 'authenticity' in relation to Indigeneity continues to be drawn from arbitrary and ill-conceived concepts such as physical characteristics and appearance (including skin colour) and the geographical location of where someone comes from, or resides, such as a city or remote community – even though all places across the continent are unceded lands of First Nations communities. These notions have seeped into the very ways even we, as First Nations people, sometimes see ourselves, our communities and our belonging in place.

Urban identities

The focus on 'urban' in this thesis is a deliberate choice in order to address some of the ways 'authentic' Indigenous identities are framed, as relating to place (usually remote places), and the ways in which Indigenous connection to place is erased, especially in city places. It is also an important framing of identity for First Nations peoples, as in the context of the many places of this thesis, the participants were not Traditional Owners of the places we were in, although they had a variety of connections to the Country we were on. This concept of Indigeneity and urban place was one that challenged participants of this research in different ways, as we will see in the findings chapters of this thesis. For the purposes of this thesis, the term 'urban' means city, or built-up area generally, and specifically it refers to the city area of Narrm.

Place is a crucial element of connection, relationship and belonging in Indigenous ontologies. Aboriginal academic Professor Bronwyn Fredericks (2013) discusses the ‘process of dispossessing, displacing and segregating Aboriginal peoples’ from urban spaces throughout history and in the present day. This is done through acts of physically removing and forcing out original populations, establishing colonies, and changing place names and replacing them with names of people from the British Empire. Country – or, distilled down to its elemental value in colonised society, land – has been stolen through the process of colonisation and ‘settling’ the continent. The First Peoples, who belong to place and are deeply connected to place, have been dispossessed, moved on, moved away and disconnected. Alongside this erasure of the original and continuing presence of First Nations people in urban spaces are assumptions about Indigeneity and living within major cities:

> There seems to be a widespread myth [across non-Indigenous Australia] that, when Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people enter cities or regional centres, we somehow become less Indigenous. (Fredericks, 2013:5)

Assumptions about the authenticity of Indigeneity relating to location ignore the ongoing relationships Traditional Custodians have with the Country that urban spaces occupy and deny the connection to Country, continuing custodianship and practice of culture celebrating this connection. For First Nations people living off their own Country and/or in urban spaces, there are continuing and pervasive notions that living in city places somehow renders Indigeneity incomplete or inauthentic and that modern life is incompatible with First Nations identities. Aboriginality has been constructed as primitive and exotic – a site of identity that is frozen in time and place, that can only be practised in particular ways and contexts, and with a culture that is fixed and does not change or adapt over time (see Grieves, 2014; Hollinsworth, 1992; Karvelas and Vasek, 2012). Constructing and controlling Indigenous identities is not specific to Australia – it is a colonising apparatus that seeks to foreground settler colonial belonging, while erasing Indigenous presence, history and potential futurity from place and, specifically, from places deemed as valuable land, such as cities.

In Northern American contexts, Native American Indigeneity is portrayed, as described by Unangax̂ Professor Eve Tuck and her regular collaborator and non-Indigenous Professor K. Wayne Yang (2012), as being in slow and steady decline through each generation. The popular national narrative is that First Nations identity somehow become less authentic with each subsequent generation because of where people live, how they practise and connect to culture and community, and skin colour, or admixture of ancestry. This myth of inauthenticity is achieved through mechanisms such as incorporating DNA tests into tribal enrolment processes, which, until recently were more concerned with 'the symbolic language of "blood"' (TallBear, 2013:4), than the actual substance. Blood quantum requirements for tribal enrolments became part of a legal process that usurped traditional tribal processes that placed importance on connection to specific ancestors and continuing connections and knowledge of community and culture (Simpson, A, 2014; TallBear, 2013). Although blood quantum is not used (explicitly) as a measure of Indigeneity in Australian contexts, the concepts of declining Indigeneity are familiar.

These processes are not accidental; as Harris and colleagues (2013) discuss, the questioning of Indigenous identities is used as a mechanism of control in state policies and practices that are designed to regulate and control the lives of Indigenous peoples the world over, the ways that identities are perceived and the ways in which people can 'be' Indigenous. Through controlling identity, it is possible to control belonging, claims to belonging and rights to belonging, which relate specifically in Australian contexts to place, land and the potential to claim ongoing relationships with place/land.[6] In Australia this has implications for Traditional Owner connections to place, land rights and Native Title claims. Beyond this, the questioning of identity and belonging also has specific impacts for health and wellbeing and ongoing connection to place and community (Kingsley et al., 2018, 2021; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021a; Thorpe et al., 2023).

In urban areas, where Indigeneity is portrayed as fragile and tenuous, despite the continuing presence and strength of First Nations communities and Traditional Owners in these places, the ongoing impacts of this history and present reality can still be felt as a further fragmentation and division within some communities, which has led to the perceived need for identity policing and self-policing.

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[6] In Australia the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) recognises that 'native title exists on land if a connection to the land and surrounding waters has been maintained from before the time Australia was annexed as part of the British Empire…' (Higgins, 2021). The requirement for documenting this continuing connection is extremely challenging given the impact of colonisation on communities and place – and adds another dimension to the ways in which identity is expected to be performed in order to be considered 'authentic' or legitimate.

Disrupted identities

In First Nations community settings, asking someone about their connections to First Nations identity is an integral part of understanding relationships to each other and place, and also an aspect of accountability within community. If you are making claims to a particular identity, you need to know how you are connected, or, sometimes, how you have been disconnected. This knowledge is an important part of relationality – and a process of connecting and understanding how people belong or can be made to belong. Questions about connection are important for establishing belonging and relatedness, but they can also be challenging. Considering the histories of intentional policies of disconnection, erasure and separation, answering questions about connection can be difficult for some people identifying as First Nations. Sometimes questioning connection can feel like a questioning of identity – and sometimes it is a questioning of identity and authenticity. There are some concerns in First Nations communities that individuals are making false claims to Indigeneity (Gooda, 2011; Nimmo, 2022; Ward, 2022), or without doing the work to understand their connections and belonging. If there is a way to belong, there must also a process of finding belonging – and, at some point, a process of inclusion or exclusion.

‘Identity policing’ is a term that comes up inside and outside First Nations communities and suggests an undermining of claims of belonging, or interrogating claims in a way that may be perceived as harmful or violent. Identity policing can also be about enforcing a particular and singular kind of identity, with expectations that identity should be performed in a way that conforms to these ideas. There is a tension between legitimising claims to belonging, creating boundaries that constitute group belonging and safety, and the ways in which these boundaries are enforced/made firm. Sometimes the boundary can be felt as a line that includes, and sometimes it is a line that excludes.

Identity policing is also referred to as ‘lateral violence’ in some instances. The concept of lateral violence has been written about from many perspectives (Bombay et al., 2014; Clark, 2015; Jaber et al., 2022), but examines the compounding effects of oppression, colonisation, racism and intergenerational trauma as the root cause of internal community violence relating to group belonging and exclusion. Lateral violence could simply be termed ‘violence’ or ‘internalised colonialism’ and not used as a way to blame Indigenous communities for the policing of identities, or for belonging to a group, when, in fact, this violence is an extension of colonisation/white supremacy (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2011). For the purposes of this work, the term ‘lateral violence’ is not regularly used. This is not a sign of a rejection of this term, or a denial of the existence of lateral violence, but a decision not to categorise or assume to know the meaning of specific interactions and behaviours between community members and young people involved in this research.

Intergenerational disconnection from place, culture and identity was an intentional process of government policies and practices that have attempted to erode and erase First Nations presence, and it continues to contribute to feelings of loss, disconnection and shame around identity (Chamberlain et al., 2020; Gee et al., 2023; Smallwood, 2023). Carlson (2016:165) explores the experiences of intergenerationally disconnected Aboriginal people, documenting the ways in which they struggled to ‘secure their identities in the midst of this long history of government policies and practices that positioned their forebears and now seek to position them’. For people who identify as First Nations but do not have strong links to communities or families and/or homelands, the expectations around how Indigeneity is ‘performed’ or seen can create considerable internalised conflict and struggle. This can be an additional barrier to finding belonging, or ‘coming home’. Carlson (2016) argues that this positioning can lead to feeling that someone’s story must fit into a familiar and recognisable First Nations narrative or script, or that one has to be built that adheres to a story that is recognisable to others; such positioning, however, denies a ‘full sense of self’ and eschews the impacts of colonisation on the circumstances and histories contributing to these expectations of binary and impossible identities.

Access to equity initiatives – or programs that appear to be designed to address the inequalities experienced by First Nations people and communities – is often limited and requires the kinds of proof that (as discussed above) are, for some, a challenge to acquire. Torres Strait Islander Professor Martin Nakata (2012) notes that the resource scarcity created through such initiatives can have the consequence of patrolling boundaries of ‘acceptable’ First Nations identities. This boundary patrolling or policing can cause trauma and distress – rather than healing – through not allowing freedom of diversity in the expression of identities, histories, cultures, beliefs and views:

> In the interests of squabbling over the limits of government reparation for our dispossession, we squabble with each other over who we were, who we are now and, ultimately, who we can be. Today, it seems that the

> unity of something we have come to call Indigenous ‘community’ is demanding singular political, cultural and historical narratives. (Nakata, M., 2012:101)

Instead of this controlling narrative, Martin Nakata (2012:100) calls for a:

> focus on the full range of possibilities we can shape, in the spaces of relative freedom that we now have, for the coming generations of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.

The concern for the limitations on expressions of identity and belonging that Martin Nakata raises equally apply to the next generations of First Nations young people. Few studies to date have explicitly focused on the experiences of First Nations urban-based young people (for some examples, see Fredericks, 2013; Holmes et al., 2002; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021a, 2021b; Nelson and Hay, 2015; Priest et al., 2011), with most studies focusing on regional and remote experiences (Jennings et al., 2021), or bio-medically framed diseases/problematic behaviour prevalence and treatments (Fogarty et al., 2018).

The deficit and disease focus of studies relating to First Nations young people further perpetuates stereotypes about authentic ways to be First Nations, and the circumstances in which First Nations people live (Fforde et al., 2013; Brand et al., 2016). A study focusing on young people’s perceptions of themselves, based on Whadjuk Country, also known as urban Perth (Kickett-Tucker, 2009), demonstrated how limitations to the possible expressions of Indigeneity were well established in First

Nations young peer groups. The findings of this small study concluded that, for participants, their identity as First Nations people was influenced by perceptions of individual appearance and performance of identity in sometimes very prescriptive ways. Some participants reported feelings of having to ‘prove’ themselves by fitting into preconceived notions of identity held by the wider community and First Nations peers (Kickett-Tucker, 2009:130).

More recent studies on the experiences of First Nations young people (Smallwood, 2023; Smallwood et al., 2023; Shay et al., 2021) and in particular First Nations urban young people (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021a, 2021b) have focused on the importance of community connection and culture in defining identities, which is an affirming and positive step in recognising First Nations understandings of Indigeneity. Although this approach is welcome, some scholars identify issues with the ways ‘culture’ as a term is being coopted by non-Indigenous organisations and through government (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021a, 2021b). As Murrup-Stewart and colleagues (2021b) show, ‘culture’ is not easily defined, but is used as a cure-all term for how policies, programs and services will address ‘Indigenous disadvantage’ without actually stating what ‘culture’ is, and how it will achieve these supposed outcomes.

The focus of the studies by Murrup-Stewart and colleagues (2021a, 2021b) on the different aspects of understanding First Nations cultures and identities (2021b), and how these are experienced and expressed by young people (2021a), acknowledges the importance of connection and the work that goes into making connections by young people. It also creates space for more research in this area that is collaborative and community driven in determining what concepts such as ‘culture’ mean – and why these are important for health, wellbeing and belonging. What this thesis examines is the active work and involvement of First Nations young people in adapting and contributing to constantly evolving sites of Indigeneity.

Place as a relation of identity

For tens of thousands of years, Narrm has been an important site for the Traditional Custodians – the Wurundjeri and the Boonwurrung peoples north and south of the Birrarung (the river now known as the Yarra) and for the other clans of the Kulin Nations – who would travel to Narrm at different times for ceremonies and meetings (Presland, 2002). The occupation of Narrm through colonisation deliberately pushed First Nations people off Country and disrupted the gatherings of Kulin Nations, making First Nations people and communities unwelcome (Pinto, 2021). The town of Melbourne saw a revival of First Nations presence, starting again in the 1920s as people moved from regional areas and interstate in search of employment opportunities and connection with other First Nations people, and/or because of the refusal by the ‘Aborigines Protection Board of Victoria’ to provide support unless someone was considered ‘full-blood Aboriginal’ or living on an Aboriginal reserve (Broome, 2015; Howard-Wagner, 2021). In his book on the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, non-Indigenous historian Emeritus Professor Richard Broome (2015) describes the resurgence of First Nations presence in Narrm, which saw increased activism and a change in the ways people connected and affiliated. Broome (2015:12) states that clan connections, still fundamental to understanding identity and belonging, were not the only way of acknowledging Indigeneity – and a new pan-

Aboriginal identity emerged through these times as people shared common experiences and desires for a future free of the harsh discrimination they experienced in housing, employment, education and surveillance. Narrm continues to be a place of great activism by First Nations people and communities. Victoria is the first state in Australia to undergo a formal Treaty process (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023:82; First Peoples – State Relations, 2023), which is due to the ongoing work of community activists – building on history and desiring a future that holds multiple sovereign possibilities for First Nations communities.

In many places throughout Narrm there is strong revitalisation and resurgence of culture and increasing pride and diversity in the expression of First Nations identities. With this comes a constant redefining and connecting of relationships to each other, to place and to other elements beyond these descriptions. This revitalisation offers possibilities for moving conversations about the representation and construction of First Nations identities beyond the deficit discourse of 'authenticity' and disadvantage, and provides fertile ground for engaging with young people about the ways they define their Indigeneity.

Thesis outline

This thesis is set out in eight chapters. The first three chapters outline the study, the research from which it emerges, and its design, analysis and possibilities. These chapters consider key texts from Indigenous academics in Australia and globally that directed the shape of this research as strengths- and desire-based and focused on the futurity of First Nations cultures and identities. Chapters 4–7 are the findings chapters and engage the young people participating in the different sites of this research.

Chapter 1 introduces the research question for this thesis and presents the literature on Indigeneity and the gap that this research fills. I argue that there are historical pressures to perform a particular kind of ‘authentic’ Indigenous identity, rooted in colonial genocidal policies in the Australian context, but that First Nations identities are linked to place and belonging and are constantly remade and negotiated through understandings of relationality.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of existing literature and the ways that research problematises First Nations communities and young people. This leads to a conceptual framework that guided the choice of methodology for this thesis and informed my ethical approach as a Wiradjuri researcher, and includes defining key concepts such as relationality, place, colonisation, youth resistance and desire-based frameworks.

Chapter 3 explains the research design and methods for understanding identity in the context of First Nations young people finding their ways to and within Narrm. The sites and engagements of this research are outlined, and the ways in which data is analysed and interpreted is explained.

Chapter 4 outlines the process of setting up a Koori youth drop-in program with a youth service in inner-northern Narrm, that sought to make connections with First Nations young people commonly labelled as ‘isolated’ or ‘disengaged’. In this chapter, concepts of youth resistance and refusal are engaged in relation to assumed ‘need’, and the challenges of theories of change in youth services are discussed. The possibilities of desire-based frameworks are raised.

Chapter 5 describes a First Nations Arts Mentoring Program in which five participants worked alongside First Nations Art Mentors to produce artwork. The concept of ‘counterstories’ is introduced to explore resistance enacted within the group. Relationality – in the form of cultural resurgence and intergenerational teaching and healing – was an important backdrop to the program. Building on counterstory, the concept of ‘re-storying’ is engaged with as a way of presencing original and ongoing connections to place, identity and belonging.

Chapter 6 brings us to a cultural visitation program staffed by volunteers for First Nations men incarcerated at a maximum-security prison. First Nations volunteers of the program engage in cultural resurgence practices and new ceremonies, strengthening connections to community and place, and presencing their identities in places that desired their invisibility, while also unlearning and unravelling the ways in which their Indigeneity has been tied to deficit narratives and working together to make meaning of an act of unbecoming. The importance of place as a relation that holds connection, community and meaning is explored in this chapter.

Chapter 7 is set in the Indigenous student centre Murrup Barak at The University of Melbourne and describes a series of interactions through a yarning workshop, focus group and interviews with First Nations young people figuring out and defining their relationships and responsibilities in, with and between the spaces of a university and a city. Participants navigate and challenge persistent narratives of non-belonging in urban and academic places.

Chapter 8 is a discussion of the overall findings and conclusion of the work. The major themes that emerge through the data and findings chapters are engaged with, including resistance, refusal, relationality, counterstories and re-storying, resurgence, responsibility, presencing and desire. The limitations of this study are acknowledged, along with knowledge mobilisation and possibilities for the application and use of this thesis.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced the key question for this thesis – 'How do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander urban Victorian young people practise their Indigeneity?' – and outlined the issues relating to the ways in which First Nations identities are controlled and constructed in colonised nations internationally and in Australia. I have described the ways in which 'authentic' First Nations identities in Australia have been tightly controlled and influenced by the process of colonisation, and how these constructions can be harmful for self-image for young people and within First Nations communities. I have also charted the ways in which these constructions are transparent, with community awareness and ability to see past these and assert sovereign understandings and ways of being connected to the ongoing relational practices of First Nations identities.

At the beginning of this chapter is a quote from Dhani, a First Nations young woman who moved to Narrm to study – and who has more to say in Chapter 7. Dhani is expressing in this quote a frustration with the racist views and expectations around her identity as an Aboriginal woman. She invoked humour and resists the thought process behind the intrusive assumptions that she is ‘part’ Aboriginal, and reframes the story and asserts her power and identity as an Aboriginal woman. In the chapters that follow we hear from young people navigating their understandings of identity and belonging. This includes resisting framings of ‘at risk-ness’ and impositions and assumptions about ‘culture’ and identity, countering the stories they feel do not represent them, re-storying their place and connections, and understanding their relationality to the communities and places they inhabit and make. These navigations help to steer us to an understanding of the ways that First Nations young people in Narrm are contributing to culture, practising relationality and adding to the diverse and complex possibilities of Indigeneity in an urban, changing place.

The next chapter provides context and description of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this thesis.

Chapter 2. Conceptualising the complexities of belonging

> the settler majority population, policymakers and statistical agencies ‘know’ Indigenous people [through an]… intense disjuncture between black and white lives. Regardless of the fact that a predominantly urban Aboriginal population lives alongside the predominantly urban non-Aboriginal population, Aboriginal lives remain out of sight and mind – spatially, politically, socially and culturally absent from non-Indigenous Australia. (Walter, 2016:86)

In this chapter I outline the conceptual approach of the thesis, charting key theories and describing the use of relationality in understanding identities and how desire-based and youth resistance research frameworks are engaged in this work. I discuss the ways that research positions First Nations people and introduce the key concepts used throughout this work.

Positioning First Nations expertise in research

Throughout this thesis, I preference the highly informed voices of Indigenous academics worldwide, paying particular attention to the voice of First Nations academics from Australia. This is a deliberate choice, and it privileges the voices of Indigenous researchers who have specific expertise in the issues they write about, research and contribute to. The research undertaken by the key academics I refer to in this thesis is grounded in understandings of Indigenous ways of seeing and knowing the world – including our relations with each other, place and all things, which are essential foundations for this thesis. Many of the Indigenous academics who have written foundational texts in Indigenous research have shown how research is harmful and denigrating to Indigenous peoples and have started movements to build research processes that are empowering and community-driven, and that shift the focus of research from the object of study to expert.

Ngāpuhi, Te Roroa, Te Ātihaunui a Pāpārangi, Ngāti Tūwharetoa and Kaupapa Māori researcher Hana Burgess writes on the importance of being in good relation with ancestors and descendants through the practice of citation. Her work (along with her colleagues) shapes and inspires incremental change for envisioning Indigenous academic futures (Burgess et al., 2021). Burgess' approach recognises and builds on the important intellectual work of those who have come before and is an offering that shapes a future that desires and respects more Indigenous intellectual contributions. This work invokes relationality in a very practical sense in academia and is a useful guide for considering the research and ideologies that are engaged through this thesis.

Positioning myself in this work

Like many young people who participated in this thesis, my family and I have moved many times. I was born on Kaurna Country in South Australia, where my father and his family had immigrated from England when he was young, and my mother had moved as a young adult from her ancestral lands in New South Wales. My family moved to Victoria when I was very young, and my brother and I were raised across Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung Country. We were locationally and culturally disconnected from the places my mother and father and their families knew – and so we had to build our own communities and places to belong. This experience is echoed in many of the stories shared by young participants of this thesis – some of these experiences are similar to my mother’s, some are more similar to mine, and some share the experience of disconnection, but the origins of this are very different.

As a young adult, I moved to Wurundjeri Country, though many of my daily activities regularly take me onto Boonwurrung Country. I do not belong here, yet I have found communities to belong to that accept me and understand the multiplicity of identities and spaces we inhabit as people, but especially as First Nations people, and the responsibilities we hold to the places that sustain us. Some of these responsibilities include (but are not limited to) caring for place; knowing, learning and acknowledging place and community and the interwoven connections of these; respecting the Traditional Custodians and ongoing practices of culture in place; and looking after community in place. In Corntassel’s (2012) conceptualisation of pathways to decolonisation and self-determination, responsibility is an interconnected process with renewal for Indigenous communities. It is at the core of what it is to be Indigenous. Corntassel asks in and of his article ‘How will your ancestors and future generations recognize you as Indigenous?’ (2012:88), which, I take to mean, what responsibilities are you upholding in your assertion of your Indigeneity? This is also a question I apply to the work of this thesis – and my responsibilities in doing it.

As First Nations people we belong to place – our histories and ability to name our connections are specifically tied to place, but many of us have been/continue to be displaced, either figuratively, geographically or both. The reasons for this may vary

– for my family they were related to work opportunities, familial disruption and trauma, and a desire for a different future. Dislocation is also a historical and ongoing process related to deliberate colonial processes of moving First Nations communities off Country that was seen as being a valuable resource, and the deliberate attempts to fracture familial and community connections. There was a sense of loss and longing for my brother and I growing up away from much of our family. Growing up and living in Narrm – an urban place – there was a degree of invisibility in the representation of First Nations people in education, media and the specific communities I was part of. This invisibility impacted on my own Indigeneity, and my own understanding of how place is hidden and ongoing connections disrupted. The histories taught in the schools we attended did not mention ongoing First Nations relationships to place, they did not name the Country we were on, and history lessons rarely mentioned more than a fleeting reference to the First Nations inhabiting the land before the first fleet of ships arrived to establish a penal colony on the continent, and they certainly did not mention our continuing existence and connections.

I have struggled throughout this work to maintain some kind of balance between being a researcher, being a member of multiple First Nations communities (in academic and social spaces in Narrm, and connected back to my own Country) and upholding ethical practices of relationality – when it is my place to speak and how do I do so? – that go beyond what is expected by ethics committees. I do not want to tell stories of despair, and trauma, in ways that promote my career and do nothing for the participants of this work. In this thesis and throughout my PhD candidature I have tried to hold the mirror up to research practices, including the ones I am participating in, instead of focusing on young people as objects of investigation. I am not sure how effective I have been in the research for this thesis, but I feel like the process has greatly affected me. I have used my interpretation of an Australian Indigenous woman's standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Nakata, M., 2007) to position this research and explore how I, as a researcher, come to this subject of research. This has increased my awareness of how I approach this work and which voices I privilege in it. On many occasions, considering my standpoint and how it is informed has (and will continue to) alerted me to how I conform to the practices I attempt to resist in this thesis.

Knowing the problem

The issue with using research as a way of forming knowledge about a concept is that in identifying the topic to be researched, a 'problem' is created. In the context of research on Indigenous peoples, people who have experienced colonisation of land, language and knowledge are generally made into 'a problem to be solved' (Nakata, S., 2018:113). Often in research we do not consider ourselves (as researchers or academics) the problem. This has a lot to do with the ways knowledge is thought of – as truth, as objective and disembodied, and taught through the academies that produce researchers. Of course, not all research is like this. But as researchers we approach the 'problem' to be researched from the disciplines we have trained in, our backgrounds and standpoints, and our academic knowledge is informed by the institutions from which we emerge, which have a history of doing things in a way that has not typically been empowering for Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2012; Moodie et al., 2018; Andrews et al., 2023).

As a Wiradjuri, female-identifying person with education in social science, environmental studies and public health research, my understanding of how to frame research and solve problems has been formed in particular ways. My identity as a Wiradjuri woman of mixed descent, raised in an urban setting off my own ancestral Country, has constantly been questioned, and internally has been something I grappled with growing up, but is also something that frames the ways in which I see the world, and the approaches I take to understanding my place and the relationships I hold. These experiences have informed how I considered and developed the research question for this work and the methods to answer it.

My experience in conducting research and evaluations of First Nations health programs has influenced my desire to focus this thesis on the strengths and resilience of the participants. As a community member, I want to make sure that I do not use participants and their stories only for personal gain. My work with young people in various programs and roles as a youth worker and programs manager has influenced the ways I sought to engage participants. This positions me within the communities I am doing research with. Some of the stories shared were familiar to me, and I was familiar to some of the young people participating in this work. But as a researcher, I was also participating in a particular way, which situates me outside of these same communities in a way that complicates these relationships. As Ngati Awa, Ngati Porou Distinguished Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2019:13) writes, for Indigenous researchers, the concept of insider/outsider research does not fully capture the experience and complexities associated with doing research in Indigenous spaces:

> it comes back to how you position yourself, how you understand yourself, your intentions and your capacity to work in a good way, your skills at negotiating complexity and your ability to work in relation with community, with land and water, with a wider sense of the world.

As a PhD candidate I am still in training as a researcher, and so these concepts – of being a good relation, and of negotiating complexity respectfully and responsibly – are equally paramount, and fill/ed me with terror when attempting to design and conduct this work. The methods and potential outcomes of this research are designed to respect the expertise, insights and knowledge shared by participants – but I also acknowledge at the end of this work, I personally gain much more from the outcomes than the participants do.

Ethical (re)framing: critiquing deficit-based research

As a good relation, 'doing no harm' in the research I conduct is not enough. This role also includes consideration of the purpose of the work, and what voices and theories are privileged through it. In framing my approach to this research, another important ethical question came up – is research the only/right answer? Even when research is well considered and designed and involves (young) people in ways that aspire to be self-determining, it is also important to note that for many (young) people, research is not important in the context of their everyday lives. Unpicking if/why research is needed, as well as the approach taken when doing research, is another ethical reframing I considered in this work.

Tuck and Yang (2014a:813) examine the practice of refusal in conducting research, and their writings caused me to consider their framing of research truisms: ‘There are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn’t deserve’, ‘there are stories and experiences that already have their own place, and placing them in the academy is removal, not respect’ and ‘research may not be the intervention that is needed.’ These considerations offer insight into the damage and weaponisation of research in perpetuating the humiliation of knowledge acquisition about Indigenous peoples, and continuing colonisation, and Tuck and Yang (2014a:813) ask, ‘As researchers, when we overhear, uncover, are entrusted with narratives that we know will sell, do we stop the sale?’

This question – ‘do we stop the sale?’ has been ringing in my ears in listening to the stories of young people involved in my PhD. This question has assisted me to make specific decisions about the ways in which I share information about the participants of this work. I have thought very carefully about the types of stories shared, how they were shared and what purpose they serve in this research. Sometimes we crave more information or history about some of the young people sharing their stories and voice throughout the following chapters – but sometimes silence or refusal is an important response to this craving.

Ethics committee approval

Alongside the ethical understandings and obligations I have applied to this research as a First Nations person doing research (as described in my grapplings with what stories to include and what to omit), the university has its own ethics clearance process to ensure the project design meets ethical standards and requirements, including the National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2023). Accordingly, this research project was reviewed and approved by the Population and Global Health Human Ethics Advisory Group at The University of Melbourne and the Health Sciences Human Ethics Sub Committee at The University of Melbourne (Ethics ID number 1545229.1) on 29 September 2016.

The problematisation of First Nations young people

Torres Strait Islander academic Sana Nakata explores the formulation of Indigenous childhood, and Indigenous children as political objects that conveniently further a ‘child-saving’ welfare model of policy in Australia (Nakata, S., 2015:9). This formulation allows for the justification of interventions into Indigenous communities, families and individual lives, both historically, such as through the practice of removing children through the Stolen Generations (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families et al., 1997), and contemporarily, such as through the Northern Territory Intervention (Human Rights Law Centre, 2022; Park, 2022) and the high rates of ongoing child removal in First Nations families (Hunter et al., 2021). This framing of Indigenous children and childhood acts as a normative process for the construction of a particular identity or portrayal of Indigenous children. ‘Indigenous childhood’ is categorized and problematised in this way. Sana Nakata’s work identifies a parallel between the ways Indigenous children are framed as a problem to be fixed, and the ways Indigenous communities are also conceptualised as ‘the problem’ and as a people that are perpetually stuck in a childlike state (Nakata, S., 2018).

In her thesis examining the conceptualisation of the social category of ‘Indigenous youth’, Gumbaynggirr scholar Lily Brown identifies the ways in which research on Indigenous young people accepts this marker uncritically as a given, she states: ‘There is an absence of scholarship that problematises Indigenous youth as an analytic…” (Brown, 2021:14). Brown discusses the categorization of ‘Indigenous youth’ as a way to figure Indigenous young people as a ‘critical site of intervention in the present in determining the future.” (2021:23). As with Nakata’s positioning of problematized Indigenous childhood (Nakata, S., 2015; 2018), Brown argues that the conceptualisation of Indigenous youth is bound in colonial concepts of control and erasure, which position Indigenous young people and their families as the problem (Brown, 2021:i).

Despite cultural strength and continuity, in Australia First Nations young people, in particular, experience higher levels of surveillance and scrutiny of their movements and presence in public spaces than people from non-Indigenous cultural backgrounds and different age groups (White, 2008, 2015). For First Nations young people in Australia greater levels of surveillance are associated with disproportionate rates of incarceration and high rates of removal from families into out-of-home care (Australian Bureau of Statistics., 2015; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011, 2016, 2018, 2021, 2022). Disconnection from place and the erasure of First Nations presence in city areas contribute to negative health and wellbeing outcomes of First Nations young people and people of all ages (Priest et al., 2011). Research on Western Canadian First Nations young people shows that culture and individual identity are strongly linked for First Nations communities, and that continuation of, and connection to, culture and identity are protective to the health and wellbeing of young people (Chandler and Lalonde, 1998, 2008), especially when connection to culture incorporates the past, present and imaginings of community-controlled First Nations futures (Chandler and Lalonde, 2019). There is emerging research in the experience of First Nations urban-dwelling young people and communities (Cerreto, 2018; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021a, 2021b) but, for the most part, current research that seeks to address issues faced by First Nations young people is focused on deficit, disease and discourse that portrays young people as troubled or as problematic.

In her discussion of '5D data', Walter (2016:80) points to the ways data relating to First Nations people and communities is framed around 'non-wellbeing'. Walter (2016:83) shows us that:

> numbers rationalise our dispossession, marginalisation and even our right to be indigenous. The heritage and ubiquity of these statistics, everywhere, allow the reality of the indigenous peoples they depict to go largely unchallenged in public and political discourse.

Despite the ways in which First Nations young people are portrayed through data, and their hyper-visibility in certain contexts, First Nations young people participating in this research spoke repeatedly about feeling invisible, of not being seen in everyday contexts or not seeing themselves reflected in everyday contexts. There was something at once very familiar in the stories told about 'Indigenous youth' in Australia and also completely unrecognisable to young people because the stories were not their stories. Participants of this work spoke of having to defend or explain their identity to people regularly because they did not match the imagined stereotype, and of having internalised the mythologies of First Nations people not belonging in urban places and losing their ‘authenticity’ by their proximity to what are now considered urban places (but still always First Nations land).

In exploring this topic, I wanted to find what it was that kept young people connected to who they were, their communities, where they were from and where they are. I did not want to describe young people in the ways that 5D data frames them – with terms such as ‘disengaged’, ‘at risk’ or ‘justice-involved’. This coding of young people occurs in their interactions with various regimes and institutions such as education, social services, youth services, health, and justice. It is not reflective of how they see themselves or the terms they would use to describe their lives. Young people deserve better representations of what joy and possibilities there are in being part of First Nations communities, and there is a need for the relationships young people have with place, belonging and community to be included in research. This work seeks to include the voices of participants in self-determining priorities and practices of engaging and doing research with First Nations young people.

Self-determination has been identified as an essential contributor to positive health and wellbeing for First Nations peoples (Anderson et al., 2016; Chandler and Lalonde, 2019; Mazel, 2016; Onemda VicHealth Koori Health Unit, 2008; Roach and McMillan, 2022; United Nations, 2007; VicHealth Koori Health Research and Community Development Unit, 2000). Defining what health and wellbeing mean, who gets to measure these and how, are fundamental steps in self-determination. This includes representation of what positive health and wellbeing look like in First Nations contexts, as defined by community and not by researchers or policymakers. Indigenous-centred approaches to defining areas of importance for research, on what terms and in what ways are critical to self-determining possibilities that imagine different kinds of futures for First Nations communities. This study seeks to add a small part to this approach, focusing on the diversity of the expression of young people's cultural identities, described in their voices, to identify issues relevant and meaningful for these young people.

Key concepts

Several key concepts appear throughout this thesis. Their meanings may be different to different people, in different contexts and within different disciplines. For clarity, the discussions and ideas that inform the use of the concepts in this thesis are outlined as follows.

Settler colonial belonging and the pursuit of Place/Country/Land

Despite what we may have been taught through educational institutions, the story of this place, Narrm, does not start with the First Fleet. When I speak about place, land or Country, I am talking specifically about the ongoing connections that exist in more than a geographical sense with physical and spiritual locations (Tynan, 2021). Throughout this thesis, I speak specifically about the places in Narrm where the research and activities are undertaken. Place, or Country, is specific – it is the past, present and future; it holds identity, relationships and reciprocal obligations (Bang et al., 2013). It is culture and holds its own culture. It makes life and makes life possible.

Country incorporates lands, waters and seas – and the connections between these, the people of the place and the more-than-human elements (for more information, see AIATSIS, 2022e). Country may also be used by First Nations people from this place to identify themselves, where they are from or where they belong (Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and La Trobe University, 2014).

Settler colonial constructs of economics and prosperity make place and Country into ‘land’, which is little more than a resource or title to possess or dispossess, or a subset of objects that become reassigned as ‘natural resources’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012:4). Land is made this way through ongoing processes of colonisation. Making Country into land requires a fracturing of the relationships First Nations populations have to Country and all that make it. Through the lens of private land ownership, relationships to place become extractive and possessive (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

The systems of governance, control and social organisation operating nationally in Australia are imported and imposed structures rooted in the ongoing implementation of settler colonisation. Violent practices of conquest and colonisation in the pursuit of land, wealth and power have occurred across the world throughout history. These experiences are specific to the time they occur, the colonising country, the geographic region, and the place and population of people being forcibly colonised. The common thread in contemporary colonisation of Indigenous peoples in places such as Australia, Aotearoa, Northern America and Hawai’i is the continuation of oppressive regimes that racialise and marginalise the ‘non-white’ ‘other’ in extractive, violent and relentless ways (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Settler colonial belonging is premised on the fracturing of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies of connections to place, claims to belonging, and relationships to and within place (Bang et al., 2014; Tuck and Yang, 2012). Country, connections and relationships to all things are fundamental concepts of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world (Coulthard, 2014; Dudgeon and Bray, 2019; Tynan, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Settler colonialism is concerned with using the land of 'place' as a resource that becomes wealth, power and home. In this way, Indigenous dispossession, displacement and erasure are fundamental to the foundations of the 'belonging' story for settler colonial populations. As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, this is not a historical occurrence, but an ongoing lived reality that continues for Indigenous people in lands that continue to be occupied. The occupation of Indigenous lands and place and the effects of white possessive logic go to work diminishing Indigenous connections to place, songlines[7], knowledge and relationships with Country and everything this entails.

The creation of narratives of non-belonging and erasure of First Nations presence and ongoing connections to place have a specific and well-crafted history in Australia. These narratives originated in the implementation of policies and practices of (re)moving people from place; forcing people together and then apart again onto missions, stations and reservations; removing children from families; and imposing classifications of people as ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘white’ according to the shade of their skin, not their ancestral and ongoing connections (see AIATSIS, 2022b for more information). Assimilationist policies and practices, such as banning the speaking of First Nations languages and dance and ceremony, and the deliberate disruption of social structures that carry this knowledge forward to new generations, sought to assimilate First Nations communities and individuals into the dominant culture. Subsequent measuring of the 'authenticity’ of Indigeneity based on individual and community ability to practice (or perform) these attributes, or based on skin colour, physical characteristics or proximity to remote or urban areas, continues to work today, undermining community connections, belonging and self-determination. The project of settler belonging is furthered through diminishing First Nations presence and questioning authenticity of identity and rights to claim connection to place.

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[7] Songlines are the stories of creation and connection across Australia that connect place, knowledge, relationships and responsibilities. Songlines cross language group boundaries and are the ways place and knowledge are shared and known. Songlines can be maps, can guide people to places, can imbue meaning in place and tell the stories of place – they tell the stories of Creator spirits as they shaped the landscape, and are a fundamental way of passing on knowledge across generations (AIATSIS, 2022d; Fuller at al., 2021; Higgins, 2021).

Nationally there is story of amnesia, and an implicit agreement to forget about this history. There is little collective interest in acknowledging or addressing the ongoing impacts of colonisation, and instead an interest in ‘personal responsibility’ for circumstances. Despite the ongoing process of colonisation, the cultures, connections and identities of First Nations communities and individuals continue throughout this continent (and surrounding islands). The stories of dispossession and practices of white possessive logic have not overwritten the continuing and actively practised identities of First Nations communities and individuals. These identities continue to adapt and change over time, building strength and movements founded on the importance of ongoing and repaired relationships with place, community and culture.

This historical context of settler colonisation is important for this thesis because it shows us the beginning of a dual process of erasure from place and making urban places into non-belonging places for First Nations people. As Yawuru man and the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson stated in his 1994 Wentworth Lecture on *Re(de)finding Aboriginality*, processes of colonisation have included a preoccupation with defining and controlling Aboriginality in Australia (Dodson, 1994). While the oppressive and destructive impacts of colonisation continue to impact the lives of Indigenous peoples in colonised lands, the continuation of Indigenous knowledges, practices and futures endures and is part of another story that is the main focus of this thesis.

Belonging and non-belonging

The concept of belonging is well utilised in youth studies, but often under-theorised and implicit in its use (Cuervo and Wyn, 2017:220). When the concepts underpinning belonging are articulated, they are explored through a number of dimensions. Some of these articulations of belonging include its social, emotional and political locus, in a relation framework of interaction with others (Yuval-Davis, 2006), its role in boundary maintenance (Crowley, 1999), and its location – such as feelings of (un)belonging (Ward, 2019), in particular places, by particular groups of young people who have been catagorised as 'other' (Baak et al., 2019). Non-Indigenous scholars Sadia Habib and colleagues articulate the complexities of capturing the concept of belonging, and argue that it may be an experience that is fleeting and temporal for young people experiencing a world that is constantly changing (Habib and Ward (Eds), 2019). In their theorisation of belonging, Habib and Ward (2019:1) state that '…belonging is about connection, membership, attachment and a sense of security.' Youth studies and non-Indigenous scholars Hernan Cuervo and Joanna Wyn (2017:220) state that belonging is a ‘relational metaphor, invoking connection and relationships to people, spaces and places.

Discussions of young people and belonging are often focused on the experiences of young people who have migrated to different places, or the experiences of belonging in relation to gender and class. Although race is explored in relation to youth belonging research, such research is rarely focused on the experience of Indigenous young people’s sense of belonging. This focus in the research, or dearth of focus as it is, creates a question about another kind of belonging and positioning of Indigenous young people. For this research, belonging is framed through relationships to place that exist outside of the temporality of most youth and place research. The relationships to place move beyond attachment and nostalgia, and are rooted in the very concepts of identity as Indigenous relationship to place. Belonging in this context is about knowing, finding and learning relationships to place that exist within a framework of relationality. Non-belonging in this context, is the impact of colonisation on disrupting this knowledge and learning process, and the imposition of ideas about Indigeneity and First Nations identities as imposed by the colonial apparatus of settler colonialism.

Relationality as a framework for understanding identities

Relationality is an important concept for understanding and defining First Nations identities, belonging, rights and responsibilities. Relationality sees Country as the source of all meaning and life – our connection to it and our connections to each other and all living and non-living entities held within it are ‘foundational to… health and wellbeing’ (Tynan, 2021:9). Relationality is ‘a system of reciprocal relations and obligations’ (Coulthard, 2014:13[8]), and a continuation of cultural practice and resurgence; a framework for understanding and examining the ways First Nations peoples describe, express and practise different elements of belonging, connection and identity. With these connections and practices come associated roles and responsibilities, and in the context of First Nations young people in Narrm, it can be seen as a way of exploring the maintenance or restoration of connections to place, identity, community and the more-than-human elements of life.

Relationality is applied as a framework that incorporates and interprets the actions of young people across the stories that follow in the findings chapters of this thesis. Relationality provides the philosophical underpinnings that shape this thesis and offers a description of the ways in which participants of this work understand and live their connections. It is a practice of cultural continuation that allows for the incorporation of counterstory, re-story and futurity of First Nations knowledges being practised and negotiated by First Nations young people in Narrm. In combination with desire-based approaches to research, these frameworks focus on a presencing of culture, identity and connection that is built upon relationships with place, people, community, history and the more-than-human elements held within and beyond these concepts. The practice and process of relationality in this research has, at times (as described by

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[8] In Coulthard’s (2014:13) use of this description he is referring to what he terms Indigenous decolonial thought or ‘grounded normativity’.

Opaskwayak Cree academic Shawn Wilson), built and strengthened a sense of community (Wilson, 2008:86). Relationality also ties into the methodology, and method, of yarning (discussed in more detail below) by establishing and understanding the connections between researcher, participants and place, and by situating the researcher in the work.

Stories of (dis)possessiveness

The Australian experience of the ongoing project of colonisation, as noted by Goenpul, Quandamooka scholar Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015), includes the reaffirmation and reproduction of possession of land and power through the continued dispossession of First Nations peoples across the continent. Moreton-Robinson (2015) names this process as ‘white possessive logic’ – the building of a framework of control and power that is deemed a ‘logical’ and ‘commonsense’ progression of thought regarding race, class structure and society. White possessive logic works to rewrite history and build stories of belonging and ownership as a right for the invading/settling populations. Specific to the Australian context is the fiction of terra nullius – that the continent of Australia was empty land, occupied by no one, and therefore claimable as the land of the invader.

Terra nullius was one of the original dispossession stories that was remade into a national narrative about a ‘young and free’ land that was here for the taking. These narratives contribute to the concealing of stories of belonging, continuation and identity for First Nations people – a national amnesia or erasure that continues in insidious ways by denying its own existence:

> In Australia… the contemporary identity struggles of Aboriginal people, and the research that relates to them, cannot be understood without some understanding of [the] historical policy and regulatory context that governed Aboriginal people before the political era of Aboriginal self-determination in the 1970s. (Carlson, 2016:28)

From terra nullius to occupied land to an emerging federation of states, another suite of legal stories about what kind of continent Australia was to become emerged. For the place that has become known as Victoria, colonisation stories include broken promises of Treaty between settler coloniser John Batman and leaders from the Kulin Nation in 1835 (Broome, 2005; Cole and Perkins, 2008), to a shift in paternalistic protectionist language (and practice) through the *Aboriginal Protection Act* (Vic) in 1869 (Museum of Australian Democracy, 2016). From this came *An Act to provide for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria 1886*, more commonly known as the Half-Caste Act, (McMillan and McRae, 2015: 236) and then the national *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* (Cth), enacted through the White Australia policy until the last official remnants of this policy were abandoned in 1973.

The *Aboriginal Protection Act 1869* (Vic) made Victoria the first colony (under British rule) ‘to enact a comprehensive scheme to regulate the lives of Aboriginal people’, which included the power to control where First Nations people lived, worked, what kinds of jobs were allowed, and who they could associate with and marry (Museum of Australian Democracy, 2016). The Act included enabling power to remove any First Nations child from their family (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016). The Half-

Caste Act extended these powers to remove First Nations people of mixed descent from Aboriginal stations and reserves, in the pursuit of assimilation but with no government support or assistance through the Aboriginal Protection Board to do so (Museum of Australian Democracy, 2016). Thousands of mixed-descent First Nations children were removed from families through the Half-Caste Act, with ‘neglect’ (or, more realistically, poverty) given as a justification for these removals. Children were placed in institutional care, fostered or adopted to white families, and deliberately separated permanently from families, kin and communities (Carlson, 2016:26) and from the structures of understanding their place and belonging. People removed under the Act were not counted as Aboriginal.

These policies attempted to erase the presence of First Nations people in Victoria by imposing definitions of who ‘counted’ as Aboriginal, in attempts to control Indigenous identities (McMillan and McRae, 2015:236). These children became known as the ‘Stolen Generations’ (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families et al., 1997). Despite a national apology (Rudd, 2008) for these practices, statistics show that First Nations children are still being removed from families at disproportionate rates today, rates that are even higher than during the first Stolen Generations period (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021), creating another stolen generation (Hunter et al., 2021; Krakouer et al., 2018), though national narratives are not generally inclusive of this story. These practices continue to impact First Nations families through intergenerational trauma and internalised shame and disconnection.

Across Australia policies of ‘exemption’ from Protection Acts were introduced in different states and territories (excluding Victoria and Tasmania) from 1897 onwards (Ellinghaus, 2018). Applying for exemption from these Protection Acts was portrayed as giving First Nations people the same rights as non-Indigenous people – and was meant to remove the oppressive surveillance of these Acts on all aspects of life for those deemed exempt. What being exempt actually meant for individuals was documentation that they were giving up their identity as First Nations and electing to live an ‘assimilated’ life, cutting ties to community and culture and to their family and friends. As described by non-Indigenous academic Katherine Ellinghaus and Wakka Wakka and Kalkadoon social worker and educator Judi Wickes, whose grandparents chose to be exempt, ‘Exemption was a poisoned chalice that had a transgenerational impact on families and communities that is only just beginning to be recognised today’ (Ellinghaus and Wickes, 2020:20). Exemption certificates were another way First Nations identities were controlled and co-opted by the government – a piece of paper that promised freedom from excessive control was, in fact, a way of signing up to another method of control. The combination of these policies and logics sought to control and deny claims to Indigeneity, and the impacts of these policies continues in the ways First Nations people navigate identity, belonging, connections, disconnections, and reconnections.

More than just surviving

Resistance and survival are, as argued by Leanne Simpson (2011), the movements before the next steps of flourishment and continual rebirth, which are required in the processes of revitalisation and imagining alternative futures that do not continue colonial processes. Simpson talks about the need for Indigenous cultural, intellectual, political and legal resurgence in ways not waiting for approval or acceptance by settler colonial systems. Simpson states explicitly that she does not define what resurgence exactly means because she wants First Nations people to take the concepts and ideas that she presents and interpret and incorporate them into their practices and communities in ways that make sense to these settings (Simpson, L., 2011). These concepts, about revitalising stories of resistance and making sure that the next generation knows these stories, incorporate Indigenous intellectual traditions of story, intergenerational exchange and teaching, and artistic and performative elements, which are incorporated into the ways in which this thesis and research are designed. These stories are also resisting the white narratives of invisibility and non-existence. Such work is important to this thesis as it again resists the framing of First Nations communities as somehow lacking, in decline, and as tragic and suffering, and places strength, regrowth and futurity as the driving stories that celebrate our continuing presence and imagine what might be possible, and who might be in control of these stories.

Throughout this thesis, a reframing of stories usually told through damage-based approaches (Tuck, 2009) is a measure used in an attempt to unsettle this contribution to storytelling/story-building. The term ‘survivance’ as it is used by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor is about Indigenous resistance and resilience, renewal and ‘much more than survival’ in the face of attempted genocide (Vizenor, 1994; Vizenor et al., 2014). For the young people involved in this thesis, survivance is the work they do every day –

in their ongoing resilience and determination, the connections they have with their Indigeneity, and how they are weaving this into the future.

Methodological framings of this research

This section describes the key Indigenous methodological influences on this thesis and is followed by descriptions of my understanding and use of definitions of terms used throughout this work. For the purposes of this thesis, methodology is a term I use to describe the knowledge that informs my worldview and the design of this study. The methodology I use guides my process for acquiring the information to answer my research question (Smith, L. T., 2012). The process and specific tools I have used for collecting the information are my methods, and these will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter (Chapter 3). For Indigenous people globally, research on Indigenous communities has a bad name:

> The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary… The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples. (Smith, L. T., 2012:1)

First Nations communities across Australia and Koori communities in Victoria have histories of different kinds of abuses and exploitations at the hands of anthropologists, researchers, scientists and those who have sought to collect information about and ‘know’ communities (VicHealth Koori Health Research and Community Development Unit, 2000). These acts of investigation have resulted in work that has ‘acted as an overt tool of colonial control espousing and enacting racial pseudoscientific theory' and/or work that does not benefit those who it was inflicted upon (Bond et al., 2015:S89). This exploitation has included digging up the ancestral remains of First Nations people and taking them away in the name of research at universities (including The University of Melbourne) or to be put on display in museums across the world (Faulkhead et al., 2010; McWilliams, 2016; Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council, 2020). This kind of inquiry has been used to produce knowledge about First Nations people – through stealing the bones of ancestors, the sacred objects of families and communities, and at the same time denying the possibilities and complexities of First Nations ways of knowing. These processes have been done in the name of research to legitimise processes of 'knowing' First Nations peoples and communities.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012:226) seminal text *Decolonizing Methodologies* discusses the ways in which research continues existing inequalities and power structures that do not benefit Indigenous populations across the world:

> research exists within a system of power… there are no neutral spaces for the kind of work required to ensure that traditional indigenous knowledge flourished; that it remains connected intimately to indigenous people as a way of thinking, knowing and being; that it is sustained and actually grows over future generations.

Building on Ngāti Porou, Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Apa and Ngāti Kahungunu Distinguished Professor Graham Hingangaroa Smith's (1997) Kaupapa Māori Theory, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) provides a reframing of research, arguing that Indigenous people and communities should be in control of, and directing, research, rather than being ‘the researched’. In the context of this thesis, reframing the research, its design and the ways in which relationships and partnerships occurred within it to make the research possible was the methodological approach used to shift the gaze of knowable object to expert advisor. This was done from the start of the project and included multiple elements such as engaging with partnering organisations in considering the ways the research, or my involvement as the researcher, could be of benefit; framing the data collection tools and questions around the participants and ensuring there was flexibility in the questions being asked, the ways they were asked and the ways participants engaged in the process; and focusing on the ways participants answered (or did not answer) the questions as a guide for the analysis of the data – and, importantly, being reflective of my practice as a researcher and as a Wiradjuri community member throughout the process. While this is a way of describing how to do ethical research in general, because it emerges from ideas and discussions with First Nations organisations and individuals, and from my own experiences as a Wiradjuri woman living and growing up in an urban place, it centres First Nations knowledge. This has, as Walter (2016:80) suggests, the potential to change the story.

> reversing the analytical lens to generate data conceptualised through an Indigenous methodological framework might alter the narrative, concepts, discourse and, ultimately, policy directions of Indigenous Australia.

Walter (2016) discusses the need to reframe narratives about First Nations peoples, through the development of research questions and problematics, and the implementation of an Indigenous methodology framework. Walter (2016:86) describes the ways in which data – or 'science' – is lauded as an impartial truth:

> Once social phenomena are perceived as 'data', it is an easy step to regard these data points as social facts – a dispassionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reality.

The many statistics presented about First Nations people tell a particular kind of story – this thesis seeks to tell a different part of this story, focusing on the voices of young First Nations people to convey the experiences relevant to their identities and ways of connecting to place. This is not simply a question about quantitative versus qualitative methods, but rather an epistemological shift regarding the validity of knowledge – a methodological reframing.

Methodological reframing of Indigenous peoples by Indigenous peoples in research – as individuals with agency, rather than problematic objects – is required to unsettle the unquestioned premise of 'settler futurity' in research. Settler futurity sees the benefits and outcomes of research (and policy) reinscribing settler colonial power and wellbeing (Tuck and Yang, 2012), while eroding the possibility of First Nations futurity. Settler futurity demands the erasure of Indigenous inhabitants of place, achieved by relegating Indigenous existence to the past and imagining a settler future. The settler future imagines/requires that Indigenous peoples have logically been eradicated, and that this erasure is logically (unfortunately) inevitable (Tuck and Gaztambide-

Fernandez, 2013). Settler futurity can be seen clearly in historical government policies, such as the policy of assimilation, and more fleetingly in the corners of current research and policy framed in deficit discourse (such as Closing the Gap) that suggests an inevitable march of worsening health and life outcomes for First Nations communities (Fogarty et al., 2018, 2018a; Productivity Commission, 2023).

By shifting and reframing how First Nations people are involved in research and its design and embedding principles of relationality and First Nations desire-based futurity (the next section discusses the meaning of ‘desire-based’), the outcomes and narratives produced through such research have the potential for great change. What this looked like in this thesis was a consideration of the ways partnering organisations were involved in the design of questions asked through this PhD, discussions with organisations and participants about the conceptualisation of First Nations health and wellbeing, and reflection throughout the research that provided flexibility and a reconceptualisation about the ways this work engaged with young people and the ways young people engaged with this work. This included a rethink about the framing of research questions and the ways certain approaches imagined need in place of listening to the voices of participants. Reflecting on the engagement with young people throughout the analysis phase of this thesis allowed for a recasting of possibilities – leaving open space rather than preconceived notions of neat conclusions and endings.

Desire-based frameworks

Throughout this thesis, a reframing of stories usually told through damage-centred approaches is a measure used to unsettle this contribution to storytelling/story-building. Away from damage and deficit, I try to shift the discussions that occur within this thesis to focus on the future desires and possibilities that are articulated through this research. Building on Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualisation of desire (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 1988; Gao, 2013; Goodchild, 1996), Tuck (2009) has created a desire-based framework for research, which focuses on possibilities rather than lack. Desire, in Deleuze and Guattari's working of it, is a propelling force that drives change, creates the unexpected and breaks down. They resist the ideas that desire is something that needs to be supressed, that it is a distraction and a yearning due to an absence. When framed in this way, desire can be seen as a shift from the control of organisations and regimes – a working to break what attempts to control. Tuck (2009, 2010) has interpreted Deleuze and Guattari's work in order to conceptualise desire as a productive and functional concept that provides agency for First Nations people through recognising the possibilities of desire. Tuck (2009:409) explains that damage-centred research is problematic in what it promises versus what it truly offers:

> This kind of research operates with a flawed theory of change: it is often used to leverage reparations or resources for marginalized communities yet simultaneously reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless.

As Tuck (2010:645-5) describes, Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term 'desire' is not conceptualised as lack – as in a want for something because there is an absence. Desire is a reflection of human complexity, a complication to plans, it is unresolvable, but it is a compelling force for change. Tuck has also critiqued Deleuze and Guattari's assertion that desire is not conscious – and she asserts that, in fact, desire is smart, agential and can hold knowledge and momentum over generations.

'These people', as referred to in Tuck's quote above, continue to be the subject of, rather than the driver and director of, academic research. Tuck's (2009:409) conceptualisation of a 'desire-based framework' calls on communities to 'reimagine how findings might be used by, for, and with communities'. It is a call to resist damage and deficit in one-dimensional depictions of communities – and to imagine what is desirable. This calling for a reimagining of what research can do, and what it is for, has assisted in developing the methodology for this thesis. This work focuses on the resistance, survival and resurgence of cultures, practices and identities as lived, expressed and imagined by First Nations young people in Narrm – complicated and contradictory as they are.

Designing a desire-based framework

To reframe stories and approaches to research and avoid contributing to more damage-centred research, deep reflection on the theories of change implicit in the conceptualisation of this work was required – including how it would be done, how data would be collected, what this data might tell us and what questions it would answer. In designing and developing this project, I engaged with what Tuck (2011:413) describes as the ‘ethical stance of the project’ – considering what stories were being collected, for what purpose, and what was to be shared or kept private. Focusing on the ways in which stories are told, what is happening in the telling of the stories, and what is being captured through these stories, there was an opportunity to capture desire in place of damage.

Tuck’s (2009; 2011) conceptualisation of desire-based frameworks also provides the space for seeing the complexity, contradictions and possibilities of the necessarily messy humanness involved in doing research with people. In stating this as part of the methodology of this project, I acknowledge that reconceptualising my approach to research, and the theories that inform this approach, for me, is an ongoing process, and centring desire in place of damage is as much about unlearning as it is about learning.

Youth resistance

> Resistance is never pure, never simply oppositional or rejecting; it is often enacted with an affective bouillabaisse of anger, disappointment, sense of injustice, desire, yearning and ambivalence. (Fine et al., 2014:50)

In this thesis, research informing a youth resistance lens is applied to the different sites explored in the findings chapters to investigate what might be happening in the interactions with participants of this work, and to peel back some of the layers of underlying assumptions implicit in this research. This thesis does not attempt to build a model of youth resistance, but rather uses the theory/ies of resistance to explore the interactions participants are having and engaging in, and the actions they are taking in their daily lives. Resistance is also considered in response to the kinds of research that are generally done on or to young people and Indigenous peoples – and is used in this work to shift the kinds of stories being formulated about First Nations young peoples.

Youth resistance research is usually conceptualised around social change and empowerment (Brayboy, 2005; Dimitriadis, 2014; Fine et al., 2014; Pechenkina, 2017). The use of 'theories of change' in youth services is discussed in Chapter 4, but I briefly discuss it here first.

Theories of change can be problematic as they imagine 'disengaged' young people navigating a course from 'at risk' to fully participating members of society, and are premised on a belief that a situation needs to be 'adjusted, corrected or improved' (Tuck and Yang (Eds), 2014:13). Instead of having a theory for what change is required of young people, resistance theories offer a more generative approach to understanding needs and desires. As Tuck and Yang (Eds, 2014) and their youth resistance research colleagues discuss, resistance does not actually care too much what we think of it, if it is regarded with disappointment, or seen as a failure; in terms of changing things in a particular way, resistance does not care about our theories. Tuck and Yang (Eds, 2014) suggest that resistance is many other things, such as survivance and decolonial possibilities – it is messy and contradictory, and non-linear. Resistance is not a neat tool that will provide clear answers to research questions or happy endings for all – but it does provide a way into understanding actions that may seem unreadable at first, which will become more obvious in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Resistance is a tool familiar to First Nations people.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the need for research that is framed on the expertise of Indigenous researchers and that focuses on the voice of First Nations young people in Narrm in defining and asserting their cultural identities. Here I connect the histories and present experiences of First Nations communities in this place to a future that can be self-determining through engagement with tools such as desire-based frameworks and understanding the power of resistance. Using a strengths-based approach to this work, it is important to ground ourselves in the place of Narrm, in Victoria. The First Nations histories of Victoria are of activism and action that have pushed the state to change, to acknowledge the ongoing connection Traditional Custodians have to place and culture, and now – moving beyond just recognition of mere existence – a truth telling to recognise the past and ongoing impacts of colonisation (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023) and to Treaty with the Traditional Custodians in an approach that focuses on self-determination (Government of Victoria, 2022).

In this chapter I have outlined the need for taking a strengths-based approach to understanding what identity means for young people. This sets the scene for this research to explore the possibilities for working with young people in a way that empowers their participation and centres their voices in understanding how they are restoring relationships, connections and understandings of their place and identity.

The next chapter presents the data collection methods used across the four sites of this thesis.

Chapter 3. Methodology and methods

As described in the previous chapter (Chapter 2), the methodology for this study was informed by my own positionality and worldview, influenced by my Indigeneity, background, family, life experience and academic training (Walter, 2019). This chapter describes the methods chosen as part of the methodology for this thesis, (articulated in Chapter 2). I outline the settings of this study – four sites engaged through partnering organisations, whose involvement emerged through the Indigenous method and methodology of yarning. I outline the data collection tools (methods), and reasoning for their inclusion in this thesis, and the analysis techniques used for the data, including using counterstory as a way of understanding engagements with participants of this work.

Research sites – location and the importance of place

The setting of this study was across a range of programs and places based in Narrm, showing the variety of experiences and lives lived by First Nations young people there. These included:

- an Aboriginal youth drop-in program run with a youth services organisation
- an arts mentoring program with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
- a cultural support program for incarcerated First Nations men, staffed by volunteer First Nations and non-Indigenous university students
- Murrup Barak, an Indigenous student centre at The University of Melbourne.

Organisations were selected based on a shared interest in the research topic, the types of services, supports and focus that organisations had with young people, and the location of the sites. Organisations did not have to be Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, though most were, but they did have to have a focus on working specifically with First Nations young people in ways that seemed to be culturally respectful, appropriate and important.

The lens of relationality and place, and the multiple connections held with it, were key to defining the question of this research, and the questions asked through it. In examining the ways in which First Nations young people understand and practise their identities, questions emerged in relation to place. There are several layers in this relationship that expand across (and beyond) time/history, community connections, family connections, individual connections, social and emotional wellbeing, physical interactions and processes of knowing. My own relationship with this place was also fundamental to my involvement in this research – as it was this relationship that connects me to the young people participating in this work and keeps me accountable beyond the confines of a thesis.

For the purposes of this study, the focus on Narrm as the geographical site of study was due to several additional factors. These included the specific experiences of living in a city environment, feelings of invisibility by First Nations young people, and the erasure of presence and existence of First Nations communities through misconception and historical attempts to deliberately remove First Nations peoples from the place of Narrm. It was also due to practical considerations, such as the ability to access potential study participants through partnering organisations.

The many places of this study are held within the river boundaries of Woiwurrung Country. I would deeply like to be able to use the Woiwurrung names of these places, but due to the destructive processes of colonisation, many of the specific original place names have been separated from people able to speak them – though much work is being done to re-awaken the Woiwurrung language (Gibson et al., 2018; Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, 2023). My own knowledge of these places and their connections to Woiwurrung speakers is also inadequate. These places have been made invisible as First Nations places – the connections and knowledge about them deliberately interfered with. The relationships to and knowledge of place have also been damaged, and are in a process of being re-made and reconnected by First Nations young people of this place and from other places.

Place has also been used as a marginalising force against First Nations people where displacement from urban areas has resulted in surveillance and suspicion, and stories of non-belonging for communities. Much of this work has been done through institutions, services and individuals working for such organisations. This context necessitated careful consideration of the kinds of places and services that were to be involved in this work, and a need to build strong and respectful relationships with these places too.

The locations of this research – working with young people through programs and organisations – means that some of the findings of this thesis include aspects of individual and group identities as they are negotiated within institutional settings. If this research was conducted in different settings – such as in people's homes – identities and key themes may have been discussed and observed in different ways. In saying this, there were additional data collection activities that occurred outside the groups and programs, such as follow-up interviews held in different locations, including occasionally in people's homes, in shopping centres, in cars and on university campus. However, these interactions included reflections on programs and groups, and deeper discussions about emerging findings.

The sites were chosen because of the specific contexts and locations of the organisations involved. The inner-northern suburbs of the youth drop-in program and arts mentoring program of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency are historically important for First Nations communities – with much political activism and community building occurring in these places. The prison program was selected because of the hugely damaging impacts the justice system and prisons have on First Nations communities, and because of my own involvement in the Indigenous Group of Learning. Murrup Barak was selected as it is a space for a strong First Nations community on the campus of one of the most elite universities in Australia, which, as a belonging place for First Nations young people, is perhaps a challenge to some of the ideas about 'authenticity' presented in this thesis. These sites were chosen in combination as they present diverse experiences of young people's Indigeneity.

Methods

Guided by the frameworks or relationality, and desire-based research, the methods chosen to answer the research question were considered specifically in relation to cultural appropriateness and their ability to engage effectively with young people. The approach taken included:

- ethnography

    - multi-site ethnography
- yarning approaches to designing and developing research
- creative and arts-based methods of engagement.

Ethnography

This study used ethnography to explore young people's experiences and understandings of their Indigeneity and belonging. Ethnography was chosen as an appropriate method as I had my own experiences with the questions I had for participants and used autoethnography or reflexive ethnography to interrogate some of these experiences. Ethnography is an approach to qualitative research that involves immersion by the researcher in a social setting for some time (Bryman, 2004). Ethnography allows for overt observation activities to occur to understand and collect information relating to social and personal interactions in a way that seeks to explore behaviours and social interactions, as well as responses to specific questions.

Choosing ethnography as a method for this study, I knew there would be some conflicting issues that presented themselves – both in the ways this approach was used, and in the ways it creates power dynamics and privileges specific knowledge and knowledge holders as expert. The history of ethnography is linked to colonisation, primarily as something done to Indigenous peoples to classify and 'know' about peoples and societies (Laycock et al., 2011:5). Through collecting knowledge about people as subjects, a dehumanising process is begun, which makes claim to the forms of knowledge that are legitimate, who the expert is and who the subject is. Research has historically been an exercise of disempowerment for Indigenous peoples, a documenting of cultural practices and ‘othering’ of peoples being studied (Smith, L. T., 2012:2).

The ways in which information collection, reinterpretation and representation occur in Western and academic contexts generally fail to recognise that this process exists at all and that it is influenced by the sociocultural context of the researchers (Aull Davies, 1998). The background and knowledge of the researcher must be acknowledged and considered in the positionality of the research, which will, in turn, provide a framework for the interpretation of the data. Given the historically destructive processes and negative impacts of research on Indigenous peoples, it was fundamental to ensure purposeful and careful engagement of research participants through this work, which included collaborative and participatory approaches to the design and conduct of this work.

Ethnography is a method of data collection, but also the product of that activity – in this context, conveyed as the stories and observations described throughout the findings chapters. It seeks to capture the voices of the participants of research (Fetterman, 2010). In this study, ethnography was used to:

- document and collect information through field notes, including descriptions of creative works produced in arts-based activities
- write autoethnographic reflective journals throughout the research project process and capture other texts such as newspaper articles, social media posts and public discourse relating to Indigeneity
- undertake participant observation during programs

- conduct a yarning workshop, focus groups and semi-structured interviews with participants.

Research acknowledges the collection and interpretation of information, but rarely those that contribute their expertise in its development – the participants. This is another process of disempowerment and knowledge control. To try and redress the disempowerment inherent in this research process, appropriate ways of acknowledging the contributions made by participants have been an ongoing consideration. Some of the ways this has been attempted include co-presentation with research participants of key concepts in this research and co-authoring a journal article about one of the programs discussed. Feedback loops have been maintained through the research, and regular updates and engagement with partnering organisations occurred throughout the project.

Multi-site ethnography

Four separate and distinct sites were involved in this research. Each site required agreements to be made relating to the ways in which I would be involved as a researcher, what the research might offer the site and participants, and how young people would participate in the work. The choices made regarding which sites would be involved related to the ways in which the sites engaged with young people, or young people engaged with the sites; the historical context of the site or activities taking place; and the young people themselves. There was also an element of convenience – although much consideration was put into which sites would provide valuable insight into the research question, not all sites contacted agreed to participate, or even responded to requests to participate.

The sites that did participate in this research offered valuable contributions to the exploration of different types of identities expressed, lived and experienced by First Nations young people living in Narrm. The young people who contributed their voices and ideas to this work came from diverse backgrounds and experiences, which provided a rich insight into the variety of ways in which young people are living and contributing to the multitude of ways to 'be' or belong to First Nations.

Yarning and collaborative approaches to research

Yarning was used as both a methodology and method in this work to enable the varied voices of young people often marginalised through research to be heard. As a methodology, it informed, and was used to develop an understanding of what this research could be useful for, how it should be designed, what kinds of questions needed to be explored and in what ways this might be done safely. As a method, it was used in understanding or establishing relationships between research participants and me as the researcher in interviews, focus groups and the yarning workshop (which will be discussed shortly).

In setting out to undertake this research, a lot of time was invested in getting in touch with and meeting prominent First Nations and non-Indigenous academics, workers and specialists working with young people. Arts-based work is an important way to engage with young people and draw out different ideas and thoughts relating to Indigeneity. The preparatory work in engaging potential sites included speaking with First Nations artists about ways to engage young people, researching existing arts-based programs and engaging with key First Nations organisations.

Using a yarning approach in the development of the research relationships I had with the different sites and in the methods of the data collection activities was important as a collaborative process. This involved an initial collaborative yarn (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010) with potential sites to develop understandings of why and how we might work together, and in the development of partnership agreements for each site (see Appendix A).

Agreements were made following yarning discussions about the research need, approach and possible outcomes. The agreements were generic in terms of what was signed, but the specific ways of working, approach to research and communication with the participating sites were unique to each site. Having agreements signed off at a high organisational level was a method of engagement and acknowledgement of the additional work staff may have undertaken in order to work with me. It also provided a level of oversight for organisations in raising the awareness of the research being conducted (for the purposes of use, utility and dissemination) and as a check on appropriateness, to ensure organisations were across what I was intending to do and the ways in which I was intending to do it.

Yarning is a well-established, culturally appropriate method of conducting research discussions in First Nations contexts (Atkinson et al., 2021; Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010; Fredericks et al., 2014; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021a). It is generally informal and relaxed, and builds on ideas discussed between researchers and participants in a conversational and involved process (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010). It includes storytelling and builds on concepts presented in discussions through giving examples and providing context and background. Building rich understandings of the complexity of identities required an approach that provided ample space for exploration, description and storytelling, which was used in this thesis. Through this research, young people provided diverse stories about their identities, histories, communities and places of belonging.

As a method, a yarning approach was included and embedded, emerging as the most useful way to undertake a workshop with Murrup Barak (see Chapter 7). Social yarns in interviews and group activities occurred where participants and I shared our relationships to place, family, Country and each other, and our shared experiences as First Nations people living in Narrm. The data collection activities were filled with humour, heartache, gossip and generous sharing of knowledge and experiences.

Cultural resurgence and creative methods

The choice to use visual and creative methods in data collection activities was considered appropriate for various reasons, including the ways in which it allows participants self-representation and can challenge the visual and other representations of First Nations people (Simpson, L., 2017; Cummings, 2011). Creative practices are also cultural practices (Behrendt, 2008) and ways of engaging in resurgence (Simpson, L., 2011). Creative practice also allows for the empowerment of makers as experts in creative expression of identity (or in whatever it is they are expressing) and provides space for engagement without having to have dialogue, or as a way of moving through difficult discussions, or as a way of listening (Behrendt, 2008; Simpson, L., 2011; 2017). Engaging in creative methods also has the potential to be productive for participants who want to create art work.

Using visual and creative forms contributed in some instances to individual and collective identity making (Cummings, 2011), such as discussed in Chapter 5, and was a culturally appropriate method in the context of this thesis.

Data collection tools

The primary data collection tools used for this thesis included:

- focus groups
- a yarning workshop
- semi-structured interviews
- ethnographic observation and reflections of programs through field notes.

Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted across the sites. This method of data collection is usually guided by a set of topics or prompts for discussion, with a facilitator or interviewer asking the questions or directing prompts throughout the session (Kitzinger, 2003). In the case of this project, while this approach was followed, there was also the relational element of determining connection to each other and place at the start of each group, in which the participants and I (as the researcher) introduced ourselves by clan affiliation (if known), Country we were born/raised on, and how we were connected to Narrm – this process is similar to what Butler (2017:24) describes as 'Aboriginal mapping questions', though he specifies that this process includes specific questions: 'Who's your mob? Where is that country? Who is your family?'. Although I use the term 'focus group' to describe this method, the ways these data collection activities were undertaken for this project were closely aligned with yarning groups – but I did not intentionally set out to do this at the beginning of the research process, so I feel it is not entirely accurate to describe the activities in this way.

Focus groups were selected as a method of data collection for this project as they are generative and intended to provide a level of comfort and a feeling of informality to participants who may not feel like talking openly with me on their own in a one-on-one interview. The focus groups were also used in conjunction with individual interviews and participant observation. This was designed to allowed multiple layers of analysis to occur. Focus groups were used in different ways throughout this research process – and over the duration of the project evolved into more relational yarning-style activities, which informed the choice to use a large yarning workshop at Murrup Barak.

Yarning workshop

For one of the sites (Murrup Barak), a yarning workshop was used to engage participants in informal conversation and allow space for young people to explore topics they felt were important and relevant for them. The session involved some craft and art activities to bring an element of purpose – especially for participants who were interested in this medium or feeling a bit anxious and wanting to do something with their hands while discussing a range of topics and stories relating to identity and Indigeneity. As with the focus groups, the theme sheet (Appendix B) was used as a starting point to begin the discussion with the group, but the direction the discussion went was not dictated by the guide, and the group directed the conversations and stories generated.

As a method, yarning uses relationality to establish connections and create a sense of shared power and understandings of the knowledge and expertise participants and researchers bring to the discussion. The dynamic of researcher as expert and impartial observer is removed, as the 'researcher' becomes a participant of the conversation. Yarning can include multiple elements of engagement, such as storytelling and collaborative meaning making in understanding concepts being discussed (Atkinson et al., 2021; Barlo et al., 2021; Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010; Datta, 2018). For the purposes of this study, using yarning to generate discussions and stories felt like an appropriate approach to engage young people in order to centre lived experience as an expertise and as an act of resurgence in research (Simpson, L., 2011) to connect and respect First Nations knowledges.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used in this research as a way of exploring ideas and information with individuals. In some instances, in-depth interviews were used to follow up with individuals who had already participated in other activities, including observational activities, focus groups or the yarning workshop, to explore topics more thoroughly. For the purposes of this research project, interview guides were based on a set of themes and were exploratory (rather than having an assumed hypothesis), following a yarning approach (see Appendix B). Within this semi-structured interview method I incorporated elements of a ‘yarning’ approach (Shay, 2021; Atkinson et al., 2021; Barlo et al., 2021; Bessarab and Ng’andu, 2010; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021; Smallwood, 2023). As a method yarning incorporates understandings of shared ‘…connections, boundaries, accountability and social conditions.’ (Shay, 2023: 63). Within the context of my research, this included establishing at the start of the interview, the shared connections that might be held between the participants and I, and connections to place we each had, who our families were, and other information that identified and shared our understanding of our relationalities. With participants I would discuss the reasons behind my research, some of the things I had already heard, and to let them know I was very interested in hearing about their experiences, and acknowledged their expertise in telling me what was important, which might mean we deviated from the theme sheet I was using as a guide for the interviews. I did not specifically term this method as ‘yarning’ or these interviews as ‘yarns’, although I utilised similar techniques.

Using semi-structured interviews, participants were asked a range of questions including what they felt was important in their own identification of themselves to others, and what relationships they had with their Indigeneity in different settings. This allowed participants to describe, in their own terms and in their own way (Jones, 1985), concepts of Indigeneity. The theme sheet used for conversations, focus groups and the yarning workshop can be found at Appendix B.

Participant observation

Participant observation included being an ‘active participant’ (Salkind, 2003) in a variety of programs and settings with First Nations young people. This included being a volunteer in some programs, running workshops or activities, and contributing to group activities. Observational work included documenting and noting dynamics between individuals involved in groups, and the ways in which identity was discussed or performed in different settings. Observation also allowed the building of more nuanced understandings of individuals and their relationships to each other across time.

Participant observation included spending time with participants in ‘every day’ situations, observing interactions between individuals and groups in specific program settings, and informal discussions with participants about issues and ideas as they arose. Observations were always overt and with the explicit permission of participants. Some participant observation sessions were followed up with focus group discussions and/or in-depth interviews around specific topics, guided by the theme sheet when required.

In the context of this study, participant observation was also influenced by the Indigenous-specific relationality of the engagements taking place, and the places in which we were engaging (Shay, 2021; Wilson, 2008; Tynan, 2021). By this I mean, that through the acknowledgements and overt declarations of my own positionality and relation to participants, and their acknowledgments of the relations they held with place, each other and me, there was an engagement in Indigenous ways of knowing and being that was occurring. This contributed to how participant observation was formulated, undertaken and in the analysis of these engagements.

Field notes

Field notes are detailed summaries of observations, events and points of interest, including the researcher's reflections on particular issues, topics or data collection activities and findings (Bryman, 2004). The fieldnotes for this project also included my own reactions to things and conversations I had with people about my research.

For the purposes of this project, field notes included observations from different program settings, within other data collection activities such as focus groups and interviews, about identity and interactions with concepts of identity and theory in other non-participant settings (such as online), notes about specific research activities and data collection that occurred, and reflections of particular things that came up. Notes included my own reflections on processes relating to my research, and the ways in which research and experience were connected through my interpretation of these reflections. The data collected using focus groups included the recorded responses to guided yarning on a set of topics, and field notes on the interactions and performances of participants within the groups.

Recruitment

This work aimed to collect a variety of experiences of being a First Nations young person in Narrm, so careful consideration was given to this during recruitment. A slow and deliberate process was taken in order to gain a wide variety of perspectives and voices.

Recruitment of participants for this study occurred mainly through the four organisations collaborating in this research. Participants were engaged through existing programs, through self-selection for involvement in a particular research activity, or through choosing to become involved in a new program and also choosing to be involved in the research component of that program (potential participants could also choose to be involved in a new program but decline involvement in the research activity). Also, a small number of participants were not involved in the programs or organisations participating in this project, but wanted to be involved in the research activities – either through invitation (after being suggested by another research participant – i.e. snowball sampling) or through hearing about the research and wanting to contribute to it. Participants were reimbursed for their involvement in interviews and focus groups through the provision of $20 gift vouchers.

Inclusion criteria

In planning this project, and working closely with the organisations mentioned, young people involved in this research met the following criteria:

- they were aged 16–30[9] years (inclusive) at first recruitment

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[9] The original age range selected for this study encompassed the Australian definition of 'youth' being 16–24 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011), while also acknowledging the range used by many youth services supporting this research (one of which assisted young people up to 25 years of age, while the other three did not have fixed age ranges). Following requests by potential

- they identified as being a descendant of one or more of the First Nations of Australia[10]
- they lived in Narrm.

Potential participants were informed about this research through the following mechanisms:

- flyers posted at participating organisation program sites (see Appendix C)
- flyers posted on social media, such as facebook
- flyers emailed to potential participants through participating organisations
- information sessions about the research at the participating organisations during regular program times
- word of mouth and passing on flyers.

Flyers contained my contact details, as the student researcher, in case anyone wanted to get in touch to ask further questions. I was also regularly present at programs with

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participants to be involved in the study although they were outside the original age range, the range was shifted to include participants up to the age of 30 at first recruitment.

[10] In this point the term ‘descendant’ is used to be inclusive of people who identify in this way, but it is important to note that many First Nations people do not like the term and prefer to identify specifically as being a First Nations clan. For example, I am Wiradjuri, but under the definition above, I could also claim to be a descendant of the Wiradjuri people or nation. Identifying as a descendant is sometimes a way that people still finding connections back to culture and Indigeneity feel comfortable claiming their First Nations identity. As this research was hoping to gain many different perspectives and stories, using language that invited a wider variety of experiences was considered important.

partnering organisations, which meant that potential participants were able to speak to me about what being involved entailed and ask any questions.

Participants were invited to participate in this research and provided with plain language statements and consent forms (see Appendices D and E). I asked partnering organisations to send on carer consent forms for young people who wanted to participate if they were under the age of 18. Young people involved in multiple activities were given consent forms for each activity.

Data collected

Ethnography and participant observation were used across all sites as the primary data collection activity occurring simultaneously with, or preceding additional methods such as focus groups, interviews, and the yarning workshop. The theme sheet at Appendix B was used to guide the direction of conversation for the interviews, focus groups and the yarning workshop. Critical self-reflection was also used across all sites and incorporated into field notes as part of the ethnographic writing process.

Table 1: Data collection activities at each of the sites

Research site	Methods used	Participants	Activities undertaken
Koori youth drop-in program (Chapter 4)	Ethnography Participant observation Field notes	Yala Yira Nini Billy Malayar	Weekly youth drop-in program sessions, and visits with participants to other youth programs over a 12-month period.

VACCA Arts mentoring program (Chapter 5)	Ethnography Participant observation Focus group Interviews	Ginan Daku Ellin Ligie Minhi	Weekly art mentoring program sessions over a 12-month period, a focus group at end of year exhibition with participants and follow up interviews.
Indigenous Group of Learning (Chapter 6)	Ethnography Participant observation Focus group Interviews	IGL Focus Group Participants (n=4) IGL Interview Participants (n=4)	Weekly sessions with Indigenous Group of Learning volunteers at a cultural support visitation program within a prison setting, a focus group and interviews.
Murrup Barak (Chapter 7)	Ethnography Participant observation Yarning Workshop Focus groups Interviews	Gudha Aisha Bula Clara Dhani Marra Djirra Eddie Fergus Garraywarra Harry Yalbi Leon Jarra Bibarra	One big creative Yarning Workshop with participants and follow up and additional interviews and focus groups.

		Issy Barrliyin Kat Ngalany	
Participants outside of programs	Ethnography Interviews	Grace Interview participants (n=2)	Additional interviews were conducted with participants from outside partnering sites

Through participant observation, focus groups and interviews, a total of 40 participants were involved in this research – some participants were involved in multiple data collection activities, which takes the number of 'acts of participation' to 52. There were 14 interview participants across 13 interviews, 24 focus group participants across six focus groups and 14 workshop participants in one yarning workshop. Participants involved in a focus group or the workshop were invited to participate in an interview too, if they were interested to delve deeper into some of the themes or ideas that emerged through the group activities.

All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. Field notes were also taken during activities, including reflections on activities and on place and landscapes. No identifying information/data of research participants is used in this thesis, and although I have made every effort to make sure participants are not identifiable, it is possible, given the small numbers of participants and the communities involved, that some participants may be identifiable to themselves or to other people involved in this work or connected through these communities.

Table 2: Data collection activities and participation

Activities	**Number of activities**	**Number of participants**
Interviews	13	14
Focus groups	6	24
Workshop	1	14
Total	**20**	**52**

Demographics

The age range of young people participating in this research was 16–30 years old. The majority (70 per cent) of participants were 16–20 years old (n=28), with 30 per cent aged between 21–30 years (n=12).

No specific question about gender or sex was asked as part of this research, though there was a prompt for 'gender/gender identification' relating to identity in theme sheets (see Appendix B); the numbers included in this section were derived from self-identification of participants, rather than a direct question. The breakdown of participants was 60 per cent female, 36 per cent male and 4 per cent nonbinary. Due to the small number of participants, specific numbers are not reported for this aspect of identity. This approach was taken in order to allow space for participants to discuss what they considered to be important in their own identification process. There is certainly space for more exploration in this area, but it was not captured in the work of this thesis.

Identification as First Nations generally happened at the beginning of each data collection activity. Participants identified themselves in various ways, and the nations mentioned across all activities included Aboriginal (unsure of clan), Barkandji, Budjari, Bunitj, Darug, Dja Dja Wurrung, Gunai/Kurnai, Gunditjmara, Kalkadoon, Kandji, Larakia, Meriam Mer, Mutti Mutti, Ngarrindjeri, Peerapper, Pitta-Pitta, Quandamooka, Thursday Island, Torres Strait Islander (unsure), Wamba Wamba, Wiradjuri, Wongai, Wonkawarra, Wurundjeri, Yamatji, Yirrganydji and Yorta Yorta. The spelling of some of the clan names may not be representative of all the ways of spelling clan names. Sometimes participants identified themselves by place or generally (such as 'Aboriginal' or 'Torres Strait Islander') when they did not know specifically where they were from.

Participants were involved in interviews and focus group discussions about the ways in which they practise their Indigeneity and what it is like to be a First Nations young person in Narrm. Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, and the focus of conversations was grounded in the place or space that enabled the interactions to occur in the first place; for example, discussing the Arts Mentoring Group works or outcomes of the program (Chapter 5) or the ways in which Murrup Barak played a role in the lives of the young people enrolled at The University of Melbourne (Chapter 7). This grounding enabled relational conversations to occur, and facilitated narrative-style discussions, such as how a young person came to be involved in a particular program or their first experience of a place.

Additionally, many young people involved in the data collection activities were involved in programs or activities across the sites of recruitment, showing the dynamic and involved nature of young people and the programs and places they access. This also shows the interconnected nature of First Nations communities in Narrm and the strong relationships and ties young people bridge across places and spaces here.

Time period

Work to set up the relationships to build the potential for research began well before ethics clearance was provided. Data collection occurred from late 2016 to mid-2017, though participation in programs and activities began before this, and continues in some cases. In some instances throughout this thesis specific time periods of data collection activities are not included in order to protect the anonymity of participants.

Analysis of data

All the data collected through interviews, focus groups and the workshop was transcribed. Across all activities there were over 20 hours of audio recordings. Data was grouped according to the site of collection – or if the participant was involved in multiple programs/sites, data was reviewed and grouped to the most appropriate site or was used to make observations across the sites. Each site was written up as a chapter in the findings section (Chapters 4–7).

Thematic analysis

Transcripts were thoroughly reviewed repeatedly, and through this process I became familiar with the key ideas and concepts discussed by participants. I kept a spreadsheet as themes emerged. Once I had sat with the data for a while and reviewed my notes and observations, I refined the emerging themes, categorising them when similarities emerged. I did this for each individual site, and across all the sites, to see what bigger pictures might be emerging, or to see if there were any noticeable differences in the emerging themes across each site. Throughout this process, clearer pictures and stories of what participants were saying individually and in unison emerged. This practice aligns with a thematic analysis method and, specifically, an 'exploratory' content-driven approach (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Guest et al., 2012). Time and space were given to the analysis of the data through deliberate processes – but also through having two maternity leave breaks throughout the course of writing this thesis – which allowed a lot of time to reflect on and consider the findings and the stories they were telling.

Counterstories

> Stories are one of the most meaningful and personal ways that we learn about the world, passed down from generation to generation through the familial and cultural groups to which we belong. (Bell and Roberts, 2010)

The data collection methods for this study were designed to collect a variety of stories from participants. Throughout the process of data collection, however, something else emerged. Initially it was difficult to put my finger on it – sometimes focus groups or interviews had a strange feeling, like there was a holding of breath, or that I was being observed. Sometimes when I prompted, or asked a question, I would feel resistance from a participant – and they would redirect the flow of the discussion, or change the topic, or push back entirely on the line of questioning. Analysis was always intended to include a review of the emerging narratives, but as I was doing this, it clicked that what I was witnessing was often a method of changing the story that I was inadvertently imposing through my questions. In addition to the specific data collected through focus groups, the workshop and interviews, this resisting of specific ideas and stories emerged through observational activities too – in the interactions participants had with each other, or with staff involved in programs, or even in anecdotes participants told me in our data collection activities. These actions could be read as counterstories, or counter-narratives, and this realisation helped me to see the work participants were doing in their everyday activities and interactions across the sites involved in this study.

Counterstories are a component of critical race theory, which emerged initially through the discipline of law in the 1960s as part of civil rights movements on Turtle Island/the continent of Northern America (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theory has evolved and crossed many disciplinary and continent boundaries since this time and has been adapted and interpreted to suit the circumstances and contexts of marginalised groups across the world. Critical race theory has also been adapted into methodology that 'pushes us to humanize quantitative data and to recognize silenced voices in qualitative data' (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002:38).

The key principles of critical race theory that help to contextualise counterstory for the purpose of this thesis are that:

- racism is ordinary and experienced in the 'everyday' by marginalised groups

- the everydayness of this racism that makes it ordinary also blends it into a logic that is difficult to see, cure and address (and undesirable to address for those for whom it upholds certain privileges and power)
- ‘race’ is a social construction produced through social thought and relations
- racialisation occurs differently across different minority groups (and time) depending on dominant society needs
- the history and context for each group that is racialised is specific, and ever-changing, which presents intersecting experiences of marginalisation that are not the same everywhere (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001:7–9).

Counterstories resist the dominant narratives embedded in racialised and colonised/white dominated societies (Bell, D. A., 1980; Bell and Roberts, 2010; Delgado, 1989, 2001; Quayle, 2017; Quayle and Sonn, 2019; Quayle et al., 2015; Sonn et al., 2014). Counterstory provides a platform to recognise the expertise of intergenerational and lived experiences of people of colour, or people who are undervalued and underserved through ‘dominant stories/narratives’ or ‘stock stories’ that are constructed to conceal the implicit and ‘common sense’ hierarchies of place and history (Bell and Roberts, 2012:2302-4). Martinez (2014:70) tells us that constructions and perpetuation of stock stories ‘feign neutrality and at all costs avoid any blame or responsibility for societal inequality’. Stock stories are invested in maintaining the status quo of racialised privilege while continuing to marginalise stories that speak of ‘other’ experiences. Resisting and countering these stories enables the unravelling of some of this perceived neutrality, which makes space for the stories of oppression and racism to be told, and for ‘alternative visions’ of what is possible once these stock stories are subverted.

The use of counterstory as a tool of analysis in this thesis (rather than as a method of data collection or of participatory action research) might seem like a strange choice. Counterstories were not constructed in resistance to specific accounts of events; rather, they were identified in the interactions, actions and discussions shared by participants. Counterstories in this context are read as a repositioning of an event, or the research itself, by participants. Counterstory emerged as an appropriate method of analysis, as a way of reading resistance, refusal and resurgence in the actions and discussions throughout the findings chapters (Chapters 4–7). However, while reviewing the transcripts and themes, and looking for instances of emerging counterstories, it struck me that this concept is perhaps too responsive to a deficit narrative. The concept of ‘countering’ is a response to something – and perhaps might not be considered an original action in its own right. Stories of identity and connection to place for First Nations people are original stories. Through the stories of young people, there was certainly resistance, but also resurgence, revival and acts of sovereignty. In light of this consideration, I explore the concept of ‘re-storying’ (Corntassel et al., 2009) as a more appropriate description of the actions of participants (see chapter 5).

Challenges

Inclusion criteria

Initially, the inclusion criteria for this study included young people between the ages of 15–25, but this age range was broadened to include interviews with some people up to

30 years of age because they were involved in some of the programs run through partnering organisations. In some instances, people outside of these age brackets participated in activities, but their contributions were not included in analysis of the data.

Data collection activities

Initial data collection activities planned included taking participants to events and reflecting on these as part of the data collection process. As the relationships with organisations partnering in this research developed and my involvement in the sites evolved, the practicalities of this changed. In some circumstances, such as the arts mentoring program (see Chapter 5), there were enough variations in activities and conversation about events happening outside of the program without the need for further activities to prompt discussions. The cultural support program at the prison (see Chapter 6) was its own event – and involved me taking volunteers to the program every week, with many opportunities to reflect on the program during car rides to and from the site. The yarning workshop at the university (see Chapter 7) was an event in itself – so no other activities were required. Finally, the youth drop-in program did not operate in the ways I thought it might (see Chapter 4), so the focus on ‘outings’ was not relevant. Though this slight adjustment changed some of the process of data collection, it continued the practice of flexibility and relationality in the research approach taken.

Re-storying desire - theorising a counterstory to deficit and pain

> So who tells a story is a mighty piece of information for the listeners; you must know what that story has at stake. Demanding to know who is telling your story means asking, ‘Who is inventing me, for what purpose, with what intentions? (Miranda, 2013)

Through the exploration of resistance and refusal evident in this study, questions of intention and desire emerged. What stories did participants want to present? What futures did they imagine and desire for themselves? And what was the story I felt needed to be told through this work? The dilemmas of reinscribing pain and suffering and exploiting this do not contribute in any meaningful way to the body of knowledge about First Nations people, or counter this knowledge production process. Throughout this study the need for ‘theorizing the… limits to settler-colonial social science research’ (Tuck and Yang, 2014:237), and to present, instead, a re-storying (Corntassel et al., 2009) of belonging and place immersed in sovereign knowledge, with desiring futures, emerged.

Conclusion

In thinking through how to do this research without perpetuating the extractive harms of the academy and the ways in which research has been and continues to be done, I saw that refocusing on the strengths, desires and futurity of First Nations young people in Narrm was the best way to proceed. Through this process, in designing and developing the research, I was challenged many times, confronted with the ways in which research is damaging and damage-centred, and confronted by my own participation in some of these processes. An important step for thinking through the significant factors of research design was identifying the ways in which my own positioning in research influences the ways in which it is imagined, designed, conducted and analysed.

As the findings chapters show, the reflective ethnographic process of this work was challenged and challenging in many ways, and documenting this was an important part of my findings. Young people's engagement and understanding of place and relationships was an active participant in the expression of First Nations identities.

The next chapter explores the ways in which theories of change about young people's identities and needs can be very misleading and require a reframing in order to engage with a desire-based interpretation of what might be suitable, and how acts of refusal and resistance need to be listened to carefully, and not interpreted as disengagement.

Chapter 4. Findings: Refusal and re-programming for desire

> What happens when we refuse what all (presumably) 'sensible' people perceive as a good thing? What does this refusal do to politics, to sense, to reason? When we add Indigenous peoples to this question, the assumptions and the histories that structure what is perceived to be 'good' (and utilitarian goods themselves) shift and stand in stark relief… Indeed, from this perspective, we see that a good is not a good for everyone. (Simpson, A., 2014:1)

This chapter follows the contours of resistance and refusal as a voice used by young people involved in youth services, even in the absence of their presence in particular places. The power of youth resistance is explored through refusal, using examples of First Nations young people interacting on a regular basis with youth services and Indigenous Youth Outreach Workers in Narrm's inner-north region.

This chapter outlines the risk in having predetermined ideas about identities and expectations of 'need' for young people, how these concepts have been influenced by the construction of youth as an 'in between' developmental phase, and the relationship this has with the infantilisation of First Nations peoples throughout the history and structures of Australia (Nakata, S., 2018). I theorise that absence and silence are an expression of choice and action by young people, and attention needs to be paid to what this is saying, and what stories are being told in order to imagine a future that hopes for more and provides possibilities of more for First Nations young peoples. Desire-based frameworks (Tuck, 2009) offer an option for reframing and restructuring services and programs that young people interact with – seeing the multiplicity and complexity of young people's lives, and the strength this brings in including young people in realising the immense possibilities for the future.

Contributors to this chapter

This chapter introduces the Koori youth drop-in program (the drop-in program) and includes the following contributors as participants:

Youth Services staff:

- Gary – Manager of the Youth Services team
- Dillon – Indigenous Outreach Worker
- Ngara – Indigenous Outreach Worker
- Alice – non-Indigenous Indigenous Outreach Worker.

Young people participating:

- Yira
- Yala
- Billy
- Malayar
- Nini.

This chapter takes place in the setting of a youth drop-in program for First Nations young people, developed collaboratively by Indigenous Outreach Workers and I, and administered by a non-Indigenous organisation with oversight for staff running the program (Indigenous Outreach Workers). Using ethnographic observation during my period of involvement in the drop-in program, I explore the comings and goings of First Nations young people identified as ‘at risk’ through the services provided by the organisation and those who chose to attend the drop-in program on their own. I also include the experiences of staff running the program. Although many young people came through the doors of the drop-in program over its duration, repeat attendance by individuals was inconsistent. The young people introduced in this chapter are just some of the participants of the drop-in program, and their interactions with the program have been described as a way of understanding some of the challenges of running the drop-in program. When the Koori youth drop-in program was developed (as discussed below), many theories about need and the kinds of young people who might become involved were imagined, but what I found instead were challenges that revealed a need to reflect on our own practices, the role of the drop-in program we had designed and youth services in general, and what other possibilities there might be for young people’s desires for the future.

One way that First Nations young people practise and engage their Indigeneity is in relation to service systems, as ‘places’ of sorts. Engaging with a culturally safe organisation – a service that focused specifically on supporting the culture and identity of First Nations young people – seemed like a good place to begin to answer the research question. I thought this would assist in developing an understanding of what was important to young people, and what they might perceive as key factors for success or failure of such endeavours. This approach, as it turned out, perhaps focused on the wrong point. The voices that were most telling in this activity were the ones that were silent/refused to take part. As it turned out, what was most in need of investigation was the service response (and my own) to this silence and understanding what this silence was saying. This process revealed much about theories of change and expectations around what 'success' might come to mean in relation to the ways young people know services, themselves, and their possibilities and desires for the future.

Finding a way to connect

In late 2015 I approached a local Aboriginal organisation that provided outreach programs for young people in the inner northern suburbs of Narrm area. It took a while to get a response, and when I did get one, it did not come from where I thought it would. Gary – a man from another youth organisation, a 'mainstream' service – got in touch with me via email. He suggested I meet him at the place I had tried to contact originally, an historically important local space for Victorian First Nations communities.

I was a bit unsure about how this arrangement between the two organisations had occurred. My intention in approaching a First Nations youth service was for the organisation to be known and to be a safe place for young people. I did not know much about the mainstream organisation that had replied to me. It provided a range of services including housing, case management for young people with a history of 'offending behaviour', employment training and support for young people who were disengaged from education, connections with health and mental health services (including alcohol and other drug supports), and links to community groups. The people clearly being targeted for this support were those in out-of-home-care and those engaged with, or ‘at risk’ of engagement with, the justice system. This organisation had no obvious history of successful partnership with First Nations organisations as far as I could tell.

The location for my first meeting to begin talking about my research ideas, and possible opportunities for us to collaborate was in a building on a busy street in the historically important suburb of Fitzroy – a place where many First Nations people had moved during the Depression and interwar period (Howard-Wagner, 2021; Broome, 2005, 2015), and many community-controlled organisations had emerged over the years. When I arrived, I pulled on the handle of the door to open it, but the building was locked. I knocked, but no one answered. I phoned Gary and he came and let me in. The space had pictures of important local Elders throughout the foyer, and famous First Nations people painted on the walls. Despite the bustle of the street outside, the building was quiet, cold and seemed empty. We walked into a huge meeting room and sat down. Gary began the story of how the two organisations started working together – more of an administrative role, he said, and also to help manage the building, which had not been functioning as a community hub for a little while. He seemed interested in some of the ideas about the research I wanted to undertake and about working with young people to understand different concepts of First Nations identities.

Gary kept mentioning the fact that there were Indigenous Outreach Workers employed jointly by both organisations – Dillon, for a boys program, and Ngara for a girls program. Gary spoke about how the Outreach Workers were really motivated to get things happening for young people in the area. I wondered where Ngara and Dillon were, and why they were not part of this conversation. I asked about this, and he said, ‘Oh, they’re just up the hall, I’ll go and get them.’ As the discussion progressed, Ngara and Dillon spoke about the young people they worked with – usually through supporting them at court appearances or visiting them at home to see how they were going with appointments and attending school. The young people were described as being ‘very isolated’ and Ngara and Dillon wanted to develop some opportunities for them to meet other young people, connect with First Nations identities and get involved with different activities. We decided to keep talking and working together, and traded contact details so we could stay in touch.

After a few conversations with the Outreach Workers I received an email from Ngara one day asking if I would like to help set up a youth program that they had started to plan – the Outreach Workers would be in charge, but I could volunteer for the program and it could contribute to my research project. Ngara thought it would be a good idea to run something relatively informal that would provide opportunities for young people to get together. We looked at potential sites, factoring in accessibility, location, connection to community and layout. The place we picked did not have a fantastic building (it was an old church), but the location was good and seemed to be close enough for young people to walk, or catch public transport to, and there was an Aboriginal health service operating at the site too.

After some more discussion about the format of the program, we decided on a ‘drop-in’ program format that did not require regular attendance but would have a series of activities young people could participate in. It would also offer a space they could hang out in, speak to Ngara and Dillon, and connect with other young people and community associated with the health service. We coordinated with the health service to run the program each Wednesday afternoon from 3-6pm, and called it the Koori youth drop-in. We developed flyers (see Appendix F) and distributed these through social media and youth service networks in the area.

As part of the agreement process, I went to the mainstream organisation's head office to get official sign off for the partnership. I met with the regional director, who happily signed off on the project and seemed interested in what other skills I had. I began writing grant applications to get small amounts of funding for the program. It became apparent to me as the program started that there was very little money for supporting the Outreach Workers, who had to pay for food for young people and petrol for travel out of their own pockets and claim reimbursement later. Although this might not seem like a particularly important detail, it impacted the way staff felt and the sustainability of working in the Outreach Worker roles. It also impacted on the relationships being developed with young people over time, including their levels of trust and energy for engagement with staff.

Imagining a place for young people

There was a lot of interest and excitement in setting up the drop-in program. We imagined the kinds of young people that would be accessing it. Dillon and Ngara worked with young people who were not attending school regularly, and who were experiencing surveillance from different systems, including child protection, police and justice. We tried to keep this in mind, along with accessibility. We wanted to make a place that did not feel unwelcome or too ‘watched’ for young people – we wanted somewhere that felt safe, without specific expectations of attendance and conformity or having to participate in particular ways.

In developing this program and place, Ngara, Dillon and I had imagined a group of young people who might access it. We tried to account for the various issues that might impact on these imagined individuals attending the drop-in program – and structured the sessions accordingly. We imagined a particular kind of young person who would be interested because there were no formal requirements to attend every week, with specific support and help needs, and who desired the opportunity to meet up with other young blackfullas. In trying to imagine the kind of place that this program could run, we also imagined a kind of young person who might attend. We imagined a lot of things that did not include input from young people, and the young people we thought of were, to an extent, imaginary. In thinking about how we might do things differently, were we to do them again, involving young people in imagining the program right from the start would be a priority. What follows is a map of learning about youth resistance.

The Koori youth drop-in program

The first week we held the Koori youth drop-in program, in February 2016, four young people turned up – two sisters, Yala and Yira, and two young men, Billy and Malayar. We stood around and introduced ourselves – Dillon, Ngara and I tried to exude calmness and a feeling of welcomeness. We were excited, but we could see it was a bit awkward for the young people coming into the space. Billy spent most of the session helping us to assemble a huge flat-pack table-tennis table with a tiny hand-held screwdriver – his hand red and sore after all his efforts. To make matters worse, it was unbearably hot in the hall. The health service staff helped drag out a huge high-powered fan from their office. Everyone immediately stood next to it, but it was so loud it was hard to hear anyone speak and it caused havoc for the table-tennis game as the ping pong balls were blown all over the place. Billy and Dillon took to the table-tennis first, and Malayar sat on the black vinyl couch, picking at its peeling arms. Ngara made toasties in the kitchen.

The eldest sister, Yala, and I stood close to the table-tennis game so that we could be near the fan, but even at a slight distance, the noise made it hard to hear each other, and the ping pong ball kept blowing onto the floor between us, so our conversation was a physically active one, spent bent over chasing the ball, returning it to the players, and shouting 'sorry?!' at each other as we strained to hear what we were saying. Yala told me about her desires for the future, and that she had already found many different avenues to get involved in opportunities to get there. She was getting paid work to write for different publications occasionally and was thinking about the next steps.

Despite the heat, Yira, the younger sister, was wearing a long-sleeved jumper and long pants. She looked like she was hot, her hair sticking to her face. She did not speak to anyone, but participated in the impossible table-tennis game, and her shrieks of delight and laughter burst through the noise of the fan as the weightless ping pong balls were blown away. A staff member from the health service came out to join in the game with Yira. Although the conversation was limited, the smiles and laughter made the hall a welcome hub of activity.

At the end of the first session, we gathered together and asked what attendees wanted to do each week. The young people shrugged – no one wanted to speak up in front of everyone. We suggested food – perhaps an afternoon snack for everyone each week – and there were some nods. Dillon asked about art and music – there were some more nods and murmurs. It was a fairly unproductive discussion, so we moved on. We asked if people would be back the following week, to which Yira gleefully replied that no, she would not be returning. Ngara asked why, or if there was anything we could do to make it somewhere she wanted to come back, but her questions were met with silence. Ngara and Dillon drove the young participants home – and as I passed their cars in the street on the way to my own car, I called out 'See you next week!'. Yira never returned.

Dillon told me about Billy from time to time. Billy also never came back to the program after his mammoth effort of assembling the table-tennis table. But Dillon saw him regularly, and they did things together outside of just attending appointments. Dillon was not particularly worried about Billy, aside from the fact that his living situation was not ideal, so I did not get many updates – which was probably a sign that things were going well enough for him.

Malayar was a pretty regular attendee at the start of the program. Dillon would pick him up from home, spend some time with him during the day and bring him to the program in the afternoon. Malayar was quiet, and a bit shy, but he would talk about things he was interested in when asked. Dillon, Malayar and I visited a few other youth programs together – looking to see what other places were doing and how effective their approaches were. Malayar would sit and watch the other young people attending the program, but he would never participate. He did open up a bit during car rides sometimes – he would pick the music for the journey and tell us bits and pieces about his life. School was a flexible arrangement for him – he attended a few hours per week, but he was more interested in doing an apprenticeship, probably something with cars. He would put on ’90s hip hop and smile when Dillon praised his music choices.

When we asked about how school was going, Malayar was never very forthright with information. It sounded tough – he alluded to experiences of racism and a lack of understanding for his circumstances by the teachers at the school. He spoke about incidents a few times outside of school on the weekends when he was with his cousins. One incident he told us about involved a fight between his cousins and a group of other young people – he described them as African. As he told us the story, I felt as if a different person was speaking it – he was no longer quiet and shy, but full of anger. He seemed puffed up – and it felt like he expected us to be on the same page about how the fight took place, but there were references we were missing. This story echoed some of the reports of racialised violence that were playing out in the media – but when Dillon asked questions about what was going on, Malayar was guarded in his response. He resisted further questions, and it felt like he had become suspicious of our intentions in questioning his story. Other times I saw Malayar, he and Dillon spoke about where he might do a mechanic apprenticeship, and Dillon would look into it some more for him.

Navigating these boundaries with young people was a big part of the Outreach Workers' jobs. Making connections and building trust were important to enable them to do their jobs, but, more than this, to create support networks young people could access, where they felt safe. There were often times when the Outreach Workers told me about stumbling over unexpected boundaries, or feeling like they could see the doors of connection closing with a young person they were working with. Persistence sometimes paid off, but just as often it did not. The program fluctuated from week to week – a few more young people would come, and sometimes none, but usually there was at least Malayar. As the initial enthusiasm we had for running the program waned, so did attendance. The Outreach Workers continued to see young people outside of the program though, so I got updates rather than direct conversations.

Ngara told me about the work she was doing with Yira – every week she called and checked in, visiting Yira at her house, in person. Yira's silence continued – as did reluctance to attend any program, appointment or to leave the house. Yira would not say what was going on. To Ngara's relief, Yala had been doing okay, she had managed to find some casual hospitality work and continued pursuing her interests. But Ngara was very concerned about Yira, who was not going to school and did not seem to be socialising with anyone other than Yala.

The young people interacting with each of the Outreach Workers were commonly out of school, like Yira, or experiencing intermittent attendance at school, like Malayar – if they were involved in formal education at all. Young people sometimes attending the drop-in program also had a high level of interaction with child protection and youth justice systems. Their experiences of these funnelling systems was firsthand, and they could see these systems were already categorising them – they knew what kind of futures were being imagined for them. This was perhaps why Malayar began to resist our questions. Conversations, like the one about a fight with young people described as African or the ways Malayar was treated at school when he went, revealed the myriad of injustices he and other young people faced on a regular basis – often in spaces that were meant to be ‘safe’ or in circumstances where the pretext was ‘for their own good’. What was read as 'disengagement’ from school and education often seemed to be a response to negative experiences and interactions with other students and teachers, and was an act of self-preservation to maintain a level of dignity, health and wellbeing for young people.

As I made toasties for some attendees one week and chatted in the kitchen to one of the staff from the health services, Ngara arrived, excitedly telling me about a breakthrough she had with Yira. It was an invitation offered by Yira to Ngara in the form of a video game controller while Ngara was visiting (she had persisted with her visits even though she did not know if Yira would ever really allow her in). Yira, sitting on the floor in her room, had pushed the controller across the floor with her foot towards Ngara. So Ngara sat cross-legged on the floor next to Yira, and they played video games together. Ngara was so elated by this interaction – she had tears in her eyes as she told me.

Reverberating in empty space

As the year progressed into winter, and the days grew shorter and colder, I sat huddled in a warm coat in the cold office waiting for young people to arrive for the program. It was quiet, and I had gotten lost in trying to update the social media page for the program, so was startled by a loud knock on the old wooden door of the hall that reverberated in the empty space. I walked to the door and turned the latch. A woman and a teenaged girl stood on the steps looking at me. I greeted them, and the woman looked at me in a confused way, telling me that she was here for the yarning circle as she looked past me into the hallway.

‘The youth group you mean?’ I asked, smiling at the teenager, who looked a bit uncomfortable.

The woman reiterated that she meant yarning circle, as she started to move past me into the hall. I thought about the flyers we had made for the program and sent out to services, which included a fire circle as one of the promised activities.

‘Oh, I think you are after the youth group – we sometimes do a yarning or fire circle as part of it… the Koori youth drop-in program’, I clarified. She spun around and looked me up and down suspiciously. I knew this look – uncomfortable and punctuated with an unspoken question: ‘Are you white or Aboriginal?’ I continued to smile, but it had gotten a bit tight and uncomfortable. The teenager stood close to the door frame, just inside the door. I introduced myself to her. I invited them both in.

I asked the girl if she was hungry and would like a toastie – she nodded. The woman with her had not introduced herself, or the girl. She asked where the other young people were. ‘Some more young people might arrive later’, I replied vaguely, thinking it was unlikely, but possible. Finally, the woman introduced herself as a case manager, and gestured to the girl, who introduced herself as Nini. The case manager said she would be back at 5 pm and left.

I talked to Nini as we made toasties. I introduced myself properly – let her know I was Wiradjuri, that the space we were in was safe. She opened up quickly and quietly – she told me she was in out-of-home care and had some contact with extended family but was living with a white Christian foster family who had strong opinions on religion. They did not like her expressing certain aspects of her Indigeneity, especially related to spirituality/culture and connection. Nini told me they had said it was heathen to tell any stories or discuss First Nations spirituality. But she was keen to learn traditional dance and to be more connected with other First Nations young people, which was part of the reason she had turned up to the group. We played pool as she told stories from her Country. No other young people turned up, and I felt bad for Nini. She was clearly so keen for connection.

We sat outside on the wooden stumps surrounding the yarning circle area, next to the fire pit. Nini suggested some things for the program – and repeated how much she wanted to learn to dance. She spoke about how she was not enjoying school and was not going very much, she felt picked on by teachers – again the story of experiences of racism with teachers and other students at school came up. She felt disconnected from her First Nations culture, family and identity, and she felt she had to hide who she was quite a lot, or certain aspects of who she was – especially at home because of her foster family's religious beliefs. Before we knew it, the time was 5 pm and her case manager was back – she looked at Nini, and nodded, and they walked out the door to the car. Nini waved and said she would be back, but we never saw her again.

Reflecting on Nini's visit, I wondered if she had made the decision not to come back, or if her case manager made the decision for her. I found the interactions I briefly had with her case manager uncomfortable – her questioning gaze unshakable. I certainly felt she was assessing who I was, if the program was worth her time and Nini's time – which I could not fault her for. But this feeling of questioning of my identity based on my appearance was not pleasant (or new), and it made me wonder what it was like for Nini – if she experienced this from the case manager too – if she felt judged and watched. I thought about Nini's assertion that she felt she had to hide different parts of herself at home and at school. An experience of feeling watched, and actively hiding. Invisible and hyper-visible at the same time. I wondered if Nini felt like she had to perform some version of herself in different settings all the time – in effect, doing a kind of dance, but not the one she really desired.

The place of a youth program

The drop-in program was a place the Outreach Workers and I had hoped young people would feel safe and comfortable in. We really wanted to make something that would provide a way for young people who were experiencing isolation to find connection and community. We wanted young people – like Nini – to find a home away from the challenges that her actual home, or other places like school, presented. We had many desires wrapped up in the creation of the program, but they were based on imagined young people and our ideas about what they needed and how they would use such a place.

Relationships with place have particular associations for young people, including those accessing the program. Places can be easy meeting and hang-out spots that are temporal and spatial. Importantly for young people, places are useful when they do not cost anything to be in, or there is no expectation that you must spend money to be in them (such as in a café), and when they are central. Places are also the in-between, such as in-between school and home, in-between class, in-between home and sports, in-between now and when young people need to be somewhere else, or the places that fill the gaps between services, supports and not being in formal education or employment. Places young people spend time in are often not places specifically designed for that purpose, and young people are often moved on because they are considered a nuisance, a risk or a problem to be managed.

First Nations young people involved in this research spoke about being paradoxically invisible and hyper visible in different places across Narrm. This experience of invisibility is because of the historical attempts to drive First Nations communities away from Narrm to make it a city, and to make city places non-belonging places for First Nations people, which includes ongoing narratives of non-belonging or inauthenticity. Hyper-visibility occurs through First Nations young people being perceived as a threat to others by merely existing in a public places and being seen as not belonging in these places (White, 2015). Examples given by young people included being followed by security guards in stores (wider experiences of this are reported in the media – see for example; Powell and Smith, 2018; Perry, 2018). One of the ways this hyper-visibility in certain contexts can be seen is in the ways that First Nations young peoples are over-policed and over-incarcerated – at rates nine to ten times that of non-Indigenous young people in Victoria (Victorian Government, 2022).

Young people are seen as places themselves – in-between places – not children and not yet adults, in the process of 'becoming' (Wyn, 2014). Torres Strait Islander academic Sana Nakata describes the ways that First Nations people in Australia are framed as 'child-like' by the nation, and as forever an in-between place: 'remnants of a displaced peoples, once inhuman, then child-like, and now dysfunctional…' (Nakata, 2018:113). Nakata looks through historical policies and legislation that racialised and objectified First Nations children and young people as 'problems to be solved' through protection, intervention and incarceration. As Walter (2016) tells us, statistics are not objective truths, and so here I reference them with caution and a point – they tell stories they are asked to tell through the questions used to gather the data informing them; they do not challenge the well-worn narrations of dysfunction. As described by both Walter and Nakata, these stories of dysfunction are built into the kind of national narratives expected of First Nations young people's bodies. These bodies are viewed by government institutions as something to protect and care for – if we are to believe the rates of First Nations child removal through the child 'protection' system (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021) – and simultaneously as something to fear, if we look to the rates of youth incarceration (Australian Institute of Health and

Welfare, 2022). Space and place are not allowed to be occupied by these young bodies, which must be controlled for their own good. They must be put in their place.

Some of the young people we have met in this chapter showed the ways they were fighting back against the positioning they were being forced into. Sometimes this included developing a health-preserving distrust of institutions and services operating in and through different places and spaces. We could see echoes of this in Malayar's resistance to our lines of questioning in his interactions with 'other' young people, or Yira's refusal to play along with expectations others had of her – such as attending programs, or services, or her resistance to speaking to different staff members associated with services. Other ways young people were finding their power was by refusing to participate in the systems of oppression that were attempting to strip them of autonomy, or that were telling them there were only specific kinds of futures in store for them. This power was sometimes expressed through silence and absence – by stepping out of the confining expectations of these systems, such as leaving school or the drop-in program, a refusal was declared.

Finding voice in refusal

Yira's refusal to engage with the program in an ongoing way could be read as an act of resistance – one that Ngara, Dillon and I did not really understand at first because, to us, it looked like Yira was having fun that first week she attended. As individuals working within the youth services system, our concepts of what constituted resistance were initially in the political and activist spheres. Resistance is often constructed as a deliberate and structured social change responding to specific phenomena – perhaps protesting a threatened policy, or countering specific acts, such as police brutality. But resistance is also accidental, messy, unstructured and even unconscious. Resistance does not always follow a theory of logic or change – it is in the minutia of doing that it exists, and sometimes the results may not be perceived as 'constructive'. As Yira was teaching us, sometimes the theory behind the model of logic being implemented needed to be examined.

Change does not always occur in ways that seem conducive to 'success' – although that depends on whose definition of success is being used, and it does not happen all at once. As Tuck and Yang (Eds, 2014:119) describe, 'Theories of change' may be thought of as shorthand for 'theories of the changes we want', but resistance as an act of change does not always have an articulated end point, or a goal other than something else to what is. Resistance is a step in a process of change that also imagines other possibilities, but does not necessarily have a compass to get there. This is not to say that resistance is pointless. For young people involved in the drop-in program, resistance was a legitimate way of taking back power when none was given and pushing against the ill-fitting construction of identities and boundaries that led to narrow future possibilities. Resistance was a language some young people, like Yira, could use to express their desire for change, as a desire for something else: 'Resistance that refuses to take seriously the framework for dialogue set up by people in power… it's a powerful solvent' (Scott et al., 2014:63).

Theories of change that are used to structure youth services and programs, like the one we were trying to run, often have specific ideas and expectations about the young people involved. The logical framework that underpins them assumes specific change is required, or support is needed for young people to progress along a continuum of ‘disengaged’ to ‘engaged’. This logic does not incorporate the concept of complex personhood (Gordon, 1997) – that people are contradictory, complex and sometimes confused in ways that contribute to a complete whole, not parts and pieces that need reformation or intervention in order to operate properly, or logically. As Tuck and Yang (Eds, 2014) teach us, resistance is a useful tool if it is allowed the space it desires: ‘youth resistance offers other forms of survivance, decolonial possibilities, agnosticism with progress, and desires for dignity that would enrich the currently paltry discussions on theories of change’ (Tuck and Yang (Eds), 2014:17).

Mohawk scholar Professor Audra Simpson (2014) describes refusal as a methodological and historical tool. Specifically, Simpson is talking about refusal as a resistance to the ways Indigenous peoples across the globe have become known, and are still sometimes known (Simpson, A., 2014:95). Indigenous peoples have been objects to be known, which privileges specific knowledge, rather than framed as knowledge holders and experts. This way of being known filters into universities and schools, where it is again played out in knowledge production and systems of discrimination, punishment and oppression. Simpson discusses resistance possibilities for Indigenous peoples: ‘Within Indigenous contexts, when the people we speak of speak for themselves, their sovereignty interrupts anthropological portraits of their past and, sometimes, their present’ (Simpson, A., 2014:97).

First Nations young people interacting with services that frame them as ‘at risk’ and ‘disengaged’ know what the expectations and imagined futures are for them. With limited space to voice opinions, little power (in the eyes of these services) to change these systems and services, and a reality of ongoing discrimination and problematisation, some of these young people have developed tools of resistance to assert their desire for a different future.

Refusal is an important concept in understanding resistance. Tuck’s (2011) concept of ‘dangerous dignity’ asserts that young people are capable of making informed decisions that result in defiance as a way of preserving their own dignity. Sometimes these decisions may go against what adults or people in positions of power and authority would describe as being the ‘right’ decisions, or they may not be considered the best long-term decisions, but they operate as a demonstration of the ways in which young people can manage themselves and express their self-determination.

> Dangerous dignity is a stance of informed defiance… Dignity, for the purposes of this analysis, can be understood as a sense of justice and injustice that is felt in or on the body… Dangerous dignity encompasses strategies employed by youth to re-vision who they are because of and in spite of their schooling. (Tuck, 2011:822–823)

Young people can and do make informed decisions all the time about what is worth their time, and dignity, such as the drop-in program, or school, or even leaving the house. Tuck (2011) theorises that the humiliating and demeaning treatment of young people in these systems, leads to push out from school. Young people respond to this humiliation through processes that ‘reorient themselves to positions of dangerous dignity, seeking self-preservation and self-determination, and claiming educational sovereignty’ (Tuck, 2011:817). The acts of refusal by young people to accept the categories imposed on them by education, employment and youth service systems might not look ‘productive’ in terms of progressing along a predetermined linear model of what ‘success’ looks like, or the assumed theory of change imagined for them. This linear path/predetermined theory of change leads to a specific future that continues the current injustices. But what questions are being asked about what young people want?

Breaking through, breaking down

The eventual breakthrough Ngara had with Yira did not magically result in specific forms of engagement and attendance. It was a slow relational process that responded to the ways in which Yira wanted to interact. Ngara was able to read the subtle ways Yira was engaging in developing the relationship between them, which was not along a predetermined linear framework. Regular contact, persistence and an interest in interactions that were meaningful to Yira shifted the dynamic of power and provided space for silence, refusal and a redirection of what kind of interactions were permissible and even desirable. By breaking down some of the barriers to engaging, Yira and Ngara were able to get to a more even ground. Kelley et al. (2014:93) describe ‘breaks’ as shifts in paradigm, simple breaks in structure, and as breakthroughs: ‘If you only attend to the outcomes of breaks in terms of impacting structural change, you will miss how the breaks are actually conceptual shifts.’

The slow, relational breakthrough that occurred between Yira and Ngara was the local micro-change required for a conceptual shift in the formulation of expectations and impositions of power dynamics and identity that young people, like Yira, are exposed to. The change was multidirectional – Yira was able to form a different kind of relationship with Ngara, and express different elements of her own complex personhood, while Ngara was able to find different ways to read the refusal and resistance that we had struggled to interpret earlier. This breaking down of walls to reach some kind of shift in the theories of change expected of young people was important for Ngara, Dillon and me in considering the role of the drop-in program and how best to support young people. This work was also extremely reflexive, as it required introspection on how young people were being engaged, the point of this engagement and what 'outcomes' were desirable (and by whom). This work was required by the broader service interacting with young people – but that change, as I describe shortly, proved to be a challenge.

An additional challenge facing the program and the service was the service's relationship with place, and the un-relational nature of the service as a non-place. What I mean by this is the fact that the service, a combination of an established community-controlled organisation and a non-Indigenous national organisation, did not have a relationship with the place/s in which the Outreach Workers were operating – the program was not tied to existing relationships with place, and the service was not known by the communities it was operating in. It would have been much easier if the drop-In program was held in the established community hub building (where I originally met with Gary to discuss the potential for working together). There were already historical connections with the local community and knowledge of the history of place there, but there was an element of continuing displacement playing out in the location of the community hub.

The community hub was located in Fitzroy – originally a place of community resurgence and political activity for First Nations people who had moved to Narrm from reserves and missions across the state and from interstate during the Depression, and World War II era (Broome, 2005:287). But Fitzroy had become a place that had gentrified over time. In a continuation of the colonial regime of displacement, First Nations families and communities had been pushed out very deliberately – first by directives to demolish inner city slums by state governments over the years (ABC Melbourne, 2020; Callanan, 2021; Matthews, 2015), and more recently by the increased cost of living due to the desirability of inner-city suburbs. The communities of that place, although still connected, had been dispersed into different areas. This was described to me by Gary, Ngara and Dillon as part of the reason the community hub had not been operating in recent times, which is why Ngara and I had begun working on the drop-in program by looking for a place to hold it, without truly realising the additional work that would be required.

While the Koori youth drop-in program was meant to function as a safe place for potential attendees, the relational work in and around the set up of the program, including the place it was being held, was fundamental to its potential success too. When young people did not attend, or showed up late, time was spent building relationships with the wider community of the place the program was run through.

Sometimes when the session was quiet, Ngara, Dillon and I would chat to community members popping into the hall to access the food bank, or to see one of the health service staff, or we would spend time getting to know the health service staff. This work was important for embedding the program in place, for the relational building of trust and beginning to see that the program was part of the network of the wider community. Being recognised and recognisable within the community was a key factor in making the program and staff safe, and this relational building aspect was equally important for us as staff/members of the community, running the program, to understand the context of the place we were in – to understand what was happening for First Nations young people in the area and what the broader politics were of this place.

The brunt of this relational work – the building of relationships with the places of Narrm and the network of organisations and services surrounding the program, and the breakthroughs with young people – was being worn by the Outreach Workers, who were largely unsupported in their roles. The breaks and breakthroughs being made were at a personal, relational level between the worker and the young person – and required a lot of trust. The cultural connections and safety offered by the Outreach Workers, which did not expect or require more identity performances from young people, were important factors for the breaking down of barriers to connection. But these same connections were not being valued or supported by the service responsible for administering the program (the same service that was meant to support and provide supervision for the workers) in ways that enabled them to occur, nor did the service even acknowledged these connections as fundamental to the success of the work with young people. The connections were made through the efforts and additional time and care offered by the Outreach Workers.

The tensions and frustrations young people felt towards the systems and services they were engaged in were also keenly felt by the Outreach Workers. The shoestring budget that the Outreach Workers had to operate within got in the way of being able to effectively deliver support and services to young people. Outreach Workers had to pay for petrol and food for young people out of their own personal bank accounts and then seek reimbursement later, rather than having a work credit card for work-related expenses. Sometimes, if staff did not submit a reimbursement claim in time, it could be weeks before they were paid back – and they had their own families and responsibilities they had to take care of outside of work.

There was also extremely limited support for Outreach Workers, who needed opportunities to debrief and discuss some of the things they were witnessing, such as upsetting interactions with child protection services or unjust outcomes from Court attendances. Ngara ended up leaving her role – she could not sustain the hours, expectations and limitations she experienced working for a mainstream organisation. The cost of the work was too high, even though she cared deeply about the young people she was working with. In Ngara's place a non-Indigenous woman, Alice, was hired. The impact on the drop-in program was noticeable, as new relationships had to be built, and Alice tried her best to get to know young people. But the lack of cultural connections Alice had, through the fact that she was non-Indigenous, made her position extremely challenging. After Ngara left, I never heard about Yira again. After a little more time, Dillon left too. He and I had worked to try and find more connections to other programs and spaces to link young people to, but after he was gone this stopped. I never saw Malayar again.

Breaking down barriers and shifting ways of thinking are big tasks that take many efforts to achieve but start with small acts of resistance. What happens when workers, like the Outreach Workers in this chapter, attempt to resist the systems and services that are not serving young people appropriately? Non-Indigenous North American Professor James Scott discusses ‘system compatible resistance’ and ‘system incompatible resistance’ and states that ‘The system always prefers system compatible’ (Scott et al., 2014:64) – which, of course, it does. If the system can read the resistance as such, it might figure out ways to respond to, or coopt, the resistance. For the Outreach Workers, the cost of being system compatible was too high, and eventually ended with a realisation of incompatibility, with the only clear resistance option for change being to leave. And this resistance certainly had an impact in breaking down the machine of the service, and the program. Having both original Outreach Workers leave made the program incompatible with continuing.

The young person constructed as an object of imagination

System incompatibility has been a reality for First Nations communities in Australia since invasion and the beginning of the colonisation of the many Countries that make up this land. Linking the historical exclusion of First Nations peoples from the democratic system and their infantilisation as not-quite-human, academic Sana Nakata is interested in the ways that First Nations children today are framed as political object-problems ‘to be solved’. She tells us:

> Indigenous Australian children have been shut out… through an outdated logic that says they will never grow up; by being ripped from their mothers’ arms; by being denied language and land and belonging; by being made to feel that they are being pulled between a white future and a black past; by being known and, in turn, by being refused access to knowledge; by being the presence that reminds the state that its origins are unjust and will never be made right.
>
> Our existence means the white imagi-nation this nation once held so tightly was never possible and never will be. In so many ways, Indigenous Australian children have been constructed as an antagonism of, even antithesis to, the democratic future of this country. (Nakata, S., 2018)

What is imagined by institutional regimes and services for young people involved in youth services, and certainly in the drop-in program, are various pathways that lead to outcomes plotted on a matrix of risk and engagement. Young people’s own desires for other possibilities are not compatible with neatly constructed matrices, and yet they are not invited to imagine something else – they are, in fact, excluded from this process.

Non-Indigenous North American historian Robin Keeley and colleagues (2014) discuss the exclusion of young people from the decisions made for them. They are not seen as already participating members of society, but rather as incomplete adults in a developmental phase of ‘becoming’ valuable members of society, not whole beings in their own right (Nakata, S., 2018; Woodman and Wyn, 2015). Kelley et al. (2014) tell us that this framing of young people as without agency and in need of being spoken for further robs them of the opportunity to be seen and treated as whole humans. This framing imagines a construct of a young person, without the shades of complexity and agency that render them real.

First Nations young people are constructed and codified through a process of using crude caricatures that justify labels such as ‘at risk’ and ‘disengaged’ – as in need of protecting, or a danger to others. All the young people in this chapter were codified as ‘at risk’ and somewhere on the continuum of a theory of change that begins with ‘disengaged’ and ends with ‘engaged’. These caricatures demand specific performances that range between damaged and dysfunctional to exceptional – each caricature enacting a service response accordingly. Over the past three decades, research into youth resistance has grown and emerged as an area with interests that can simultaneously empower and disempower young people through the reproduction of social structures that frame young people along these coded lines – as at risk, in need of assistance or on a continuum of becoming a fully realised person – but not quite fully formed yet (Fine et al., 2014; Fox and Fine, 2013; Habib and Ward, 2019; Tuck, 2011; Woodman and Wyn, 2015; Wyn et al., 2019).

Youth services and youth programs, in particular, require codification of young people as damaged and in need of help through theories of change that allow youth services to ‘empower’ young people as the ultimate good (Tuck and Yang, 2013). Education and training services require the ‘exceptional’ codification that generally includes a young person overcoming some kind of adversity and progressing in an expected way, thanks to an intervention program. The logic of these programs is often that a First Nations young person is (1) destined for failure and (2) that this program can put them ‘on the right path’ and help them to overcome their default destiny. These frameworks imagine particular kinds of young people, with particular kinds of futures, in effect deciding ‘what is best’ without respect for the agency or desires of young people.

Like most youth services, the organisation administering the drop-in program and supporting the Outreach Workers coded young people at the first moment of interaction. The codes included ‘at risk’, ‘vulnerable’, ‘delinquent’ and/or ‘youth offender’. The process of coding young people according to specific behaviours can be used to mask acts of resistance and empowering moments of defiance (Scott et al., 2014:64) or to claim responsibility for helping a young person overcome afflictions associated with being marginalised. The stories of young people in this chapter show that this coding occurs through problematising or making invisible normal acts of young people – like wanting to maintain dignity and preserve wellbeing by not engaging with acts of racism and discrimination at school. The term ‘truant’ is used as a code that problematises a young person’s reasonable behaviour to a series of events with limited options for response. This problematisation of young people, and their behaviour, shifts the focus and blame from active systems of oppression that continue to marginalise and disempower young people (and especially First Nations young people through the ongoing practices of racism and discrimination), and places the emphasis on individuals as responsible for their own outcomes.

Breaking the system and changing the theories that underpin why and how it works are fundamental to shifting imagined possibilities for young people in the future. Being invisible in First Nations identity, while also hyper-visible and treated with suspicion, is a reality for many First Nations young people. This was an experience that echoed in interactions Nini described in the many different facets of her life. The experience of small transgressions of personhood and identity, having them denied or questioned, or told that she had to practise her Aboriginality (or not practise it) in a particular way, by her foster family, was one of many of the humiliations and destructive forces she had to deal with, as were the experiences of racism and discrimination at school. These experiences add up to a cumulative experience that is exhausting, frustrating and has impacts on an individual and collective level – on sense of identity, health and wellbeing, and a sense of justice. In Nini's description of her experience of being discouraged from exploring different elements of her identity, the pervasive extent of control can be seen. There is an echo of assimilation and a continuation of colonial practices evident in the account of religion versus culture. There is nowhere safe for Nini to be who she wants to be.

First Nations young people are targeted through policies and practices that diminish and isolate them, that grind down identity as a risk and not a strength (Chandler and Lalonde, 1998). These actions continue to result in over-representation of First Nations young people in youth justice settings (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022), higher rates of involvement with child protection services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021), and the consequences of low expectations and negative experiences in education systems that result in school push out (Tuck, 2011; Wilson, 2014; Productivity Commission, 2023) and limited possibilities and pathways to desirable futures (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). There is historical context for this treatment, it is not an accident, and there are metastasising outcomes of this on criminalisation and problematisation of First Nations young peoples today.

Resisting labels and codes can break down the expected ways of operating and interacting – and this resistance is a rather effective tool in creating some kind of change, however seemingly small it may be. This could be seen in Yira's refusal to engage with the service unless it was on her own terms, in her own space, or Malayar's resistance to our attempts to engage him in a conversation that framed his behaviour or ideas in a particular way. A breakdown in communication might be enough to stop repeated attempts to 'engage' young people in services and school, for example. Refusal, in this context – and in the context of the lives of young people we have met in this chapter – included actively removing oneself from places, such as school or youth services or court, which felt unsafe, unwelcome or unwanted. At the centre of refusal and resistance is some kind of desire, and, as Deleuze and Guattari theorise (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 1988; Goodchild, 1996; Tuck, 2010; Gao, 2013), desire is productive in its efforts to break things down, in order to achieve what it searches for – some kind of change.

Desire-based frameworks for engaging with young people

Young people do not fit neatly into the expectations held for them within youth service systems. Perhaps what is not seen, but in plain sight, is the expectations young people should have of these service systems, and what these service systems could be offering and providing. In the context of the drop-in program – the space we had provided might have seemed empty, but the absence had meaning. As with Nini, and other young people attending the drop-in program (or, more accurately, not regularly attending the drop-in program), when systems and services are not meeting their needs, and not providing them with adequate options, opting out is a valid choice. ‘Opting out’ is the opposite, in some circumstance, of disengagement. Or, possibly, the ultimate act of disengagement. It is an act of stepping outside the framework that does not suit or represent the needs of young people, where the futures and possibilities imagined for them are inadequate. When the theories of change that underpin our logic are unravelled and reveal a fabric made up of oppressive ideas that inhibit possibilities for First Nations futures, a break away from these theories is required. These breaks can be messy – chaotic even, and hard to read – and incompatible with the systems doing the reading.

Refusing frameworks that use engagement as an individual responsibility, central to a concept of change that has very limited imagination about the future possibilities for young people, is one way those deemed powerless can subvert systems and services. It is a way young people can protect themselves and maintain a level of sovereignty. These acts may not result in clear or specific outcomes along a linear theory of change, but perhaps they are being read wrongly.

What conceptual shift can be made to re-vision the hoped-for outcome here? Tuck's (2009) 'desire-based' framework is one offering that includes calling for a moratorium on damage-centred research, while new possibilities that centre Indigenous aspirations, histories, complexities and futures are imagined. Desire-based frameworks are inclusive of the complex personhood of First Nations young people, who must also live with the systems they refuse to be defined by. Tuck (2009:419) states, 'As a theoretical concept, desire interrupts the binary of reproduction versus resistance.'

In the specific setting described in this chapter, a desire-based framework is useful as a practical guide to frame considerations for engagement and development of programs that centre the desires and strengths of young people, their culture and identity. One of Tuck's (2009:423–4) three key points for action in constructing desire-based frameworks is to re-vision theories of change. Through an interrogation of the drop-in program and the youth service administering it, we were able to start re-visioning the theories of change that ultimately lead to the isolations and experiences of young people involved. When we move away from seeing young people as damaged, at risk and inevitably disengaged, and look towards what they identify as needed or desired areas of strength, we see resilience, survivance and possibilities.

Survivance in relation to desire includes envisioning the continuation of Indigenous cultures, knowledges and possibilities, and the synthesis of these with future hopes and dreams. Thinking of Nini's desire to engage with culture and knowledge through dancing and connecting with other First Nations young people, we see the possibilities for futures they desire and imagine for themselves. We never got to hear the desires

Yira had – the acts of refusal and resistance were still in motion, and perhaps she was still imagining her own possibilities too. In quoting Vizenor (1994:93), Tuck (2009:422) explains the ways in which survivance moves beyond concepts of merely surviving:

> Survivance, in my use of the word, means a native sense of presence, the motion of sovereignty and the will to resist dominance. Survivance is not just survival but also resistance, not heroic or tragic, but the tease of tradition, and my sense of survivance outwits dominance and victimry.

Using Vizenor's (1994) explanation of survivance, I imagine it as a reassertion of First Nations presence and a restoring of First Nations futurity. As Sana Nakata (2018:113) argues, First Nations children and young people are 'more than simply a problem to be solved… and can imagine things for the country's future'. First Nations young people are doing this work already in resisting limited pathways and ideas imposed upon them and expressing desire for futures that include the immeasurable possibilities of their whole selves. They are resisting and breaking down the systems and services that cannot comprehend them as more than a series of labels, or a point on a predetermined continuum on a theory of change. By refusing these narratives and breaking down systems that are not compatible with First Nations desires for the future, young people are creating space for other possibilities and other narratives of what it means to be a First Nations young person in an urban place.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the process of setting up a Koori youth drop-in program that sought to connect First Nations young people labelled as 'isolated' or 'disengaged' accessing youth services in the northern inner-city suburbs of Narrm. Engaging in critical self-reflection through the research process enabled me to consider the ways the five young people irregularly accessing the drop-in program were resisting and refusing what we, as youth service providers and as a researcher, were imagining for them. The theories of change being imposed provided inadequate and undesirable options for their futures. Actions of resistance and refusal – sometimes wrongly read as disengagement – are enactments of self-determination and dignity. With regard for understanding the ways that young people are expressing their connections to identity, culture and Indigeneity, a question emerges – how would First Nations young people like to express their identities? In the next chapter we meet a group of young people participating in an Arts Mentoring Program who are actively narrating their own possibilities and re-storying their connections to place, each other and their own concepts of identity, culture and belonging.

Chapter 5. Findings: The art of resisting, countering and re-storying

This chapter follows the tangling stories and counterstories of five participants of a First Nations Arts Mentoring Program, and the mentors, as they made art, teased each other, supported each other throughout the program. Sometimes it was easy to see the ways in which participants had disentangled stories imposed upon them from the stories they wanted to tell about themselves, and sometimes it was not clear at all. To assist in the disentangling process, this chapter uses the concept of 'counterstories' (Martinez, 2014) initially to examine the ways participants enacted resistance to colonial narratives of invisibility and passivity, refusing to be defined in deficit terms and disrupting the intrusions on the stories they made for themselves. Building on this concept, I introduce 're-storying' (Corntassel, 2009) as a more sovereign framing of the acts and relationships emerging throughout the program. The work of First Nations artist mentors in the program in cultural resurgence and intergenerational teaching and healing was an important backdrop to re-storying place and belonging for participants. Relationality (Dudgeon and Bray, 2019; Tynan, 2021; Wilson, 2008) is used to understand how these relationships, intergenerational teachings and this counterstorying is much more than resistance to colonial narratives: it is an act of resurgence and re-storying, of presencing original and ongoing connections to place, identity and belonging.

Countering assumptions of authenticity

Ginan and I met at a shopping centre near her house, finding each other inside one of the shopping centre entrances. We stopped at a café inside and sat at a table. Ginan and I had known each other for a while, so were generally comfortable around each other, but this day was slightly awkward as I placed my phone between us on the table to capture our conversation.

Ginan spoke about her experience growing up in Narrm – her connections to place, and to family and communities here. It was not easy – being from a large First Nations family was a source of strength and pride for Ginan but was not perceived as meaningful to non-Indigenous peers at school, who Ginan felt did not see the value in connections to place or each other. Ginan told me:

> I was facing a lot of racism at my old school… I guess even being bullied in the classroom by teachers who knew I'd been away on sorry business, but they would pick me out [in class] and ask about certain things [I had missed], and really put me on the spot…
>
> When I was facing all those things at school, I got institutionalised for it – sent to hospital, back and forth within the last few months of [my final years of school]… eventually they decided that I had to stay in a ward to keep myself safe. And while I was in there, one of the most effective methods of keeping me calm and actually reflecting on everything that was happening to me was by doing art. It was the first time that I sat down and just started using symbols that I'd heard or learnt, [and I] made

> a painting for the ward as well… they hung it up on the wall, and that was pretty good.

Ginan explained how she got through the rest of her schooling experience. She listed the many things she had since become involved in – arts programs, education programs, youth programs – not just as a participant, but often as a leader or mentor. Art had played an important role in her healing journey by connecting her to culture and expressing her identity. She told me about the ways she tried to make sure young people used art to express themselves, without having their identities questioned:

> last year… we did an art project with a school. And one of the artists (non-Indigenous) [facilitating the group], obviously she knew something about symbols and what symbols were from here, and what weren't – and one of the [symbols the artist knew about] was dots. And one of the students was using dots in her artwork, and she [the artist] goes, 'Oh, she's not allowed to do that!'
>
> I was straight up pretty annoyed (but at the same time I was impressed by her knowledge – the fact that she knows that dots aren't from here!) about her trying to deny someone who thinks that dots are part of their cultural identity and part of something that they think is theirs (even though they're not from the Northern Territory where dot painting is from), that's what they associate as part of their culture. And so I was like [to the artist], 'Even though it is a symbol that is used up north, it's part of who she thinks she is, and I'm not going to deprive her of that

> experience.’ And this [the artist] was a whitefulla – trying to take that away from her [the girl who was doing the painting].

As Ginan inferred, the expectation that a child involved in an art program at school should come equipped with ancestral knowledge about what kinds of art are appropriate to use and by whom would probably be considered a far reach in a non-Indigenous setting. It is after all the role of a school to provide education, but for First Nations young people, there are assumptions that this kind of knowledge is somehow inherent and, to an extent, that a lack of this knowledge is indicative of a lack of culture, connection or authenticity. In many of the stories of the young people who will shortly be introduced in this chapter, feelings of authenticity make themselves present relating to cultural and artistic knowledge, and feelings of not being enough, or not practising Indigeneity in correct and specific ways.

The above interaction of the young girl at school shows that she is about to be shamed for her lack of knowledge relating to the cultural appropriateness of specific art practices, but this is interrupted by Ginan’s desire to protect her from this experience. There are many interactions a First Nations young person might have throughout their days and weeks where stories filled with assumptions about knowledge, identity and authenticity are imposed, and there is no one to intervene (VicHealth, 2021) – what does this do to sense of self, and how are young people responding? Speaking to Ginan, a picture of resistance and resurgence emerged.

Ginan and I spoke more about artwork, non-Indigenous people’s expectations of ‘Aboriginal art’ and what she paints. Through her involvement in the arts mentoring program that is the subject of this chapter, Ginan had sold some of her artwork. Over the holiday period the arts mentoring program participants were invited to take part in a market stall selling some of their works printed on cards, cushions and bags. Participants of the program were able to talk directly with customers, explain their artwork and answer any questions people had, while also earning money for the work they sold. It was a good opportunity for participants to be part of the marketing side of their art, to get some experience and earn some money. But as Ginan explained to me, some of the assumptions and stereotypes about First Nations people that she and her peers had to contend with growing up made their way into the unfiltered conversations they had with potential customers. Ginan recounted one experience to me:

> There was a guy who was having trouble deciding on an artwork to get for his friend. And so he was going through the bags and the pillows and one of the ladies [with him] – he asked this lady for her opinion. And she goes, ‘Oh, this one – if you want it to look like it’s been done by an Aboriginal person, then you should get this one. Because that one doesn’t really look Aboriginal.’ And it was based on the fact that it had dots… I was just like… did I just hear that? I think my cheeks went red… my hands were scrunched up… It just shows that there’s too many situations where people [put] us into categories… Plenty of times they put us into this little category, if you don’t fit into it, then we’re not right.

The assumption in this interaction is clear for Ginan – there is an idea, a construction of what is 'Aboriginal', or what looks like it was created by a First Nations person, a construction of what a First Nations person is meant to look like, do and be, based on collections of stories and images that have been told over and over again. Instead of speaking to the actual people who had created the artwork in front of them, the potential buyers instead decided what 'looked' like a collection of ideas that constituted 'Aboriginal'. There was no room for a different story, or a clarification even of the story being played out. This story very clearly questioned personal identity and authenticity. It also loudly spoke to the entitlement of non-Indigenous peoples to at any time question and interrogate First Nations identities and authenticity.

The questioning of authenticity is not a new experience for Ginan, or her peers. Recounting these experiences of racism, prejudice and bullying – through this interaction and also while still at school – Ginan shared how deeply harmful and hurtful these ongoing encounters were – obviously damaging her health and wellbeing. These experiences are not unusual or one-off instances, but a constant grinding noise young people are negotiating (Priest et al., 2013; VicHealth, 2012, 2014, 2021; Walton et al., 2014). Racism is present all the time (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001) – it is embedded into the colonial institutions that govern this land. For First Nations young people seeking to creatively express elements of their identities, the additional scrutiny of 'authenticity' and uninformed and unfiltered public opinion about identity and belonging adds a layer of identity policing (see Chapter 1 for a description of this) that has very real impacts on health and wellbeing (Priest et al., 2011, 2013; Walton et al., 2014). But as Ginan spoke to these experiences, her refusal to accept these terms of ‘encounter’ was apparent. Ginan spoke of being targeted and bullied due to her Indigeneity, but also of having this questioned and undermined. She also articulated that practising her Indigeneity and culture was a source of strength that allowed her to build resilience and a desire to support others to do this too.

Founded in community and culture

In late 2015 I began discussions with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) about the programs it delivers to young people, and whether my research might align in some way with one or some of them. VACCA is the lead Aboriginal child and family services organisation in Victoria, with a primary focus on self-determination to support ‘culturally strong, safe and thriving Aboriginal communities’ (VACCA, 2022). Operating for more than 45 years, it is a community-controlled organisation providing support services for youth justice and for Aboriginal people experiencing family violence and homelessness, and emerged from a long and determined Aboriginal civil rights movement. VACCA is premised on Aboriginal people having the right to the care and custody of their own children, who are raised in community and culture (VACCA, 2022). Following many conversations and lots of generosity in the form of sharing information and time with me, I was invited to participate as a volunteer in the Arts Mentoring program.

The young people in this chapter shared their stories with me through my observation of their participation in the program (with consent) over the duration of the program. The stories show many different elements and interpretations of what it is like to be a First Nations young person living in Narrm. These stories are specific to the young people who shared them, though they may be relatable to many other young people too.

My involvement in the program included collection of data through ethnographic observation, focus groups and interviews with participants, where we discussed connection, belonging and identity, as well as the experience of participating in the program. My multiple roles were made explicit to participants. I felt participants were comfortable enough with my presence and with the mentors in the room to be able to choose not to participate in this research, or in the arts mentoring program, if they did not want to – and there were certainly times where this happened.

Some important things to note: the program has had several cohorts of participants over the years it has been operating – I have not listed the exact timeframe of the program in this chapter as the group of participants involved was small, and this could potentially make them identifiable to some people.[11] Names of participants have been changed to protect anonymity, though the names of some of the mentors, artists and the program manager, Sarah, have been retained with permission and respect for the important and ongoing work these individuals do and the opportunities provided for First Nations young people.

Contributors to this chapter

This chapter includes the following contributors as participants:

Mentors, artists and volunteers:

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11 As of 2023 the program is ongoing, however the discussion here refers to my period of involvement.

- Maree Clarke, arts mentor
- Aunt Emma Bamblett, arts mentor
- Sarah, program manager
- Miyan, program volunteer
- Victoria University workers: two staff members from Victoria University who volunteered their time to assist with enrolling and supporting program participants to complete a qualification while involved in arts mentoring.

Participants:

- Daku
- Ellin
- Ginan
- Ligie
- Minhi.

An arts mentoring program – intergenerational support, cultural learning and art

The focus of the Arts Mentoring Program is on 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 15 years and over who have an interest, talent and passion in the visual arts' (VACCA, 2018). The program encourages a small group of First Nations young people to explore different artistic techniques and expressions, while also providing a culturally safe space that is led by First Nations arts mentors and volunteers, and some non-Indigenous artists and volunteers. The program is not labelled an 'arts therapy' course. Its objectives are not related to specific therapeutic relationships with practitioners. Young people are recruited to participate through existing networks such as other VACCA programs and supports, referrals by other agencies and services, and through local schools.

Artist mentors Maree Clarke, Aunt Emma Bamblett and others worked to:

> support young people to develop their visual arts practice and techniques, create works and learn about Victorian Aboriginal arts and culture… [to link with] a network of Aboriginal practitioners, arts professionals… and cultural institutions such as the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre [to] provide further opportunities to gain knowledge and skills. (VACCA, 2018)

The program culminated in an exhibition of work by participants, where participants spoke at the opening night event and were available to speak with attendees and sell their work. The program partnered with Victoria University's Moondani Baluk Unit to integrate the learning outcomes into a Certificate in General Education, giving participants a qualification at the end of the program. There were further opportunities to continue arts practice for participants through an arts collective for young people to develop their portfolio of work and learn about the business of making and selling work.

Program structure

Each week the arts mentoring program progressed through a loose framework for participants. Sessions were usually instructed by First Nations artists and makers, with stories about different art being made and histories of place and connections embedded throughout the work produced. Some weeks included excursions to events or galleries, and near the end of the program there were sessions on presenting work, getting work ready for sale (including photographing and cataloguing it), putting together an exhibition, and installing and setting up the exhibition. Each session concluded with reflection time for participants to write in their journals for the week.

The first visit (for me) to the program involved arriving VACCA's office in the inner-northern suburb of Preston, on a cold and dark evening. The street was windy and strangely isolated given the busy main road. The glass sliding doors at the entrance to the building were locked. I called someone to be let in. Once inside, I walked through a typical open-plan office to a large meeting room. It did not look like an arts or a youth-focused space. The blue glow of a computer screen reflected on people's faces while a projector beamed images up onto a screen. The person speaking was Maree Clarke – a Mutti Mutti, Wamba Wamba, Yorta Yorta and Boonwurrung woman and wonderful artist, maker and educator, who describes her practice as:

> regenerating cultural practices, making people aware of… culture, and that we are a really strong culture, and that we haven't lost anything; [that] some of these practices have been laying dormant for a while… (Clarke, 2023)

Maree was sharing some of her work and talking about her inspiration – family stories, connections to place and international adventures she had been invited on to look at stolen items in museums. As my eyes adjusted to the light in the room, I could make out a familiar face – Ginan. She greeted me warmly. I settled into a position at the back, and could vaguely see perhaps three other young people among many older people. Maree was very open and low-key with the ways she described her art.

After the presentation we moved into another room to start on the artwork. Maree had some diamond-shaped plywood that would become shields. Daku – the only young man in the group – got to work sanding and smoothing the edges of one of the shields. Soon the air was filled with sawdust, and every surface covered in the fine particles. Ginan, Daku and Minhi – the other young woman participating in the program – laughed at the mess, and we all had a nervous giggle at the prospect of office staff coming back into the dusty space the next day.

As the participants in the room got to work, a satisfying buzz of activity enveloped us. Some participants listened carefully to instructions, while others were excited and exuberant, loud and messy. Although there was a little bit of hesitation, the overall feeling was of joy. At the end of the session we cleaned up the dusty mess. Maree told us about other work we would try over the next few weeks – painting, papier-mâché coolamons[12] and clay jewellery. An assortment of art materials were packed away in several large plastic tubs, which we stacked in the corner of the meeting room. Journals (part of the Victoria University assignment) were handed out to each participant to fill out, capturing their reflections on the session.

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[12] Coolamons are usually made from bark and have many different uses – from carrying and storing food and water, or containing fire, to being the first cradle for a baby.

Over the following weeks the group of five participants settled into the rhythm of the program. The group was made up of four young women – Ginan, Minhi, Ellin and Ligie – and one young man, Daku. Several artists and speakers were involved in the program, and before I began the group, it had visited some galleries and shows. The main artists involved with the participants most weeks were Maree and Aunt Emma, a Wemba Wemba, Gunditjmara, Ngandjonji and Taungurung woman, and accomplished artist, who uses storytelling in her work. The two women from Victoria University regularly attended and became part of the joy and support of the group, as well as the various members of family and foster carers who sometimes attended too.

The different life experiences and circumstances of participants revealed themselves through interactions and stories shared over the weeks of the program. Some participants already had a strong interest in art, some felt very connected to their culture or cultural identity, and some did not seem that interested in art, or cultural identity, or seemed to express some discomfort in their level of connection to culture and identity. The dynamics of the group meant that participants shared experiences with each other, and generally were treated with respect – though there were some notable occasions when this was not the case between participants, and when unspoken rules and boundaries about how to 'perform Indigeneity' were exerted.

Here, we meet the participants of the group and learn a little bit about them and their dynamics together. We have already met Ginan at the start of this chapter, but in this group setting, Ginan was an active participant – producing lots of work, listening respectfully to the mentors, and sharing stories about her work, her life and ideas she had along the way. She was one of the older members of the group, and there was a lot of respect for her in the room. Her reflections on things were always listened to – when she opened her mouth to speak, the room fell quiet, but she never wielded power or exerted control over the group. She was gentle and kind with other participants, offering advice or suggestions when asked.

Minhi was the youngest member of the group and was very quiet throughout sessions. She would answer questions when asked directly, but rarely offered anything unprompted. She was involved in all the activities and was a willing participant in learning new techniques. Being the youngest member of the group meant she was looked after and considered in the group – people were conscious of protecting her from anything inappropriate or unpleasant. She usually sat next to one of the mentors or an adult family member if they were in attendance.

Ligie was friendly, quirky and fun. She seemed outgoing the first time we met and was happy to talk about her artwork and the various things she was interested in. She was already very involved in producing art and was pursuing this in several ways in her life. Like many other young people participating in the program and this research, Ligie had been in the foster care system from a young age and had grown up with a white foster family away from her family and off her ancestral Country.

Ligie's involvement in the program seemed to not always be easy for her, or for the group. Her art was a creative outlet that she did not seem (from the ways she responded to questions about it) to want to connect to her cultural identity. Discussing culture or cultural identity was a challenge – she was very specific about how she wanted to have these conversations. She would find ways to make sure conversations or lines of questioning ended if she felt uncomfortable; she often used a distraction or disruption – background noise, laughter, music or anything that could serve as a break at the right moment. Ligie operated on her own axis, in terms of her interactions with adults in her life, and resistance was a strong element of who she was. She regularly disrupted the flow of the group through talking loudly or making big messes with art material – and seemed to be aware of what she was doing when this happened. She was a close friend to Ellin and Ginan and was always kind to the other participants in the group, but not always to the adults in the room.

The one young man in the group, Daku, did not really like art. He was a little shy, but funny and delightful as he became more comfortable. He was not living with his immediate family, and his contact with his extended family was through phone calls and at community events. At first it was hard to understand why he started to, and continued to, attend the group – his reluctance to be creative and freely express ideas about artwork would become an impenetrable wall the more he was pushed. Despite this, he was very respectful towards everyone, especially the mentors. Each week he insisted on finding the right music to play for the group and would plug his phone (with a very smashed screen) into the stereo in the corner of the room and sit just out of the line of sight of the table, on a beanbag on the floor in the corner, gently defying the group structure and expectations. Over time it became apparent that he wanted to be with the group for the social element – even if it meant participating in art. It was clear that his confidence around art was low. In the interactions he had with mentors, his head would dip, his voice would become low – he would do as he was told, but it was a struggle. He was happy to be involved generally in activities, such as sanding the shields, but when it came to putting his own ideas into action, he would shrink back and try to become invisible.

Miyan, a volunteer who was closer in age to the participants than any of the other staff or artists, was good at encouraging Daku to work on things. She gently asked him questions and helped with his painting. They would sit side by side at the table, and she would get him to elaborate on what he was working on or do a little bit more on something. She would build on his concepts and encourage him to keep going. Sometimes, when the feeling of the group was comfortable and jovial, Daku would tell us stories of his life outside the group – what he had been up to, which family members were visiting. The members of the group knew what was happening in the community on weekends, what they could get involved in, and knew people in common. Mostly they knew their connections to each other through family and kinship, or through friendship networks.

The dynamic of the group was cohesive – there was a bit of teasing, occasional flirting and definitely gossiping about personal lives. There was also care and tenderness – members would ask what was going on in people's lives and listen empathetically when challenges or hardships were raised. Ellin was living in out-of-home-care, as were her siblings. They regularly caught up and saw each other and stayed connected in each other's lives. She spoke proudly of them. She was away a lot – travelling for sorry business or having health troubles of her own. Despite this, Ellin's artwork was prolific. She was always painting and drawing. Each week her collection of work grew and grew and was very distinctive – using the same colours, similar patterns and designs. Ellin produced more work than any other member of the group. She seemed confident in her artwork and was one of the most self-assured young people in the group when it came to knowledge of her culture, identity and belonging.

Ellin seemed disinterested in any investigations I tried to make relating to art and culture, and attributing connections between these things to the program. Some of this disinterest was a resistance to the questions I was asking – she seemed to want to make it clear to me that her artwork was her creative expression, which was different to her cultural identity. Though many members of the group spoke about the process of learning more about culture and more about themselves through their arts practice, Ellin was clear in asserting this was not her experience – she already had the knowledge.

Ellin would tease people in the group gently, though she teased Daku a lot more and really picked up on his hesitance and self-consciousness relating to art. She made fun of him for learning about his culture through a book. This teasing and asserting particular ways of exhibiting knowledge about culture and identity was her specific way of teaching others (especially Daku) in the group about appropriate ways of being First Nations. It did not seem to be intentionally mean, but her confidence in her cultural knowledge seemed to be a barrier for her to see that some young people felt less connected to community or cultural identity – even through this line of questioning and teasing was profoundly confidence-shaking.

The program became a cohesive place where participants would gather, connect, share and create. The mentors, volunteers and other adults involved would dip in and out, orbiting around the production of works. There were moments of tension and resistance, and occasional conflict, but mostly the space was a place of resolution and harmony.

Resistance and the art of storytelling

As the weeks went by, more paintings, jewellery and shields accumulated. The room, still meant to serve as a meeting space during business hours, began to resemble a creative storage room, with clear plastic boxes of art supplies stacked one on top of the other in a large tower in the corner, and the paintings and shields lining the wall of windows on one side of the room. The bookshelves slowly become display cabinets, and earrings and necklaces sat atop every spare centimetre of window ledge and bench. The visibility of the art works began to change the space, making young people more present in the office environment.

Each week as we sat around the table and made things with our hands, stories would flow. People talked about what designs meant, where they were from, family stories, what people had been up to during the week, and who was visiting and who was unwell, and they told funny stories about family members in common, and big and small injustices were lamented. In this space there were always lessons going on – demonstrations and remonstrations of how (not) to do things, stories with hidden messages and interactions with subtle corrections. There was generally a lot of patience – an always-listening ear if things needed to be spoken about, a hand always ready to help if someone needed it. The design and set up of the group allowed for regular intergenerational and cultural education to happen in ways that were not forced or structured. There was just space to be had, or held, in ways that facilitated lots of meaningful interactions.

Part of the safety of the group was the knowledge, grace and gentle teachings offered by the mentors of the program. They were respectful of the participants, acknowledging their skills and work, and provided guidance around how to engage in particular art practices, as well as appropriate ways to behave, how to listen and how to push past ideas of shame and feelings of inadequacy. This was done by encouraging participants to keep going or to try something new, and by sharing stories of vulnerability or ways they had learned about certain practices. Aunt Emma shared a story one week about coming to art as a healing practice when she was struggling with mental health. As she spoke, the participants listened attentively, but kept their eyes down and on the work they were doing – busily making art. The vulnerability of the story made the group feel trusted and strengthened the relationships between the members.

For several weeks in a row Maree provided advice and guidance on how to produce certain artworks. She spoke about her strict veganism, and that she collected only deceased animals to use their teeth, fur, feathers, bones or sinew for producing her art. She knew how to prepare a deceased echidna to remove its quills. Her partner had the right amount of strength for removing the teeth from a dead kangaroo using plyers, or to collect sinew from legs to make the long cord for necklaces, or to stitch possum skins together. She held immense knowledge about using many different parts of animals to make cultural work. We inspected quills from echidnas, kangaroo teeth and eagle feathers she brought in to show us. She spoke about the ways these animals could be honoured, and the objects collected could be used, sewn together or bound, and about the kinds of materials needed and different techniques she learnt from her research in Narrm and overseas. She was so generous with her knowledge, and kind and humble considering her substantial expertise. She also showed us that making and creating her work was cultural, dynamic and intellectual – she was continuing cultural practices, regenerating knowledge, reviving methods and learning new ways of doing things all the time. Her involvement in the arts mentoring program was all about sharing and teaching this knowledge and ensuring its continuation to future generations.

One week Maree showed us how to make coolamons. These were not being constructed by collecting the bark and wood from living trees, but instead from sheets of plaster, using a heavy wooden coolamon as a guide for shape and size. We covered the wooden coolamon in plastic wrap, layer after layer. Maree placed a large container of water in front of the coolamon and began putting sheets of plaster in the water. She demonstrated how to gently lay the material onto the existing coolamon and then smoothed over it with her hands, overlapping each layer, adding a bit of water as needed. She made space and indicated someone should have a go – Minhi got up and smoothed a layer on, wrinkling up her nose – 'It feels weird!' Once the coolamon was covered, Maree put it to the side for about half an hour. By the end of the session the hard plaster shell was ready to be removed from the coolamon. 'Next week we'll trim and sand the edges and make it a bit smoother all over', Maree told us, using her hands to show what she meant as she spoke. The shell was placed upside-down on a bookshelf in the corner of the room, ready for the following week.

Disrupting the story

Ligie did not engage much with the work Maree presented. She did not make a coolamon or any jewellery. Instead, she focused on drawing and painting. She knew what she liked and what her talents were. She seemed to be confident in her artistic abilities but challenged by any attempts to shape or direct what she was doing in relation to culture or cultural knowledge, or other people's expectations and impositions about what 'culture' might be. Ligie used technology to make some of her art, and the discussion of 'Aboriginal art' seemed to ruffle her – it was not a label she wanted. The program staff seemed aware of this discomfort and would steer conversations away from this most of the time, but occasionally they would challenge her about what 'Aboriginal art' meant to her.

One week I was shocked as I watched Ligie take a big brush loaded with paint and thickly apply it over the top of a nearly finished painting. The painting was beautiful – full of detail and quite impressive. She quickly covered the work in white paint and shrugged off noises of surprise and protest coming from other participants and mentors. It was not the first time I had seen her start a painting again – but it was the most finished painting I had seen her do it to. When one of the mentors asked her about it, she said she did not like it and began talking about something else. This diversion of the conversation was something Ligie used if she was asked about what she was working on, or what a specific picture meant. She would often look for an opportunity for distraction. This sometimes meant making huge messes, distracting other participants of the group, suddenly wanting to change the music that was playing, anything that meant she did not have to respond. Ligie had particular stories she wanted to tell, in particular ways, but there were lots of things she did not want to talk about. This tension between expression and silence was obviously a heavy burden that Ligie was doing her best to navigate. But sometimes it built up and the internal tension would spill over into the group. People quietly continued their artwork for the rest of the session, looking at each other but saying nothing about what had just happened.

A few sessions later I asked Ellin about what she had been getting from the arts mentoring program, and if she felt like she was learning more about culture. She seemed slightly irritated by this question but answered respectfully with her own counterstory:

> I’ve always been really connected to my culture and my art stuff. I guess I learnt about other people, being inspired by their art, and seeing their personality transferred on to a new work, and yeah, that’s pretty much what I learnt. (Ellin)

There was a piece of art she had been working on over a few weeks, it was obviously special. I asked her about it. She was happy to respond to my questions broadly but seemed reluctant to go into specifics. It was clearly a meaningful and deeply personal painting. Ligie sensed Ellin's reluctance to talk about the painting, so answered my first question about what the painting was about:

> For one, it makes you feel alive… (Ligie)

Ellin then went into a bit more detail:

> well – I dunno. It's like… you know when you go into hospital, and you are on a lifeline thing? – yeah it's like that. It's like… I dunno how to explain it… I pretty much been in hospital a lot in my life. Not just with me, with my mum too. Yeah so… (Ellin)

She trailed off and I thought she was about to tell me something else, but she did not. In the quiet following the end of this interaction I felt a lot was said about the story the art was telling. There is much more to Ellin's story – her reluctance to speak about it and her desire to let her art speak instead is being respected here. We do not need to know more for the purpose of this chapter, although we might crave it. The picture was painted over a black background and there was a painted heart shape blending into ECG (electrocardiogram) lines, using Ellin's favourite colour palette.

I asked about how she sought inspiration for different artworks.

> To be perfectly honest, I draw and paint when I'm pissed off – like when I'm in a bad mood. (Ellin)

She totally resisted any line of questioning about art being a way of learning about or expressing culture. When I asked about what she had learned through the program she came back to specific techniques, and again asserted that she was learning about art as a practice.

Restoring the story

The following week we were back with the coolamons – Maree showed how to trim the edges of one of the shells to make it even and how to sand the inside and outside to make it smooth and ready to paint. Little bits of plaster dust collected on the table as the surface of the emerging coolamon was smoothed. People got to work sanding and smoothing, preparing the shells for painting.

Two members of the group did not participate in making coolamons – Ligie, who was away and did not seem very interested in coolamons when she was around, and Daku. As the other participants of the group got busy making coolamons, Daku started working on another piece of art, tracing a picture of an animal from a book, but making great attempts to conceal what he was doing from the group. It was clear he was struggling with his confidence. Version after version of what he was doing went into the bin. He seemed frustrated.

More coolamons appeared on the bookshelves in the meeting room. First the colour of white eggshells and then, as they began to be painted, an assortment of colours and patterns very identifiable to the young women who had claimed them. After a few weeks all but one had disappeared home with participants, to be completed for the exhibition.

Someone asked Daku about the picture of the animal he drew. He looked at the ground as he quietly told us that the picture was of his totem. Ellin piped up: ‘Wait. What? I thought you said your totem was [something else]?’ Daku flashed his characteristic cheeky smile but it was clear he was really embarrassed. At the start of the program he had told the group what he thought his totem was, but now, he muttered, a relative had told him over the phone about his totem when he asked about it, and it turned out he was wrong. There was some giggling by the young women in the group and teasing of Daku. I was a bit surprised by how harshly some of the young women were making fun of him – especially Ellin, who seemed to really enjoy ripping into him about this. Miyan frowned at Ellin about this and tutted. She made it clear that this was not something to make fun of each other about.

This was a place of discomfort – a tension in knowledge, connection and access. Daku and Ellin had some similarities in their circumstances, but Ellin was a little older and much more self-assured. She was connected to her siblings, whereas Daku was not. He was working to understand his story and to connect the pieces of his family, place, culture and identity. This was work he was actively doing. It did not seem like Ellin was trying to hurt Daku intentionally, but she seemed comfortable with her own story, her place and connections. Some of the work she did in this interaction seemed to be about teaching Daku about place, and appropriate expression of identity. Knowing before doing was important to make sure you have the right story the right way, even though for many young people disconnected from family and community this process can be extremely challenging and emotionally fraught. The experience of the interaction and the intent of the interaction seemed to be mismatched here, and so the story is hard to untangle. Despite this uneasy interaction, the group cohesion did not seem to be impacted and participants were able to navigate around these interactions and past them.

Each of the participants were juggling their own challenges and struggles in different ways outside of the program. For several weeks in a row Ellin was absent because she had been admitted to hospital. Daku missed some weeks when he was trying to make more connections with his family.

One afternoon as I entered the building to head up to the program, Ligie came storming out of the lift. She looked really angry, like she had just been in a fight. ‘Are you okay?’ I asked as she thundered past me. She paused for a second and made eye contact with me, giving me a sad smile before continuing out of the building. She never came back to the program. The other participants did not say anything about her departure. Speaking to one of the staff members about what had happened, they told me they had seen building tension and simmering conflict. The group had obviously provided some relief from some of the things happening outside for a while for Ligie, but the boundaries could not be maintained and the challenges she was experiencing spilled into the space – her own struggles with identity and belonging were no longer helpfully expressed through art during the program, or held at bay by it. The program had become a place of discomfort, and the mentors and program staff were on the receiving end of these feelings.

This departure from the program did not stop the friendships Ligie had with other participants – these continued beyond the group, in many cases they preceded it. But there was a shift in the program – it is hard to say if it was related to Ligie or not. It may have been a natural progression of the program as it drew closer to its end. The way the group shifted and adapted to the absence and presence of different members made a space that was generally inviting and accepting of the people who came through the doors each week. The last coolamon shell was taken home to be painted, and there was a bit of a drop off in attendance at the program. Having the opportunity to continue working on art at home seemed to be a way to maintain a connection to the group, even if participants could not physically attend. Each week we would hear snippets and updates about how each participant was doing, including hospital visits, sorry business and family requirements. But the ecology of the group had evolved to be a supportive community taking care of its members and nurturing them through tough times.

The (nervous) energy of renewal

The end of the program saw a frenzy of activity. New mentors and staff came in to help participants with developing their work and finishing it for the exhibition. There was discussion about what would be displayed and how some work might be used to produce merchandise that could be printed on tote bags, cards and cushion covers, and sold at the exhibition. Participants began to be prepared on how to market their work and talk to people at the exhibition. Work was photographed and the young participants were involved in creating a catalogue for the exhibition.

The day of the exhibition we met early at the gallery for a final inspection of the space and to go over the order of events for the evening. It was already hot, being late in the year. There was a twitching nervous energy buzzing through the gallery space. A photographer walked around the space taking photos of the layout and work on display. We settled into a circle in one corner of the gallery, slowly all coming to sit on the floor facing each other, with notebooks for writing down ideas about what people might say for the opening. I asked if we could reflect on the program a bit and think about what we had all gotten out of it. There were some nods and agreement, all tinged with anxiety.

Miyan started by telling the group how proud she was of them – and the photographer piped up in the background, agreeing as he walked around, and told them it looked amazing, and it really did.

> Yeah, I guess, like we already knew who we were, but it unravelled bits and pieces for us, like the tribes, totems… (Ellin)

This was a dig at Daku and there was a bit of giggling. He rolled his eyes and grinned. Miyan tutted. We moved on.

Ginan offered her reflections:

> Yeah, like we just learnt more about who we were even though we already knew that we were Aboriginal, I was like, there was more to being Aboriginal than just the word…

Ellin considered this for a moment before adding:

> I guess we all came in with, like, our own knowledge on what we thought Aboriginal art was, and then went on, like… well, what am I gonna put on the paper?

I wondered if this was a concession to Daku – an acknowledgement that people are all at different stages of knowing who they are, where they fit, where they are from, and with their own experiences and confidence around how to express that. Before I had a chance to ask more about this, Ginan added:

> And once we all learnt a bit more about art, it all varied between different people, and their knowledge of what Aboriginal art was, and so their art is like different because their knowledge varied, and they've seen different types of art. It's not just one mob, it's many, and that is something that everyone is influenced by… I went back home, and I looked at different art from where I'm from, and… back on traditional symbols… I looked at possum skin cloaks, and I used some of them in my art. Every symbol I used in my art, I based it on where I am from and, like, those symbols are something new that I found out, which was kind of prompted through the program

The group continued chatting for a bit, but it was clear everyone was feeling a bit nervous about the impending exhibition, so I stopped probing with questions, thanked them all and moved out of the way as they prepared for the opening a couple of hours away.

Revitalisation as remedy

The program was always about much more than producing specific art or learning specific techniques – every session included storytelling, cultural practice, intergenerational teaching and forging connections. The relationships between participants, mentors, staff and practices were constantly working to create spaces of safety and joy.

Leanne Simpson (2011) writes about the practice of revitalisation and resurgence, and cultural renewal, and how these practices are a remedy to shame. For me, reflecting on Simpson's conceptualisation of how revitalisation counters shame, it seems that involvement in the program offered these practices – of cultural renewal through the intergenerational teachings of the mentors, and the interactions between the participants of the group, as a way forward in arts practice and cultural knowledge. The program was also the setting for telling a different kind of story.

When I first began spending time with the arts mentoring group I sensed from some members of the group resistance to any perceived impositions or ideas about how participants might produce art, or why they might be there in the first place. It was sometimes hard to see what was going on, such as when Ligie was not very respectful towards more established artists or when Ellin resisted my questions about what she was learning through the program – these instances felt charged, on the brink of something. From their own experiences and interactions, participants were resisting and reframing the external influencing and positioning of their lives. When they felt or heard that there was a story emerging that did not reflect their experiences or understandings, they resisted, using various techniques to achieve this – reluctance, refusal, resistance and the offering a different story, such as Ellin's assertion that painting and drawing was a way for her to decompress, not a way to express her culture or identity as a First Nations person. This is not to say that this (re)action was brought about by the program but, rather, it became apparent as the group progressed and participants became more comfortable in expressing themselves.

Disconnection resulting from settler colonial policies has a ripple effect throughout First Nations communities. It is perpetuated in the continuous narrative constructed about First Nations non-belonging in urban places. For some of the participants, the production of art relating to expressions of culture and identity was extremely challenging. The specific background and life circumstances of young participants attempting to navigate this were clear intersecting factors. Disconnection from family and place is extremely traumatic. Not all participants of the program had been disconnected from their families, but all knew the ongoing intergenerational trauma of the violence of colonisation, and the impacts this specifically has for First Nations communities in Victoria.[13]

There is a growing body of research connecting trauma with shame, and especially trauma experienced by First Nations people resulting from colonisation (Chamberlain et al., 2020; Dolezal and Gibson, 2022; Gee, 2016; Gee et al., 2023). The intergenerational effects of colonisation change over time[14], but continue to impact physical, psychological and spiritual health and wellbeing. Shame and feelings of inadequacy for not knowing more about language, connection, history and relationships across communities are the result of colonial practices of cultural destruction and assimilation. This shame has dimensions that may be recognisable across groups, but are also specific – shame has specific meaning in First Nations contexts:

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[13] Research shows that First Nations communities in Victoria have experienced large-scale collective trauma associated with the structural violence and oppression stemming from colonisation (Gee et al., 2023). Cultural determinants and resilience and recovery factors are associated with trauma among Aboriginal help-seeking clients from an Aboriginal community-controlled counselling service (Gee et al., 2023).

> Shame traps us individually and collectively into the victimry of the colonial assault, and travels through the generations, accumulating and manifesting itself in new and more insidious ways in each re-generation. (Simpson, L., 2011:19)

Shame is the extreme discomfort of being singled out, seen as not holding cultural knowledge, or doing things culturally the wrong way or being disapproved of. Shame has specific meaning in First Nation contexts, and in its linguistic use in Aboriginal English, around embarrassment, discomfort, shyness and many more emotions beyond this (Hamilton et al., 2016; Harkins, 1990). What I mean by shame is feelings of guilt and inadequacy, feeling as though there is something to cover up – specifically a deficit. For Daku, shame was in the hiding of his attempts to draw his totem – literally covering it with his hands as he drew and scrunching up pieces of paper in his quest to perfect something he felt ashamed of not knowing. His feeling of shame was the deficit – but the shame was not his fault.

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[14] Jeff Corntassel names this changing structure of settler colonisation as ‘shape-shifting colonial entities’ (2012:88)

For this generation of young people, shame is not specifically related to being First Nations, unlike the ways in which previous generations were told to loath and hide their Indigeneity (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023; National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families et al., 1997). The shame discussed here is associated with feelings of not knowing enough, which include not being connected enough to culture, family and community; not living on or visiting Country enough; or not being First Nations enough, or in the right ways, whatever they are perceived to be. This is very present in the emerging stories of Daku and Ligie. Ligie's shame might have been disguised with distractions and avoidance, instead of hands over paper, but it was there. She did not screw up pieces of paper, but she painted over canvases again and again, and avoided questions relating to connecting her art to her identity as a First Nations person. There was also a degree of not wanting to be associated with this deficit of knowledge – and of fighting it, such as in Ellin's case – of wanting to be seen to know culture and to be assured in this knowledge, and not be searching for it in an arts mentoring program.

Ellin's resistance to the shame of not knowing and her desire to exhibit strength could be read as pride and a continuing act of resurgence. It also presented in a way that seemed to be read by others as challenging to the work they were doing to restore their connections to elements of cultural identity. Of course, shame is also directly connected and interconnected with the shame that was felt and forced on previous generations. Shame is present and makes itself felt in different ways. The arts mentoring group was brought together through a shared sense of pride in identity and purpose, but it was also constantly challenged and conflicted by shame, by feeling and not wanting to feel shame, and by causing others to feel shame deliberately or inadvertently – like making fun of Daku for not knowing his totem or asserting that making art was not about learning about culture.

Feelings of shame relating to Indigeneity are not isolated to this continent – they are also present in other colonised nations. Simpson (2011:15) acknowledges feelings of conflict and shame relating to the humiliation of colonisation and ongoing dispossession, and feelings that her ancestors did 'not do enough' to fight and resist these regimes, while also feeling grateful for all that her ancestors did in order to keep and continue language, culture and connection to identity in the face of extreme adversity and attempted genocide. Simpson (2011:15) realises that 'shame can only take hold when we are disconnected from the stories of resistance within our own families and communities'. The participants of the arts mentoring program were contributing to knowing these resistance stories; for some, like Ginan, by learning about the different stories and meaning behind symbols etched into possum skins, and for others, like Ellin, by asserting her power in knowledge of these stories.

To counter this shame, Simpson (2011:16) discusses in her book *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* her efforts to chase the stories of resistance within her family and communities, and to pass them on to the next generations, to teach them that 'We have nothing to be ashamed of.' The work Maree does in chasing the stories of making and creating culturally affirming objects, creating art, and reviving and reawakening knowledge that connects her and her ancestors to place is restoring the stories of connection, place, history and presence. Maree's generous sharing and passing on of knowledge through her practice and stories is continuing cultural practices that centre First Nations presence, ways of knowing and being.

Conceptualising resistance, counterstories and re-storying

The focus on the stories shared by participants in this thesis, in the way of reframing conversations and interactions in the context of this program, really begins with an attempt to understand what is happening in the interactions participants are having – with art, with mentors, with each other, with me as a researcher and with their sense of identity and self. Coming to the program as a participant, a mentor or a volunteer, the people that formed this cohort of the program all held multiple sites of identity and belonging, but one thing that united us was the experience of being urban-dwelling First Nations people.

The art young people were producing through the program could also be seen as an opportunity to present counterstories or, beyond that, to start at the beginning and present a story they wanted to tell about themselves. Counterstory, or counter-narrative, has emerged as a concept through critical race theory as a way to examine how marginalised groups create space and tell stories that exist beyond the dominant narrative and experience (Bell, D. A., 1980; Bell and Roberts, 2010; Delgado, 1989; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Martinez, 2014). Speaking from her experience on a project with Noongar Elders in Western Australia, non-Indigenous academic Amy Quayle (2017:85) notes that counterstories are:

> important not only for Indigenous peoples in their own healing and processes of cultural maintenance and renewal, but also because these stories can be mobilised to counter the silencing of histories of dispossession and the connections between past and present lived realities.

Counterstory was a useful framework for understanding what it was participants were saying and doing, and to see the actions being taken and the agency of young people in finding tools to reframe the ways they were seen, represented and engaged with.

Stories are particularly powerful tools of engagement as they can be carried, shared and created without material wealth, and provide connections across time and generations that bind communities together. In community-based arts projects counterstories have been used as a resistance to dominant stories of systemic oppression (Bell and Roberts, 2010). Bell uses the term 'stock stories' to refer to these dominant narratives and uses several other kinds of story to assist in understanding what is happening in resisting these stories and building/maintaining counterstories: these include concealed stories, which are hidden from the mainstream by marginalised groups; resistance stories that show the ways groups resist the dominating efforts of colonisation and actively fight against this; and emerging/transforming stories, which challenge stock stories and create new stories that 'interrupt the status quo and energize change' (Bell and Roberts, 2010:17–20).

Counterstories can be acts of cultural continuation that defy attempts of cultural genocide or erasure and can survive quietly and covertly, or loudly and defiantly.

For this chapter, the concept of counterstory captures much of the action being undertaken regularly by the participants of the arts mentoring program, such as Ligie's desire to burst out from the constraints she feels others are putting on her through their conceptualisation of her art as 'Aboriginal art', or Ellin's proud assertion of her cultural knowledge and strength in identity as separate from her desire to do artwork. The stories participants tell and the work they make continues this revitalisation and restoration of place, knowledge and presence. It counteracts the stock stories that have been told so often about urban place as non-Indigenous that they have seemingly become fact.

Through the incorporation of her own stories while making art in the program, Maree demonstrated her complex and authentic sites of identity to the participants of the group. She is an award-winning, internationally acclaimed artist, who is strongly connected to the Country of her ancestors and the communities of those places, and a skilled maker and revitaliser of culture, and many other things. It was all possible – one element of her identity did not negate the other or compromise them. She encouraged the young participants to understand their own stories, and the complexities and multiplicities of their identities.

Throughout the program, as I listened to Maree talk about her work and tell stories of her life, there was never any hint of shame. Not knowing something could be remedied by learning about it. The ongoing representation of pride in culture and in the hard work of learning your stories was a beautiful departure from the dominant narratives about First Nations people in urban places. This story was not just a response to those narratives – it existed beyond such a framework and was embedded in restoration and connection. The practice awakened the stories that were already present, spoke them out loud and demonstrated the possibilities for re-storying place and the multiple histories that reside within it.

Reflecting on Maree's practice, and the work of the participants in the program in asserting their knowledge or learning their stories, the concept of counterstory seems important, but not specific enough for the First Nations experience of place and belonging. These are continuations of the first stories of place and passing on of knowledge, connection and belonging. Beyond only countering stock stories that have a normative influence on erasing First Nations histories and presence, the specific actions First Nations young people are taking in this chapter, and every day, are not just a refusal that is agitating for change. Participants are re-storying place, belonging, connection and culture. Re-storying, in this context, builds upon the conceptualisation by Corntassel and colleagues (2009) of re-storying as a process of remembering and revitalising collective and individual consciousness, and offers active processes of engaging the past, present and future in place. Daku might not have participated happily all the time in art practice, but he was constantly engaging in relational processes, learning and connecting. These are acts of resurgence (Simpson, L., 2011) that continue stories that are already here, such as the continual survivance (Vizenor, 1994; Vizenor et al., 2014) of culture, not just as a response to the impacts of colonisation and oppression. Re-storying moves beyond responding to, or countering normative processes of erasure through settler colonial stock stories, and sees the work, like the actions of the participants in this program, as an active continuation of the stories always present in place. These stories are embedded in the origins of the people of this place – of creation from the start. This restoration of stories and relationships that recognise connections to this place as First Peoples is a re-storying process, that engages and invokes practices of relationality.

Relationality

Relationality is an important element of restoring story and place, or re-storying. It is a worldview informing connections to place, communities and landscapes and all of these across time. Relationality is a philosophy of interconnectedness (Campbell et al., 2020; Tynan, 2021; Wilson, 2008), it is all-encompassing and also very specific. It is at play in the dynamics within the group participating in the program, in the ways the group connects, disconnects, creates and maintains knowledge and practice – it is in the ways Aunt Emma recounts her experiences of coming to art as a healing practice, or in the ways Maree is awakening knowledge through practices that have been sleeping for generations due to colonial dispossession and control. It helps to hold some of the participants when they are struggling with various challenges – like Daku's desire for more knowledge of his family and culture – and it also is a jarring absence in instances where young people are not quite sure how they fit – such as Ligie's frustration within, and sudden departure from, the group. Re-storying centres relationality as a way of understanding where stories belong, and how experiences and practices of identity fit within this.

Place, art and the place of art in making community

As reflected in the story Ginan shared, questions of authenticity and validity relating to First Nations art are prevalent in other/broader (non-Indigenous) communities across Australia. Buried in these questions are assumptions and stereotypes relating to First Nations identities, and presumptions of a right to interrogate and question these identities. For young people who are hyper-vigilantly navigating social and cultural worlds, there are obvious parallels between art and what is considered ‘authentic’ ways of knowing and showing culture, what it means to be First Nations, and expectations surrounding the performance of these identities. These impositions and expectations form the standard intrusive stock-story narrative of what authentic First Nations identities are meant to look like. When young urban-dwelling First Nations people do not fit neatly into these categories, other stock-story narratives emerge about the disconnected or inauthentic or ‘hardly’ First Nations young person. It was clear that these narratives were familiar to the young people involved in this program – though responses to these narratives were rather different across the group.

For some members of the group, such as Ellin, there was resistance to attributing the program to increasing cultural knowledge or connection. Ellin and Ginan were already confident and secure in their relationships with cultural knowledge and identity. For other members, such as Ligie and Daku, this resistance seemed to relate to feelings that they could not ‘authentically’ represent cultural knowledge in their artwork, or that they did not want to, or that they struggled with feelings of shame around not knowing more about their culture and perhaps felt expectations that they should know more. For Ginan, the health and wellbeing impacts of damaging narratives and everyday racism she experienced outside the group meant that she had a clearer understanding of her own story, and that she had thoughtful considerations of her purpose for engaging with art and how it had led her on a journey to learn more about culture, arts practice and the healing that this was able to provide.

Participants responded in different ways to these conflicted experiences – sometimes through reluctance in their involvement in specific activities or the group, such as Ligie and Daku, sometimes in their reluctance to engage in specific conversations or lines of questioning, such as Ellin. This reluctance had several different effects – in this context it revealed underlying tensions in the group, which reordered the relationships and interactions taking place in the space. Sometimes reluctance turned into disruption – refusing the order and seeking a breaking point, either through the laying down of rules that may reveal the known but unspoken power dynamics in the room, or through specific conflict or pushing people to behave in particular ways.

Scott and colleagues (2014) consider disruption in the context of civil uprisings and the ways in which disruption often does not look or act the way we hope it might. Often disruption can appear unintelligible to the systems or forces it is seeking to resist. It does not have a neat agenda, strategy or structure that can be reasoned with. It is noncompliant. This makes it very difficult for power structures to settle or co-opt the disruption. As Scott and colleagues (2014:67) explain, disruptions ‘don’t give you much of a signal about what they want; except they signal what they hate…’ Resistance and disruption are related, perhaps at times even hard to distinguish from each other. Resistance is resistance, whether we agree with it or not, whether it achieves better outcomes or even the desired outcomes of progress or positive change (Scott et al., 2014). Sometimes resistance does not have a long-term goal, sometimes resistance is an outburst of suffering.

In the case of Ligie's expression of discomfort and a desire not to discuss certain things, disruption was a tool she could use that interrupted a particular kind of progress. For Ligie, art was familiar and comfortable– it was a source of expression and creativity. It was not something she seemed to want to be told how to do. It felt like an aspect of her life that she did not want connected to her Indigeneity. The final disruption of Ligie's exit from the group may not have been the happy ending we all hoped for, but it was an action Ligie took – an expression of resistance and power. A different kind of ending.

Re-storying belonging and building relationality

This chapter started with a story from Ginan about her experiences of racism and discrimination at school and day-to-day growing up in Narrm. These experiences impacted on her sense of identity and self-worth. Studies show that experiences of racism have significant impacts on physical and mental health (Priest et al., 2009, 2011, 2013; VicHealth, 2012; Zeirsch et al., 2011). In Australian contexts, racism and discrimination targeting First Nations peoples has many layers, including questioning identity, 'purity', 'authenticity' and 'claims' to Aboriginality.

For Ginan the experiences of discrimination and feelings of shame led to significant mental health and wellbeing distress. She found a sense of relief and resilience in the practice of art. Through this she was able to practise different elements of her cultural identity in a way that suited her. She was able to tell the stories she wanted to tell, on her own terms. This experience was challenged when she was again faced with non-Indigenous expectations of ‘proper’ cultural expression and knowledge – this time when a non-Indigenous artist questioned the arts practice of a First Nations young girl engaging in painting with symbols and styles that were presumed to not be connected to her cultural identity. The response Ginan had to this incident was one of refusal to accept the way that story would play out – she did not want that girl to experience shame around her perceived ‘authenticity’ in expressing herself. Ginan also spoke of her physical reaction to the prejudiced comments about art ‘looking’ Aboriginal while she was staffing the market stall.

There are clear contradictions between the perpetrators’ expectations of notions of Indigeneity in these stories; expecting that a child who is learning to paint should already know the history of art and cultural practice, and not be influenced by external impositions of what Aboriginal art is ‘meant’ to look like, and the expectation that Aboriginal art should ‘look’ a particular way in order for it to be considered ‘authentic’ and worthy of purchase. Art in these stories is proxy for First Nations identity/representation because this is what is questioned in these examples. Ginan’s response to these incidents was one of refusal and resistance, a disruption to status quo. She countered these presumptive stories by asserting a different story – one of resilience, of the continuation of cultural practice, of adaptation and dynamism. These counterstories place First Nations young people in charge of the telling, and the meaning making, restoring the teller’s position as central in the story and in restoring their sovereign status as continuing one of the longest enduring cultures in the world.

The role of art in this program and beyond in the lives of the young people participating was an important source of healing and connection. For Ginan, the influence of art in her self-expression and connection with culture and restoring health and wellbeing in her life was fundamental to her healing and sense of resilience. As some young participants insisted, this program was building on a set of skills and knowledges that already existed – in the participants themselves, and also in the context of the space/place of the group itself. When participants were unable to attend sessions there was a continuation of care and connection that kept them included. This was not an 'arts therapy' program (for a definition of 'arts therapy', see ANZACATA, 2019), but it tapped into and restored knowledge and action relating to knowing and learning stories that were already being enacted by young people, through their art, but also through their lives in other ways too.

The participants of this program were interested (to varying degrees) in the expression of their art and identity. The focus for some was learning about and connections to First Nations identities and knowledges. Just as with Maree's lessons about diverse and expansive possibilities for identity, the meaning young people derived from their involvement in the group, and its contribution to their understanding of their own First Nations status, shows that multiple truths can exist at once. The mentoring artists involved in the program were cultural knowledge holders with an interest in sharing their knowledge and connecting to the next generations. This program was the landscape for many practices of counterstory that moved beyond resistance and into re-storying relationality practices as belonging to place and to the culture and presence of First Nations people as always here and ongoing.

Re-storying urban place as Indigenous – the role of an arts mentoring program

The variety of experiences and diversity in expression of identity in the arts mentoring program became more obvious as the program progressed. Participants shared experiences of struggle and challenges of their identity, culture and sense of self. These experiences were not always spoken aloud, but they were present in the dynamics of the group and were apparent to me in my interpretations.

The participants had different ideas about the expression of different elements of their identities and they took on different roles in the room. This includes Ginan's role as the quiet but respectful leader with considered responses to questions and interactions. Ginan would take into account the different levels of confidence of other people in the room as she considered how to respond to things. Ligie engaged resistance in her expression of identity - findings ways to redirect conversations she was uncomfortable with. Daku was also exploring resistance in another way – in his struggles to engage with arts practice at different stages. The role of cultural moderator was sometimes employed too - correcting others when the ‘wrong’ kind of stories were being told, which could be seen in some of Ellin’s stance on the role of an arts mentoring program not being a way for her to learn about stories of culture. Participants offered counterstories when presented with something they did not recognise as their own experience – like Ellin’s perfectly honest responses to my questions.

The flexibility of the program to adapt to the circumstances and pace of participants allowed space for participants to self-direct the work they did, in their own time. It also meant that there was space for participants to interact and engage with each other and the mentors in the room, to ask questions, express curiosity and hear the stories being offered. Participants spoke about what was happening in their lives, the stories that were being told through their artwork and the learning they were actively seeking about their families, or their culture and Country. At times these stories bumped up against specific ideas about the ‘right’ ways to know culture, or things not meant to be talked about – such as Ellin and Daku’s interactions, or Ligie’s resistance to any direction or advice about work she was doing. The stories that began to emerge here were ones of building confidence, and the safety of the group allowed resistance and reluctance to be expressed and performed, and provided space for the expression of the counterstory and the emerging re-storying.

Although art was not always seen as a vessel for educating about culture, art could express different aspects of identity, including, but not limited to, culture. Young people resisted the imposition of ideas about what their art meant, or the predetermined concept that art was an expression of culture. For some young people, such as Daku, producing creative art was a source of uncertainty, and sometimes shame, as he felt exposed and unsure about his knowledge and abilities. What the program did offer was a network of friends who would (usually) support, encourage and give him time and attention. He had the chance to engage in conversations about cultural identity that were not always easy without a specific target or goal, such as producing artwork. Although Daku was connected to his family in a broader sense, being involved in the program gave him the opportunity to ask questions about who he was and where he had come from, and provided the structure to make sense of this.

As the group progressed over time the bonds and friendships made across the bounds of age and role seemed to ease most of the members of the group into a space of safety and comfort. It was the connections between people that afforded an increasing assertion of cultural knowledge – making way for participants to feel confident in their existing knowledge or prompting them to investigate new aspects of knowledge and relationships in their art. For some participants, this included delving into various elements of their identity, including culture, through their artworks. This flowed on from the dynamic and intellectual ways that mentors spoke about their own exploration of different artistic methods. The program facilitated this practice of relationality. The acts of resurgence and the hard work mentors put into their work were demonstrated through their skills and knowledge.

Maree and Aunt Emma's generosity and kindness was demonstrated through their active engagement with young people in making things and openly discussing the process of finding out about things they did not know. This may have been because knowledge was restricted/forbidden from being passed on, or asleep because of the impacts of colonisation. Neither mentor expressed any hint of shame about not knowing something, and demonstrated the ways they were actively pursuing knowledge and ongoing learning of practices and techniques. This had the effect of banishing any notion that not knowing was something to be ashamed of.

Vizenor's (1994:1) concept of survivance provides some clarity in considering the actions participants and mentors took – moving beyond resistance to colonial deficit narratives: 'survivance is an act of presence over absence… survivance is the continuation of stories, not merely a reaction…' What young people were doing here was not only resisting, which is worthy of note, but actively presencing themselves and their culture and connection to place and community, a re-storying of relationality and of place as always sovereign and Indigenous, and of people as belonging.

Conclusion

There are many ways to inhabit and express the multiple components of identities young people connect to, including where and when to do this. In everyday life for First Nations young people, settler colonialism continues in the shape of the structures, services and systems operating throughout this continent. This impacts the kinds of stories that are told and retold about First Nations peoples, and the ways relationships with the legal, educational, health and judicial systems are framed. But these are not the only stories – and responding to them is not the only action First Nations young people are taking. In this chapter I have explored the concept of 're-storying' and its relationships to counterstory. I have argued that participants of the arts mentoring group were engaging in acts of re-storying place and belonging through engaging in practices of relationality and resurgence. There are several threads connecting throughout the stories presented – of kinship, of respect, of defiance and of longing for place, certainty and safety. The contributors of this overall story also participated in making place and belonging through the arts mentoring program. This process is also one of presencing First Nations communities and practices – a restoring and re-storying of place and belonging.

This chapter is not a critique of art authenticity, or art therapy, or an evaluation of the effectiveness of an art program. It is an exploration of the ways that young people were engaging in cultural practices and creating their own ways of connecting to this, while overcoming histories and current experiences of shame and marginalisation and resisting the stories that get told about them and to them relating to their different sites of identity, or their sites of belonging. Through this resistance, in the setting of this arts mentoring program, there were acts of survivance and resurgence that contributed to the development of counterstories emerging from interactions and performances taking place throughout the program. Through these counterstories participants were re-storying their histories, connections and futures to place, to each other and to their arts practices.

In this chapter we saw participants respond with assertions of presence and sovereignty when met with categories they felt did not fit their ideas of their work (Ligie), their cultures (Ginan) and their identities (Ellin). They reframed questions (Ellin), repainted work (Ligie) and created new stories that made sense of their ideas and representation of themselves (Daku). They listened and watched intently to what they were being taught implicitly and explicitly (Minhi and Daku). In these actions survivance and resistance were present – participants were clearly able to identify when colonial narratives of deficit and erasure were present, resist this framing and reassert their stories of continuance, resurgence and adaptation of culture, knowledge and strength of identity – enacted in multiple ways such as through Ginan’s story of recovery and resilience in overcoming her experience of mental illness resulting from the discrimination and racism she experienced/s. Through these processes, stories of relationality and connections to place, space and each other are being formed, restored and re-storied.

In the next chapter we meet First Nations young people volunteering for a cultural support program for First Nations men incarcerated in a maximum-security prison.

Chapter 6. Findings: Presence as an antidote to injustice

This chapter discusses the experiences of First Nations young people volunteering for a cultural visitation program for First Nations men incarcerated in a maximum security prison. These young people, like the participants of the arts mentoring group in this chapter, are engaging in acts of re-storying and building relationality back into a place that is designed to strip the residents (inmates) of these connections. The use of art and culture is revisited, and the practice of engaging in ceremony and understanding what this means in strengthening connections to community and place is introduced and explored in order to understand the ways that young people are presencing their identities in places that desire their invisibility.

The setting of this chapter – a prison – is also always First Nations land. For young people in this chapter, the prison – a non-belonging place in many ways, is a site where belonging and responsibility, and the corporeal elements engaged through this are negotiated. But there are additional layers of culture, identity and community that are embedded within place that hold meaning and have a way of revealing themselves the more they are engaged with. Participants of this chapter engage with place, culture and community through the setting of a cultural support program for men in prison – and, through this work, build stronger connections to their identities and cultural practices through invoking ceremonial practices and the communities they belong to, create and imagine.

Building on the concepts of resistance and refusal discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the place of the prison also teaches the young people volunteering for the program about the systems they are participating in and resisting, and how to make sense of some of the refusals they witness. In this chapter I theorise the actions of volunteer participants as active ceremonial practices that presence Indigeneity and relationality. The involvement of volunteers in the program and its design and implementation also offers a glimpse of what desire-based frameworks (Tuck, 2009) can look like when working with young people to imagine a different kind of relationship with place, systems and possibilities for the re-storying future.

Contributors to this chapter and abbreviations

This chapter includes the following contributors as participants, and uses the following abbreviations and terms:

- **Indigenous Group of Learning (IGL) program –** the Indigenous Group of Learning was created through a need identified by First Nations inmates at the prison facility where the program started. The program was established and facilitated by several key individuals who helped facilitate access to the prison through their existing networks, shape the program, deal with the administrative requirements of working in a prison and recruit volunteers – who are the reason the program was a success. The program was a two-hour weekly session.
- **ALO** – Aboriginal Liaison Officer (at the prison).
- **Attendees** – inmates who attend the program, also referred to as ‘the men attending the program’.

- **Guards** – prison guards.
- **Prison staff** – front desk staff and others in non-guard roles, including people working for other programs and services in the prison.
- **Program co-founders** – two people who helped start the program.
- **Volunteers** – First Nations and non-Indigenous young people – enrolled students at the time of this project – volunteering their time and energy to run the weekly sessions.[15]
- **IGL Focus Group Participant** – First Nations young person volunteering for the program participating in a focus group activity.
- **IGL Interview Participant** – First Nations young person volunteering for the program participating in a one-on-one interview.

The Indigenous Group of Learning

In youth research, discussions of place often centre on the creation of settings and communities, framed around belonging (see, for example, Chen and Schweitzer, 2019; Habib and Ward (Eds.), 2019; Woodman and Wyn, 2015; Wyn et al., 2019). Although these discussions are important and relevant in the context of First Nations communities, especially people living off Country, such discussions are also limited in understanding that place is a relation too – Country holds meaning beyond what is created and here now, and relationships and responsibility hold across time and space.

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[15] The volunteers for the Indigenous Group of Learning included non-Indigenous and First Nations young people, but this chapter focuses on the experiences of the First Nations young people volunteering for the program, and data collection activities included in this chapter were specifically with these young people.

In a focus group session with the First Nations volunteers for the Indigenous Group of Learning program, the program name is discussed, as participants reflect on the first year of the program and where they would like it to go.

> What’s it called now? There’s been so many names… (IGL Focus Group Participant 1)
>
> Homework club? (IGL Focus Group Participant 2)
>
> Koori homework club? I dunno if we should have Koori in it, considering… (IGL Focus Group Participant 1)
>
> I dunno if we should have homework in it… (IGL Focus Group Participant 3)
>
> Yeah. (IGL Focus Group Participant 1)
>
> We don’t do homework… (IGL Focus Group Participant 3)
>
> Not everyone in there is Koori… (IGL Focus Group Participant 1)
>
> Just to be raw… when I’m talking to my friends about it, and they say, ‘what do you do?’ and I say… ‘the purpose is…’ and they are, like, ‘but what do you actually do?’ and I’m, like… ‘we play scrabble’, do you know what I mean? Well – we don’t do homework… we do painting… (IGL Focus Group Participant 3)

> It’s kind of like a cultural space more than anything… (IGL Focus Group Participant 4)
>
> And that’s what I then have to say… it’s not a homework club… I thought I was gonna be a tutor when I came in, I thought I was going to have to help with an English paper, I dunno… and then it turned into two hours of playing scrabble. But you can’t get to that deeper level when you are just tutoring… (IGL Focus Group Participant 3)
>
> I don’t know if it would work if we walked in and it was like, tutoring… (IGL Focus Group Participant 1)
>
> It wouldn’t! (IGL Focus Group Participant 3)
>
> [laughing] Let’s sit down and do some maths… that’s not what they want to do… (IGL Focus Group Participant 1)
>
> I feel like homework shouldn’t be in the title. (IGL Focus Group Participant 3)
>
> You sit down, and you play scrabble with the guys, and they… we are doing things that are more meaningful to them… (IGL Focus Group Participant 4)

We change the program name – it becomes known as the Indigenous Group of Learning.

The welcome ceremony

Every trip to the prison, with volunteers loaded into the car with me, felt the same. The drive felt the same, the road works were the same and somehow the sky always looked the same – overcast and grey, but in a way that made me squint. It was like playing repeat on a very dreary movie of flat land, windowless warehouses and tall temporary fencing shepherding a road that felt like I was driving with blinkers on. This place was unknowable to us – we were stopped from experiencing it in any way but through the exact route we drove along it. The landscape was absent, the lines of the horizon hidden, and our ability to relate to this place was erased. Despite the repetitive sameness, I could not remember this place, and I had to do the drive with my GPS on. I was disoriented by this place and moving through it, even though I had done it every week for over a year, sometimes more than once a week.

Usually, there were three passengers in my tiny car – two squished into the backseat and one person riding upfront with me – the volunteers for the Indigenous Group of Learning program. When we arrived at our destination – the prison – we would park facing the high grey walls. We tried to remember to leave our personal things in the car (inevitably, we forgot and would get told off once inside), and we brought the weekly supplies to the program: beads, canvas, biscuits, instant coffee and string for bracelets – cut into the same wrist-sized lengths to stop people from using them to do some kind of harm – all in a clear bag with black handles, along with our photo identification.

The stated objective of the Indigenous Group of Learning on our grant applications was to run a program for First Nations men in prison, staffed by university student volunteers to ‘reduce the likelihood of recidivism by working with inmates to think about future goals, including education, employment and returning to communities post-release’. The reality was closer to running a program that focused on social and cultural support for inmates (attendees) who were sentenced or on remand at the prison through a flexible program that included art activities and practical help like letter and CV writing, connections between services and advocacy for inmates when needed. The prison was a maximum-security adult male prison. We entered as a group of primarily young people (volunteers were aged between 19–29, and me – a ‘co-founder’ of the program and the ‘group mentor’, since we had to come up with official-sounding names on the grant application). University students were chosen as suitable volunteers because of their potential availability outside of class and the connections to learning and culture that might be made for students.

The group’s presence in the prison was an anomaly – not only was the group primarily young and female (six of the eight original volunteers were female), but the group also included First Nations young people (half of the volunteers in the first year of the program were First Nations). This combination seemed to overwhelm the logic of the prison staff, who switched between wanting to look after the volunteers and wanting to watch us – to make sure we were not doing the wrong thing. It is probably important to note that there was also a very gendered division in how the group was treated. The program was set up by myself and a male colleague – as the ‘co-founders’ – with administrative assistance from the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law (based at Monash University). Even though most of the weekly interactions with the prison for organising volunteers were conducted through me, once we were inside the prison, the staff always spoke to my male colleague. They spoke about speaking to him when he was not present, rather than speaking directly to me.

The young people volunteering their time and energy for the program were from diverse backgrounds. When the program was first set up, the plan was to only recruit First Nations volunteers. The recruiting process was difficult, and although we got quite a few applications, the requirements for getting cleared and trained for volunteering were too much for some applicants. Being from some of the same communities as the potential volunteers, it was confronting to have to ask about criminal history and for all the information required to run background checks. It felt like a violation in many ways. It put some people off following through with the application, so the program had to change shape to accommodate this. Non-Indigenous volunteers were also invited to participate but were vetted to ensure they were the right fit for making the program feel safe and supportive for everyone involved.

The first recruitment cycle resulted in an even split of half First Nations and half non-Indigenous volunteers. From my perspective, the group was wonderful, enthusiastic, energetic and safe. Over the first year of the program, the group became efficient in creating nooks for volunteers and participants to find spaces that felt safe and comfortable. People would divide themselves between activity stations and find ways to connect to each other, things they had in common and things they could teach each other. The list of inmates wanting to join the program got longer, and a waitlist for future attendees was started. The Aboriginal Liaison Officer (ALO) began to mix up the group of men attending each week to try and make it fair. This did interrupt some relationship building, but it also meant the group met more men from across the prison. The volunteers were keen to be as inclusive as possible with the attendees.

> One thing that I always hated was hearing that there was people on a list that couldn't get in. Not because they weren't allowed to be there, but just because we didn't have the space. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

Despite the program's success, we were reminded regularly by prison guards and staff that the men at the prison were 'bad men' – and the women in the group were told that they should not go into the cells alone with men. Although we occasionally visited cell units as a group to check on attendees, we never did this on our own in any case. Reflecting on this, volunteers rolled their eyes, and cheekily responded:

> It's such as safe space! A maximum-security prison [laughter]… and I just feel so safe! (IGL Focus Group Participant)

> The inmates never made me feel unsafe as a young woman. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

Guards never asked why we were at the prison, the purpose of the program or how the volunteers were qualified to do the work. As a group, we endured weekly amnesia as to our existence in the prison – with prison staff and guards seemingly baffled by our appearance for our sessions. The volunteers were seen in a particular way that stripped them of any other identity – they were also university students, doing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, volunteering their time every week to provide support through the program to First Nations men at the prison, among many other things. Instead, the group was treated with suspicion and an absence of respect. This was evident in the way female volunteers were called 'girls' instead of women, and not addressed in a more professional tone, in the emails I would receive each week about what people were wearing, in the way a guard grabbed me by my belt and shook it, because he didn't think it looked strong enough to hold a set of keys to the prison, and in the ways we were treated by the prison staff at the front desk as we entered the prison each week.

The data for this chapter was collected over a period of 12 months from the start of the program in late 2016 and included (with permission) my observations of the program and how the volunteers participated, as well as individual interviews (four) with First Nations volunteers and a focus group (with four participants) reflecting on the program. The stories and experiences shared in this chapter are of the First Nations volunteers of the program, though the program was also run with the assistance of non-Indigenous volunteers who were specifically chosen for their cultural sensitivity and provided with training and support (as were all volunteers) to ensure their suitability and safety in participating in the group.

In the next section, the process of entering the prison, and setting up the room for the program is described. I use the detail of this description to show the acts of ceremony and resurgence present and enacted in the movement of the group through the site of the prison.

Performance and ceremony

> …that first day when I got there. I didn't really get nervous, but… when we were driving up on that first day, and I looked at those walls, and it was literally like a pen, a pen for people. It was actually just so disgusting to think about I guess… and it was so like, an 'out of sight, out of mind' thing, because people might know that people are in prison, but it's not until you've actually seen the walls that you are, like, 'Oh my god, people are in there.' That's their world! Like in that tiny little… uh, it was just so weird. And then seeing the actual door to then go in… yeah, it shook me. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

Entering the prison was tense, there was a constant weighing up of cost and loss. Do not smile too much, but do not look nervous. Be polite even in the face of utter rudeness and contempt from prison guards and prison staff. Provide the same information every week and get mixed results, despite doing every single thing the administration staff of the prison asked of us in order to be there – the training, the multiple forms that had to be filled out in a very particular way (with a specific colour of pen) and submitted in order to gain access, the sending of a list of approved volunteer names each week for checking prior to our arrival. Some weeks volunteers were not allowed in because their 'access' had expired – even though nothing had changed, even though I sent the list in advance. Even though we were giving our time for more than free (these visits cost us dearly). Every time we went in it would feel like a small uneasy and pyrrhic victory. Prison places are violent and dangerous – not because of the people we were there to visit, but because of the systems and operations that allowed violent, dangerous and murderous acts to occur in the name of justice against First Nations peoples.[16]

There was a ritualistic performance involved in entering the prison, especially as a group made up of intersecting identities that made us very visible – including age, gender and Indigeneity. We would have to prepare ourselves in advance for the experience – dress in the appropriate attire, acquire the appropriate items for entrance, and subject ourselves to the same routine humiliations and degradations. It was a ceremony of sorts that we were willing to subject ourselves to in order to gain access to the real ceremony of reconnection and relationality involved in running a program for First Nations men incarcerated at the prison. This was an important ceremony for mending what was broken – asserting the importance of culture and connection in a place that did not value or see these things as fundamental to survival. The prison place was a forgetting place – where identities and alternative possibilities were stripped away to the most dehumanising experience. Some of the ways ceremonies are practised today may not resemble the previous versions of ritual and tradition, but the intention of our program, a ceremony of sorts, of resurgence, reconnection and re-storying relationships to place, community and beyond, was firmly the continuation of relational practices and protocols of inclusion:

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[16] The Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody (Johnston, 1991) began in 1989 to investigate the high number of, and poorly explained, deaths of Aboriginal people in state and territory gaols. It reviewed the deaths of 99 people during this period, and made 339 recommendations, the majority of which are still not implemented. The Guardian newspaper has a project called *Deaths inside*, based on Recommendation 41 from the report, which tracks Indigenous deaths in custody since the release of the report in 1991. As of 5 April 2021 there had been at least a further 474 deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody (Allam et al., 2018, Allam et al., 2021).

> We go in there, and we are all connected – one mob. I feel connected. Even though we're divided by walls… there is this barrier that is just not there. It's person to person. It feels good. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

To get to our relational ceremony, there were several steps in advance that we had to take. Being in the prison place, which was a type of invisible place, required a kind of vanishing ceremony to be performed by us every week. In this ceremony we were stripped of our identities and made into something else as we entered the prison. We were transformed by, and in turn made attempts to transform, the prison place. The performance began as we walked through the flat bleak car park, passing the visitors building, and stood out the front of the entrance to the prison – a corporate-blue building with black opaque glass windows, always reflecting the glare from the sun into our faces, even on overcast days. We could never see in – this building was where the vanishing ceremony began, with our erasure beginning as we entered:

> I never get questioned about my Indigenous identity when I identify in the group, but you walk out and you know… I feel I become invisible as an Aboriginal person within the prison, but in that group it's never questioned. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

There was a small patch of grass out the front – our designated meeting spot for the program each week. Around us other visitors would come in and out – young women and small children, elderly people, prison staff and other professional visitors. Prisoners would not enter through this way – we would often see the white trucks with tiny windows transporting the prisoners in through large gates next to this entrance. In the next step in this performance, I would put my prison identification pass around my neck and become something else – I felt like I had to pretend to be something else. Then we would wait for the final couple of young people volunteering their time and energy to help run the program to turn up.

Once we were all there, we would proceed through the sliding doors. One day those doors were locked behind us by a police officer, which was at once terrifying and also completely within the normal experience of feeling powerless within the prison. We become suspicious. On that occasion a black labrador sat wagging its tail inside, its handler stood next to it and looked at us. Along with some other hapless visitors, we were instructed to form a line. 'Place your belongings on the floor next to you, stand still, hands by your sides, do not touch or pat the dog', we were instructed. The handler walked up the line in front of us, slowly, letting the dog sniff everyone, and then behind us, letting the dog sniff everyone. The dog wagged its tail the whole time and did not stop or sit in front of anyone. You could feel people holding their breath, and the tense quietness as everyone did their best to follow the instructions. Abruptly the handler made a sudden physical gesture, and it took a second to realise that they had thrown a toy onto the ground in front of the group, exclaiming loudly, 'Good boy!', while patting the dog vigorously. The whole experience was jolting. The handler led the dog to the doors, turned a key and pressed the release button, and took the dog outside to play. Nothing was said to the line, but the staff around us began setting up for people to head through into the prison. We were back to the usual script – lining up in the 'professionals' line, met with suspicious looks from the staff behind the desk.

The inevitable questions that we were asked every week began, 'Where are you from?' and 'Who will be escorting you?' Well accustomed to this line of questioning, I would automatically be holding my identification badge out, to a look of surprise from the staff, who would then tell us, 'Well, they have to fill out the book', while eyeing off the volunteers. The volunteers knew what to do; they filled out their details and were issued visitor passes.

The next part of the performance included a special dance through the screening section of the entrance. Like at an airport, we had to go through scanning machines. On top of these machines, plastic trays sat awaiting our belongings. Each week we would pile everything up in the trays on the floor and dance out of each other's way, hopping on one foot to remove shoes, stretching our arms up and back to take off our jackets. Our things would be gathered and placed on the conveyer belt to be scanned. One by one we would line up and be directed through the glass gate. A usual interaction, 'Hi girls', from the guard with a scanning wand, with a wink, as he waved the wand over the front of our bodies, our backs and feet. And, 'Aren't you lucky – heading through with all these pretty girls?', to the few male volunteers in our group:

> I do find, especially because we are [mostly] young women, we get like, very scrutinised, there's always comments, even if you are wearing appropriate dress code, always comments made about how young you are, what you look like… You can feel them [guards] looking at you too,

> like when you are walking through, they're kind of, like, 'well, what are these lasses doing here?', you know what I mean? You can feel it. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

Each week our items of clothing and program supplies were rummaged through by staff working on the scanners – pockets searched, packets of biscuits investigated. Our items would sometimes fall off the conveyer belt, and we would be offered no assistance with these, scrambling to retrieve them ourselves while getting out of the way of the slightly-more-professional-looking visitors coming in behind us, who seemed not to be subjected to quite the same scrutiny – certainly they would not get the same leering comments from the guard with the wand. Moving on to the next stage of entrance, we would put our jackets and shoes on again, and head through to the key room. The program volunteers always looked a bit stressed and on alert. It seemed important to try and exude some kind of feeling of calm and in-control-ness. Through the key collection room we would go as I variously entered pin codes, scanned my identification badge and had my fingerprint read in order to gain access to keys. More scanning, fingerprint reading and key turning awaited through the next corridor and into the main section of the prison.

The inside of the prison was much like the drive there – high walls blocking any perception of the surrounding landscape – and made me feel as though this was the only place there was. Corrugated iron and double layers of thick mesh fencing between prison sections stopped anything being passed through. Various buildings that looked the same were scattered around a star-shaped courtyard – the Intelligence

(Intel) room in the middle, where people were watched and movements controlled, then the medical building, visitors centre where families sat waiting for their loved ones, kitchen, industries buildings, education buildings and cell units where men slept and worked out. At one end of the path was a door with another building behind it – the programs building, where our program was run every week. The next part of the journey was the same – another key would be used to get us through, and we would have to walk through the common room area for staff before entering the program rooms area. This was always uncomfortable, as guards would be sitting around watching television, and us, as we walked through.

The programs building was long and skinny, divided by a hallway with program rooms on one side and staff offices on the other. Windows from all rooms faced into the hallway, and in the middle of the building sat the guard station, where inmates had to report when attending programs, using the toilet or leaving the building. Each program room had a door into the hallway, and a door to the external courtyard, where inmates would be let in. The external doors were kept locked and had to be unlocked every time an inmate or staff member entered or exited the room.

We had the same rooms booked every week – two adjoining rooms with concertina doors that we would fold back to make the space bigger. In the hall outside of each room was a whiteboard, where the name of the program was written – our group was listed in various ways, ‘Koori homework club’ was sometimes written, and always the name of the male co-founder, not mine, written as to who was in charge – the final stage of the vanishing ceremony before we entered the room. Once we had all entered the room, there was a palpable feeling of relief, and a shift in the sombre mood of the group – this was the place we could finally become ourselves again and make a community space, at least for a couple of hours every week. Once the door was closed behind us, a buzz of activity would begin, as the space was transformed, and everyone knew their part in the process.

Unsettling stories

The performance of entering the prison, and becoming invisible, or hiding, was not an unfamiliar experience for the First Nations volunteers, or for myself or the other co-founder of the group. Although everyone takes on different identities in different spaces, for First Nations people there is a history of hiding culture and identity that is specific to the experience of colonisation and attempts at erasing these sites of belonging and knowledge across this continent. This vanishing ceremony was part of a bigger story of erasure and survival, which we were trying to negotiate in order to make the connections within the prison we knew were needed – both for the men attending and for us in running the program. We knew as a group we needed to be quiet enough to get into the programs building in order to be able to run the program. The group was enacting an act of survival, necessary because of the walls and rules of the prison, but enabling the building of something that was culturally strengthening and invigorating:

> I feel like it's one of the biggest things I've ever done in my life and it's like a weird sensation because I feel so weirdly comfortable about it… it's been good to meet other people and especially other people with the

> same kinds of views… and I love meeting the guys there, that helps me to connect to community a lot more too because it’s kind of like I’m putting everything into reality and into practice. I mean, if you want change, then be active about it, and that’s what I’m trying to do, I’m trying to talk to these guys and trying to find out about their history and what they want to do and I just really want to help them and I want them to know they’re not in it alone, I think that’s my main thing… I just hope that there’s, like, little things I say or discussions we have or me just being there is enough to make them want to do more or want to be just maybe that little bit stronger, even if it’s to say no to things, do you know what I mean? So that they can just focus on themselves and to really bring out the positive things in themselves and to make them see it as well because they’re there, I think a lot of the guys have forgotten it. And to be connected because there’s not… enough programs maybe, at the prison, a sort of space that they can come in and it is all about culture, all about identity, just bringing that out. I’ve loved doing that because it helps me with my culture and identity as well, connecting with mob as well. (IGL Interview Participant)

The desire to connect, reconnect and restore some of the sense of community for the men attending the program, and the volunteers as members of the program, was a clear focus for all participants. As the weeks went by, the numbers of inmates wanting to participate in the program grew. We were told by inmates that the program was the only time many of them got to be around other First Nations people, as they were spread out across cell units and jobs in the prison. Volunteers also requested the program continue over scheduled university breaks – as they wanted to keep seeing the men and each other. The rules the prison had about how we were allowed to engage with inmates were oblivious to the ways we knew each other – the family connections some of us had, and the experiences we shared as First Nations peoples from across the continent. The connections to place and each other were not made for fitting into the systems of punishment and control the prison attempted to uphold:

> when they [the attendees] said, 'what's your background?' You know… I dunno if they are holding that line to see if you are Indigenous or not, because, you know, I probably don't look that dark… so, they'll look at me and be, like, 'Are you Indigenous? What's your purpose here?' and then as soon as I said not only am I [an Aboriginal] woman, but I grew up out in the sticks, where a lot of them actually did grow up… It just made 'em a lot more open, I guess, and they dropped the walls a little bit more, because they knew that I was the same as them… (IGL Focus Group Participant)

Despite the stress of making our way through the entrance of the prison to the program room, the actual joy of getting in and setting up before the participants arrived was a consolation of sorts. The set up for the program included changing the room layout from tables arranged in a horseshoe to smaller activity areas, where tables were grouped so people could sit around them. A trolley of supplies that stayed in the ALO's office across the hall throughout the week was usually waiting in the room for us when we arrived. Once in the room, volunteers got straight to work, laying out art supplies, beads and string for bracelets on one activity area, and canvases, paint, sponges and brushes on another area. Four volunteers would move tables, lay down a large tarp on the floor, put tables back and lay newspaper down as the designated painting area. There was always a table with a selection of word and number puzzles, some colouring-in sheets and pencils, and another with board games – this set up provided activities for men to do in a group, or on their own if they were new and did not know anyone or did not feel like talking to anyone. The coffee urn would be put on and water jug filled, instant coffee and sugar put into plastic containers, along with assorted cream biscuits and long-life milk. Tea bags were not allowed to be left out; we had to provide these upon request to inmates as they were apparently used as a substitute for tobacco. Plastic spoons and polystyrene and plastic cups were the final touches. All the while we chatted, and the room was full of movement and noise. It was colourful, it felt different to the controlled order of the areas we had to walk through to get here.

Sometimes men turned up early to the program, and it seemed unnecessary to make them wait the few minutes until official start time. One man in particular – an attendee since the start of the program – was always the first to arrive with canvases he had been working on in his own time rolled up and tucked under his arm, ready to show us, beaming excitedly through the glass door. His enthusiasm was contagious. As he walked through the door he would shake everyone's hands, ask how they were, and help himself to the coffee and biscuits before sitting down to show us his paintings.

One week this man unrolled the paintings to show us a huge image of many long-necked turtles. He explained it was him and his family – he had been working on it late into the night to try and finish it before his anticipated release date. He had been working with us to try and get his confirmation of Aboriginality certificate in order to access services and supports when he exited the prison, so each week we would update each other on the progress and requirements. More men would arrive in the meantime, come in, greet each other, and then the volunteers, before heading over to the urn and making themselves a hot drink and helping themselves to biscuits.

The room would quickly transform into a bustle of noise and activity – people clustered around different activity stations. The beads table was always popular, atendees sat around the table, hands absent-mindedly sorting through beads in little plastic containers, and chatting as they made bracelets for kids or themselves. People would ask each other for news and updates, how their week had been, how their studies were going (attendees to volunteers), what the food had been like (volunteers to attendees), if there was any news from home or updates on various applications to services and programs. Volunteers would check in with attendees about how their families were going, and see if there were any specific requests for help or assistance with letter writing, or filling out forms. More coffee, or sugar, or the occasional tea bag was requested. We would break at the designated time, unlock the doors for the men to go into the concrete courtyard for five minutes, get some air or go to the toilet. We would lock the doors when the men returned to the room.

Every week we would be given a list of names of the attendees. Sometimes the name of a man who had previously been released turned up again on the list, sometimes the list would have some new names on it. For new attendees we would try to make them feel welcome, introduce ourselves and talk them through the program and different activities and what we could provide support for, and introduce them to other attendees. Often there would be an exclamation of joy when they were recognised as family and were given the full barrage of questions on updates of family members, gossip or where they had been. Sometimes a returning member of the group would come in sheepishly, telling us they had not planned on being back, or sometimes they would walk in with arms in the air, ready to embrace fellow members and volunteers.

> Like the first time I was talking to one of the guys [attendees], I feel like they [feel they] have to validate why they are in there – we don't have to ask what they did, and we wouldn't, but we know what a lot of them have done because they feel like they have to validate it, and they trust us and care about what we think about them. One of the guys told me what he did, and then he backdated everything… his whole story, that's when I realised, like, 'Holy shit, this is so real, and every single one of them has their own story' in there, they are all fighting their own battles. It's been good to learn about each of them individually, and together as well. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

During program sessions various staff members would come in and out of the room, usually without asking permission. The ALOs came in and out to follow up on things, attendees made requests or harassed them about something they had not done, or asked why another person was not in the program that week. Sometimes staff from other programs or services would come in, or a guard would come in with a slip of paper and yell out the last name of an attendee and a new location of where they were meant to go, such as ‘medical’ or ‘government services’. Attendees were moved on with little respect for whatever it was they were doing, or for the group – sometimes halfway through a painting. Sometimes we got told that someone we expected to be there had been moved unexpectedly to another prison. These were constant reminders of the place we were in, and its way of controlling people in it.

These interruptions hiccupped throughout the group each session, until (like clockwork) about 15 minutes before we were meant to pack up, a guard would come and knock loudly on the hallway window, making sure I was looking as they pointed at their watch with a stern expression, mouthing ‘Pack up.’ The knock was usually loud enough to cause the group to pause and look up, which generally caused a ripple of discontent as attendees expressed their frustrations at having the group cut short. It also had the effect of snapping us back into the space and time of the prison – out of the safe space we had constructed. It was a fine line to balance. From experience, we knew if we kept going with the program until the scheduled end time, and guards came in to collect inmates without them being ready to go, it could cause problems – if inmates complained or argued with guards, they could be banned from the program, or all programs. If we created ill-will with the guards, they would make our program harder to run. But there was also little consideration for the fact that we were there as a voluntary program – and the young people were giving their time and energy every week in order to provide 2 hours of connection and reprieve for the attendees. This time would provide them a space where they would be treated with respect and humanity. We had heard from other programs around the prison, and the ALOs, that being involved in our program seemed to have a calming effect on attendees, and there were less incidents occurring following our sessions. So it was a hard decision to make every week – to pack up early, to keep the guards happy and the attendees off the banned list, while also trying to respect the time and energy of the volunteers and the men who had turned up. Asking the men for help while we packed up would sometimes be the best resolution, as the connections of the group could be reinforced through this process – and we could make the space about community again, even if only for a few more minutes.

Following the slow and reluctant departure of men back to their cell units, we would continue the pack up ritual – putting rubbish in the bin, washing paint brushes, emptying the urn and putting away coffee, sugar and scrabble pieces, and laying paintings out to dry in the ALO's office. After the last things had been tidied away, we would sit down for a debrief with volunteers – to see how they had gone, and to see if there were any issues that needed to be followed up. The ALO (or ALOs when there was more than one) would come to the room to hear about how the session went, to fill us in on weekly horror stories of what inmates had done what to whom, who was currently in a fight, who was in isolation and banned from attending programs, or update us on men who had not been attending. We would be filled in on if attendees weren't doing so well and needed a bit of extra support from us. Before leaving each week, we made sure there were no reasons for prison staff to complain about our presence in the room (one week we had left pencil shavings on the floor, which was enough to cause us to have to vacuum the space ourselves for weeks afterwards) – we made ourselves invisible again. We pushed tables back into a horseshoe, emptied bins. The group generally looked exhausted by the time we left, as we exited the prison and went on our return journeys home.

Leaving the prison was always an unsettling part of the program – being able to just exit the prison, go back to our homes, or university, or our workplaces, to go get coffee, to have conversations with people who had not been in the prison. Speaking to volunteers about this, they agreed – the feeling of the prison lingered, and thoughts of the wellbeing of the men remained. This went beyond just the weekly program – volunteers wanted to do more for men, to provide support post-release, or link into programs that could provide this. It was something we began to make plans for.

> I can’t help but wonder, like when they [the attendees] leave, or when I have heard that one of the guys has got out, I’m like, ‘What are they doing now? Do they need help? What’s the go?’ you know, I can’t help but wonder… I want them to be able to call me… I want there to be a program that we are connected to, where they can call, and they are being taken care of. Because, like, I don’t want to feel like I am helping them a few hours a week, and then they get out, and then what? (IGL Focus Group Participant)

Involving volunteers in the design and future planning of the program was a way to make sure it was meeting their needs, as well as the needs of the attendees. It was also important for recognising the expertise and relationships volunteers had, and the work they were doing in making something meaningful, and the desires they had for its future. When the other co-founder and I held a focus group to discuss the program, specifically with First Nations volunteers, we heard some really practical suggestions that also showed how invested and aware volunteers were of the ways in which their time and energy was making a difference to the program and building important relationships within the prison and beyond:

> I think it would be cool if we could have some sessions getting more community members in – to do some cultural stuff. If we could get some Elders in, I think the guys would really love that opportunity. If we could use the outdoor space over summer that would be really cool. I'm not sure if we'd ever be allowed to, but if we could have a smoking ceremony – I think that would be special. And connecting with other programs. When I've been telling people about this, they are like, 'Oh yeah, so what do you do when the guys get out?' To connect them to other existing programs so they have some support when they get out. There are already some out there. It would be cool if we could get together. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

This building of networks and support, as well as relationships and community within and beyond the prison, offered insights into the ways in which culture, identity and understandings of relationality were already in place, but also growing, for volunteers. This offered a protective element that allowed volunteers to be resilient in the face of frustration and systemic oppression they faced when entering the prison. Although acknowledging that inmates fare much worse than us, are treated in much more degrading ways and experience prison settings in ways that volunteers, and we as a group, could never really imagine, entering the prison and trying to make ourselves invisible in order to reduce the amount of scrutiny we faced was a costly process. Volunteers could see the ways in which they were being perceived, and the injustice of control and power within the prison was repeated at multiple stages throughout the visits. This experience was especially felt by female participants of the group, with layers of sexism on top of the experience of not being taken seriously because of age or being criminalised because of Aboriginality:

> the prison is so patriarchal and sexist, and I know that we just have to deal with it, because… we just have to put up with the bullshit if we want to be in there, but it sucks having men… police what you wear and… have prison guards pretty much tell you not to fuck the prisoners, like, obviously… (IGL Focus Group Participant)

> It just makes you think about, like… say, one of the inmates is in the room and is looking at something you are doing, and is maybe… standing over your shoulder, and it's like, 'Oh fuck, I better stand up because I don't want a guard to look in and think there is something going on here.' It sucks that you always have to be questioning how you appear to other people. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

These experiences of surveillance were not only unsettling and unpleasant for volunteers, they had an impact on feelings of safety and would occasionally disrupt the flow of the group when guards entered the room. I would get occasional emails following sessions telling me to speak to the volunteers because a bra strap had been spotted or some other wardrobe issue had been identified. Once I was told by a guard that my belt did not look strong enough when I was attaching keys to it in the key allocation station, as he grabbed it and shook it for effect.

Inside presence

> I just wanted to be able to get in there and… make the time they are in there easier in any way that I can, because… it can't get any worse… so – hoping to make it a bit better. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

> blackfullas inside are just so vulnerable, and they probably don't get that much support, so to be able to do something that might make them feel a little bit more supported while they are in there, and a little bit less of a shit time, I guess, is why I wanted to get involved. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

In the context and time the program was being run – with instances of First Nations people experiencing violence, harm and death resulting from interactions with health and justice systems (Allam et al., 2021; Johnston, 1991) – our very being in the prison building, and interacting with this regime of justice, felt dangerous. It was also a choice of resistance the volunteers of the program were making, perhaps not as radical as some would have liked, but an act that had real implications at an extremely personal level. Recognising that it was always far worse for the men incarcerated at the prison, it was also true that the bodies of volunteers were being subjected to the kind of approach to control and intimidation inflicted as punishment on the people incarcerated. Our presence in the prison was cause for suspicion and surveillance. And yet the volunteers persisted. They admitted to feeling afraid, or uncomfortable, not of the participants of the program – those who were variously described through a litany of mental health and substance abuse conditions – but because of the feelings of seething threats of violence and punishment ever-present in our visits, which we knew we could walk away from at the end of the sessions: the men attending our program could not escape.

The volunteers of the program did not allow the creeping imposition of suspension of rights and freedoms to get in the way of the new possibilities they were creating, or the potential futures they imagined. They pushed through. There was a vision and framework based on something desirable that emerged from this program. We created our own ceremony for cleansing ourselves as we entered the prison place, for re-forming our connections to the land and each other – a way of embedding elements of culture into the air and space and time of the program that resisted the ever-present impositions of the space and denied the kinds of stories that were being constructed through statistics, policies and politics. In the program space we were making our communities, connections and practices present, resisting attempts to erase the importance of these elements of relationality in the place that was now a prison but always First Nations land.

When asked about ways to make the program better, the volunteers voiced their desires, all of which improved the program.

> We could change the time that we go in, so that we are not going in when visitation hours are on. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

We changed the time to earlier in the morning – it was a winning solution, as men attending the program could still see visitors and we did not have to deal with the front desk of the prison at peak hour. Some participants wanted more structure – something different for the men:

> in the next session we should get an Elder to come… we can put a focus on some weeks. The biggest aspect of culture they get to practise at the moment is painting, and that's awesome, but it would be great to get something else in as well. Like anything else, like dancing. A big one for me is always music. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

Although a huge bureaucratic hurdle to make happen, we managed to set up and run a music program, with First Nations musicians, culminating in a performance during NAIDOC Week at the prison. Some of the attendees recorded albums from the songs they wrote during the sessions.

> I know they are really keen to have a smoking ceremony… there is a pit to have a smoking ceremony. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

This happened eventually too.

An incomplete picture of a crab

As a group we noticed a lot of young men returned to the prison on a cyclical basis of remand and short-term sentences – they would come into the room, quietly at first, and then over a few weeks build their confidence and begin to participate more in activities and conversations. They were often moved on quickly from the prison, just as we got to know them, which was a reminder of the constant and ongoing colonisation of this place and was a deliberate attempt, by design, to break anyone forming bonds and connections. It was a challenge in terms of making connections for us too, and I could see the confusing mixture of disappointment and relief on the faces of volunteers when we would regularly find out that attendees had been moved on or released.

One day a young man came into the room and sat at the painting table. He introduced himself when people came over but did not say much. It took him a few weeks to feel comfortable enough to pick up a paint brush. One of the older men, an established painter who had been coming to the group for a while, could see the young man's reluctance to start painting, and so he coaxed him a little, showed him what he had been working on, and asked us for another canvas board so the young man could begin painting. We did not have any new ones, so I went through the pile that had not been claimed for a while and found one with a name of a man I knew was no longer at the prison on the back of the board. One of the volunteers took it and painted over the little lizard that had not been finished. While it was drying the older man and the younger man sat together chatting, trying to determine what to paint. They did some drawings on paper at first and left the canvas for another week.

We watched as the canvas was prepared and a little grey pencil drawing of a crab emerged from the black background. Some weeks the young man would not come, so the picture took a while to paint. During sessions volunteers would be shown how to paint too – picking up a brush, laughing nervously as they were shown how to do something, or teased for the drawing they had attempted. On the back of the canvas the young man had written his name in huge capital letters – the beginning of the painting of the crab was claimed. He finally began to paint the outline of the crab in blue. As he painted, he opened up a bit more and would talk about what his plans were for the next little while. He knew his release date was coming up. He really wanted to head to a rehabilitation program before going back to his family. He had made some enquiries about a bush program with a focus on employment. He asked if we could run the program there too. We looked into it – it was too far away for us to travel, but the bush program looked promising.

Some weeks later, with a load of volunteers in the car, I drove through the prison car park, following the usual disorienting trip in. As I looked for a park, we drove past a car with one of its doors left wide open, and no one inside – which seemed strange. We parked nearby, and as we walked by the car with the open door, I looked to see if anyone was around. There were rows and rows of empty parked cars, but I could not see a single person. We got to the reception area of the prison and met the other co-founder inside. He stood quietly, and as the volunteers began the disappearing ceremony of piling their shoes and jackets onto the plastic trays and signed in, he pulled me aside and told me there had been a death, and it was one of the men we knew who had been attending our program. One of the other program staff had told him in the car park that morning. I thought for a minute and asked if he had left his car door open – he ran out to close it.

Remembering

After we got into the program room, we left the volunteers to set up the room while I searched for the ALO with the co-founder. The ALO looked at us as if we already knew what they were about to say. They told us that a person had suicided, that it was the young man who had been painting the crab. He had not been accepted to the rehabilitation program he wanted to attend in the bush. He had been sent straight home. Not long after he was released, he died. The news knocked the wind out of me. Pulling ourselves together, the co-founder and I spoke about what we were to do. Back in the programs building I asked the volunteers to sit down for a minute.

This was not the first death of a member of the program we had experienced. But it was somehow the hardest. A week later there was a ceremony held in the place known as the Koori quiet area at the prison – a little space with some garden and a breezeblock building hidden away from the rest of the prison by high corrugated iron walls painted with designs by current and former inmates. The fire pit, usually ornamental, was put to use with special permission – a fire was lit for a smoking ceremony.

A small number of First Nations men from across the prison came – the young man had not been in the prison for very long, and he had mostly kept to himself. Two guitars were brought out, and people gathered in a circle around the fire pit. A few songs that everyone knew the words to were sung – they were joyous and defiant.

One man got up and spoke to the group – urging everyone there to speak up if ever they were feeling down – if ever they felt the world was closing in. 'There's no shame', he said. 'Just speak to someone – let them know how you are feeling.' The place felt like we were somewhere else – not in the prison. No guards hovered and watched as we stood together in a circle and let the smoke cleanse us before it drifted up and away from the high walls. There was no judgement here, no sense of inevitability of the outcome, there was humanity and dignity and respect for a person who was unable to see a different version of events for their own future.

Later when we were setting up the room and going through the canvas boards for painting, we came across the unfinished crab. Through the paint the raised outline of the original painting of the lizard was still visible. The crab outline was painted and waiting to be filled in. We could not put this picture back in the pile for repainting. This story had a different ending to what we had imagined. This was a kind of resistance we could barely fathom, it was so devastating and final.

Resisting, unravelling and unbecoming

Statistics about incarceration and potential health outcomes for First Nations young peoples build a picture of social and cultural expectations – a kind of narrative that exists within broader society. The volunteers for the program were familiar with this picture – they had seen it in their studies and used this data to construct essays for their degrees:

> You know, I read about this stuff for my studies, and I'm always talking about transgenerational trauma, but being in there, you can just kind of

> see the effects of what’s happened. You know some of those guys have been [wards] of the state, and they’ve never had a family… but we can go in there and I guess give them some hope? (IGL Focus Group Participant)

Media stories about people being killed or not adequately treated in a way that prevents their preventable deaths add more details to this image. It lays out the expectations about the kind of future First Nations young people might hope for, and the kinds of acts that are allowable against them. The emerging picture of what is in store for First Nations young people nearly finishes itself. These kinds of stories act to both mobilise resistance and bolster stereotypes:

> I’ve been doing criminology for my undergraduate and I always look at the path of Indigenous incarceration, so when this came up it was, like, well, let’s get hands on and see what it really is, and it’s just so shocking, the rate of Indigenous people incarcerated… I’ve been to a prison back home, and it is just all of the mob in there… it is so sad. Even when I go for a night out, all I can see… is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people just thrown in the back of the paddy wagon. It just really, really gets me. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

Having individual hopes and possibilities slowly eroded through the withdrawal of supports and services, or the reality that these supports and services were never really available in the first place, leaves a limited vision of future possibilities open to First Nations young people, like the young man who had been painting the crab. An act of resistance to a future that ruled out all other possibilities was devastating. It made it hard for the volunteers and me to imagine anything else. Reframing this act of resistance was important in order to make sense of it in a way that we could become sensible again. We could not ignore it, and we could not allow another death to be forgotten or an act of resistance to become a space of collective amnesia because it was too hard to think about. Acknowledging this suicide was also an act of resistance to the ongoing march of the myth of terra nullius and settler futurity – that we were/are not here. This young man was here, and he left an impact on us as a group. Remembering him, and telling his story, will not bring him back, but it does bring together the community and relationships built through the program. Perhaps what can be seen is not an act of erasure or unbecoming, but a movement to freedom – freedom 'as that which is found elsewhere…' (Bond et al., 2018:418), beyond the never ending repeat of flat dreary landscapes, impermeable walls, and control and punishment. We hoped he was finally free.

The volunteers and attendees of the program were greatly impacted by the death of the young man. This story was not unknown to us, but it never stopped shocking us. Resistance in this instance disappointed (and devastated) us:

> resistance is effective in that it produces a new reality, a new condition from which to resist… It 'works' even by not doing what we want it to do. It works by breaking down… Resistance has an impact, or maybe the word is an aftermath, whether we are disappointed or not. Resistance doesn't care that we regard it with disappointment. (Tuck and Yang (Eds), 2014:13)

The aftermath here was not as glittering with optimism and desire for the future as the one we had imagined. Cumulative grief, trauma and exhaustion – these are things First Nations people and communities are familiar with (Atkinson et al., 2014; Chamberlain et al., 2020; Smallwood, 2023). For generations we have been dealing with this. But through the haze of our grief what became apparent was the ways in which our community came together to support each other – attendees and volunteers, and co-founders too. We had a ceremony to mourn our shared loss, to make the space safe again, and to set out intentions to continue our work together. We had culture and protocol and connections that bound us together strongly. Throughout the program we had not just been surviving and resisting, we had also been regenerating and renewing our culture and connection, and re-storying our presence in places that tried to make us disappear.

In our blood, in our bones

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2013, (Eds) 2014) collaborate regularly to talk about (among other things) the mechanisms of youth resistance, refusal and action. Tuck's (2013) initial framing, and further framing (Tuck and Yang (Eds), 2014:14), of the concept of 'bone-deep participation' in Indigenous youth resistance movements is useful in considering the ways in which young people involved in the Indigenous Group of Learning actively and physically embed resistance into their very being in the prison. Deep participation, as Tuck (2013:11) describes, 'invites participants to help define the scope of the discussion, the rules of engagement and the structure of the relationship'. It also captures the level and depth of commitment – in a bodily sense – of the volunteers of this program. They were bone-deep committed to the program. The IGL might have run for two hours a week, but the commitment of volunteers was well beyond this:

> I can’t imagine not doing it now. It’s altered what I want to do as a career. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

The IGL would not have existed without the volunteers, could not have continued. Their involvement was foundational to its success. They helped to shape it, make it better, hold it together. But it was also clear that the program had an enormous bodily impact on them too. When we packed up after each session, the exhaustion was tangible. When the young female volunteers entered the prison, they had their bodies scanned, their appearances commented on, and as all volunteers walked through the prison, they had their presence surveilled. There was also the real emotional cost of bearing witness to the harm inflicted on other First Nations young people through the systems of oppression and systematic racism that resulted in outcomes that were not too distant and impossible to relate to:

> that could have been me. If I grew up in a way that some of those guys grew up, then that could have been me in that position… (IGL Focus Group Participant)

The program made the prison different, and the program made us different. The volunteers were committed deeply, in a relationship that sought to restore connections, responsibilities, respect and humanity, that saw our blood connections and shared histories tying us to place and each other reaffirmed and strengthened. In the making of the program volunteers were resisting what the prison was attempting to make them and the inmate attendees into – controlled objects.

The theory of change in many programs that work with young people is that the young people are changed by the program (Tuck and Yang (Eds), 2014). As with the concept of deficit data – which follows an implicit logic that First Nations people and communities are problematic and in need of helping, rather than put in a position of making decisions about what should be measured, and how – this theory is backwards. In the context of the IGL, the young people participating were not in need of helping or changing – they helped to develop and run the program, adapting and changing it as required. The inmates were not the target of change in the end either – they were a community of knowledge and education, connection and culture. Together the work done through the program changed the space of the prison, even just two hours a week, in a way that was contributing to a presencing and restoration of community, culture and ceremony in place making:

> The guys have a good idea of where they're from and who they are basically. In that environment it's like something stable that's not determined by the prison environment, it's a way of defining yourself that's not put on you by authorities. (IGL Interview Participant)

> Just building those relationships… a real highlight for me has been some of the guys have been teaching us how to paint… I have never done that before, and it's cool to be able to connect with my culture in that way. (IGL Focus Group Participant)

Reaching out and beyond the walls of the prison, the IGL drew volunteers and attendees together, reconnecting pieces that had been deliberately fragmented at the behest of some form of justice:

> It’s kind of like each different group is part of the puzzle, and all together we’re kind of like the big picture – you know what I mean? (IGL Focus Group Participant)

Reconnecting and re-storying place and community had young people making sense of the meaning of First Nations identities and the spaces in which they belonged. It also influenced their understandings of the narratives that were being constructed about First Nations people through data and the media, and through institutions such as those they were studying through.

Presencing is a concept that has been developed through decolonisation studies, that acknowledges the work of First Nations people and communities in resisting colonial erasure of First Nations histories, and continuing presence (Nxumalo, 2019). It is a disallowance of settler futurity, and an ongoing assertion of First Nations place, connections, relationships and cultural practices. Cultural practices of First Nations communities enable meaning-making through processes of storytelling, ceremony, making art and doing relational work (Simpson, L., 2011). These actions are an active presencing of First Nations identities and communities. Presencing was a process engaged in through the program in the prison, as volunteers enacted a ceremony of becoming invisible in order to enter a space where they could engage in a process of building community, cultural resurgence and growing cultural connections and relationality.

Conclusion

As the IGL progressed, volunteers experienced incursions on their sense of dignity, humanity and identity in the confines of the prison. In response they developed strategies for managing and navigating these violations. We had our own cleansing rituals, such as the set up and pack down of the room, and the debriefing sessions. The non-belonging nature of prison was disconcerting, alienating and infuriating, but despite the unrelenting violence and attack of the non-place, the young people involved in the program worked with the men incarcerated there to create a group where community was made, where bonds were formed – where people and place were remembered. We restored our own customs and rituals rich with culture and belonging, connected in our relationships to each other and to place. The group became a place that fostered wellbeing, safety (at least for a short while), connections and humanity. It was a site of active contributions, shifting relationships and resistance of stereotypes and typical relationships with the justice system. Young people were constantly unsettling standard interactions in the prison, fostering positive relationships with inmates, with themselves, and with culture – re-creating and presencing the identities they inhabited and expressed, resisting the identities that were 'allowed' in that non-belonging place, and creating relationships across the boundaries of grey concrete walls, socioeconomic status, age, life experiences and different systems.

Volunteers spoke about their awareness of the relational nature of our identities as First Nations peoples through the program, and how they contributed to this, and in turn had their sense of cultural identity contributed to by being a member of the community built through the program. The volunteers also contributed to building the program and embedding the changes they thought were required to make it better over time. Together they imagined many possibilities for what the program could be, but, beyond this, possibilities for the community of men incarcerated, and also their own futures– intricately and indelibly linked through our connections, place and time. The volunteers created a future-focused desire-based framework incorporating the interconnected experiences, impositions and connections across the IGL community. They articulated their awareness that, if circumstances were different, they might have found themselves in the same position as some of the attendees of the program. Over the period of the program the volunteers also had a growing awareness of the factors at play through the oppressive structure of colonisation, contributing to their initial ideas about 'Indigenous incarceration', and their increased understanding of the experiences and conditions of attendees of the program. The points of connection between the people making this community were seen as strengths – and built upon to create the possibilities of connection and community. The aspects of the program that volunteers identified as culture were seen as positive and enhancing factors that contributed to sense of self and identity, and the group was a place of connection.

The awareness volunteers had of the impacts of the structure around them – the prison, the justice system, the approach of incarceration as a form of justice – meant they were able to see the position of power they had in relation to this. Some of the volunteers became aware of the disciplines they were training in, and the ways they had been taught to think about ‘Indigenous incarceration’ and other related concepts. In the context of resistance, as a group the IGL was attempting covert system-compatible resistance. But they were also faced with the reality that the futures they were desiring were not reachable to all the attendees – and sometimes the only way out was to become system incompatible in an act so devastating it nearly unravelled all of us. In terms of the question of possibility, is it possible to be compatible with a system that was/is premised on the erasure of First Nations existence? What are the positions of power First Nations young people can take up in not only imagining, but realising, the restoration of First Nations sovereign futurity? Some of the incremental change the volunteers attempted to make through the program, with the attendees, was in enacting presencing as a process of cultural renewal and resurgence, but also as a process of engaging in community-building and re-storying the ongoing connections to place and each other. This had an impact on their sense of identity and belonging, and in making a space, like a prison, back into a First Nations place.

In the next chapter we meet First Nations young people navigating a different kind of institution – a university – and also their place as First Nations people, often from many different places, within an urban context. Some of the work they are doing is about understanding the ways they are positioned in knowledge and learning within education, and finding ways to reposition themselves and understand what relationships are desirable and possible in the context of a university space.

Chapter 7. Findings: The responsibilities of place and belonging in the Academy

In this chapter the experiences and stories of young people figuring out and defining their own relationships in, with and between the spaces of an educational institute – the university - are discussed. This navigation is considered alongside the historical and ongoing structural dispossession of land, knowledge and place (Broome, 2005, 2015; Tout-Smith, 2011; White, 1999; Wolfe, 2016; Woodman and Wyn, 2015) enacted through the university. In this chapter the specific place within the university that is engaged with is Murrup Barak, the Indigenous student centre at The University of Melbourne in Narrm. Through a combination of a yarning workshop, a focus group and interviews, First Nations students interacting with this setting discuss their experiences at the university, physically, intellectually and culturally. Through the discussions and explorations that take place we can see that this place, considered an urban place, is also and always a First Nations place in which relationships and knowledge are constantly being negotiated and reinstated. From participants we hear descriptions of the persistence of narratives of non-belonging throughout history (Ahmed, 2004) and young people's growing awareness and resistance to this, a development of their own understandings of place and their relationship to it, and the responsibilities they feel and carry as First Nations people in this place and beyond (Bang et al., 2014; Fredericks, 2013; Murrup Barak, 2013; Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Contributors to this chapter

This chapter includes the following contributors as participants:

- Gudha
- Aisha
- Marra
- Djirra
- Garraywarra
- Harry
- Jarra
- Bibarra
- Barrliyin
- Kat
- Bula
- Dhani
- Eddie
- Fergus
- Yalbi
- Leon
- Issy
- Clara
- Ngalany.
- Me: The interviewer/discussion facilitator.

In an interview with a First Nations student through Murrup Barak at The University of Melbourne, I started at the start and asked Gudha about how they liked to be known when meeting people:

> Tell me a bit about yourself, like how you like to introduce yourself. (Me)
>
> Well, I don't know, I think it kind of depends who I'm talking to. There's just certain things that I don't expect people to always understand when I introduce myself, so if like, I don't know, I was just talking to a bunch of straight people, I'm not necessarily going to be, like, 'Oh, I'm gender fluid

> by the way! Sometimes you might see me as a girl sometimes you might see me as a boy, I don't care what pronouns you use.' Because sometimes it's just beyond them, they don't really understand… I don't know, I feel my gender identity is just, like, I present as something else but then if you know me you'll also know that I'm something else, if that makes sense? So… I present in – I don't 'look' Aboriginal, I don't look gender fluid… so people often like don't see that when I introduce myself, so I kind of just keep it basic when I introduce myself, like 'I'm Gudha', that's all I say really, I don't go into too much depth. (Gudha)

Gudha lets their relationship with people and place develop overtime – they can reveal more about themselves when they think the other person or people are worth sharing different elements of their identity with, and when they feel safe to do so. Different groups of friends know them in different ways. This is not the same as hiding different elements of their identities, but there is an element of self preservation, or energy preservation, in this decision to engage in these conversations or not. This experience – of considering the place you are in, the people you are with, and the potential engagements you might have in this context, is discussed by other participants in this chapter, and is connected to considerations about responses, and responsibilities.

Meeting place

What is now known as The University of Melbourne is situated in a suburb now called Parkville, in Narrm, in the state of Victoria, Australia. It is right on the edge of the central business district, connecting Carlton and North Melbourne, surrounded by cafes, office buildings, businesses, parkland, hospitals, research institutes and a cemetery. It is busy; all around are traffic, people, trams, bustling.

Walking across Grattan Street and on to the university campus, a sign hangs on the connecting bridge between the twin John Medley buildings; it reads ‘Welcome’ and also – the first hint that perhaps this is not just an English-speaking colonised place – the Woiwurrung word for Welcome – ‘Wominjeka’. Up the steps beyond the twin buildings, and onto the lawns where students hang out when the weather is nice enough, the wattle trees are in bloom. This marks a change in the season. In the Woiwurrung language, the species of wattle native to this place is known as Muyan. At the top of the steps there is a long water feature, green lawns, stone buildings. The land has been rearranged for this particular aesthetic. It is hard to see the natural slope, the places where water flows underground and, when it rains heavily, above ground too, where eels continue their migration across the campus. In recent years some effort has gone into recognising the markers of place and time here. Billibellary’s Walk is one way the ongoing connection and presence of the Wurundjeri people is recognised. Despite the ongoing efforts of those who worked to create this walk, it is not well signed, and students and visitors need to know about it in order to find it.

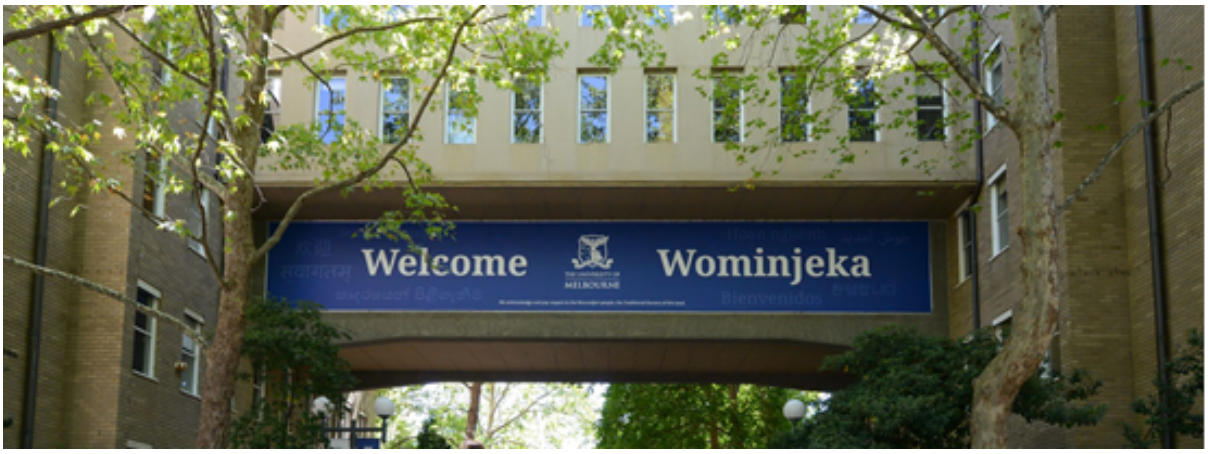

Figure 1: Wominjeka sign at The University of Melbourne

The following text is an excerpt from the narrative attached to Billibellary's Walk:

> As you walk to the next stop consider your place here on this land today. What does it mean or represent to you? How do you interact with it, how do you connect with its history and how will you contribute to its memories? Consider the shared ways of understanding the past. As you do so, take a walk through Billibellary's land. Feel, know, imagine Melbourne's six seasons as they are subtly reconstructed as the context for understanding place and belonging for the Wurundjeri people and ponder the landscape that was both shaped by its custodians through the management and protection of important resources and the defining facet of daily life. (Murrup Barak, 2013)

One day on campus I bump into Eddie – a young person who has participated in some of the activities for this research. We chat, I ask what they have been up to, and I am filled in on study and work details. The whole time I am speaking to them I see them eying off the construction area behind me – there is a lot of construction going on around campus. ‘Everything okay?’ I ask. They express their concern at how close the construction site is to some trees – and they wonder out loud if the workers know the importance of the trees. They look like they are about to go and say something to the workers, then change their mind. ‘I’ll write an email’, Eddie says, and they wave goodbye as they walk away.

The Wurundjeri people have ongoing connections with this place, which now looks like a university place. Language reminds us of the intimate relationships with place and the other-than human elements that sustain and make it – the language of this place, Woiwurrung, embeds knowledge of these relationships and connections that bind the elements of place and people together. In an exhibition on campus in 2022, *Emu Sky*, Wurundjeri Elder Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin describes the ways place and people here are connected by telling us the story of the Wurundjeri people. Wurun, the Manna Gum, and djeri, the grub that lives inside it, are intricately connected and are the namesake of the Traditional Custodians here. The djeri makes tracks under the bark of the wurun as it moves inside it. These tracks are represented in the mark making and artwork of the people of this place, and the signs of this place all through the trees. The djeri tells the story of the place, and its lines in the wurun tell people where they are when they see them (Murphy, 2021). The stories of this place continue, even though the knowledge of these stories might not be common, or shared, or understood by all the people that live here. Like Gudha tells us in the introductory quote, sometimes people will not be able to see all the different elements of their identity, but as we have heard in all the stories of the chapters so far, not seeing something is not the same as it not existing.

This university place, in particular, privileges specific knowledge and ways of knowing, in ways that have historically dispossessed, and currently dispossess, place and people of connections and respect for sovereignty and authority. For the people who come to study and learn at this place, and other university places, the kinds of knowledge systems that are presented continue colonisation stories, though there is an increasing awareness of this epistemological bias and the damage it is doing not only to people, but also place. For First Nations young people who come to this place to study and learn, this can sometimes be a site of 'othering' and 'strangeness' (Ahmed, 2000) where they come to learn about themselves in particular ways – as constructions of otherness/strangeness. Conversely this may also be a place where they learn they do not fit into the assigned categories of poor, damaged and despairing, and are therefore inauthentic or do not belong, or perhaps they become aware of their own power in resisting these tropes. In this place, as we will learn from the young people participating in this research, there are many aspects of learning going on, and un-learning, as young people navigate the ways in which their ideas and realities of living First Nations identities in an urban place, an 'other' place, and a university place, are explored, understood, misunderstood and interrogated. As with the knowledge of this specific place, there are many lines of stories going on, some on the surface, some are not easily seen, and many in-between stories of knowledge, knowing and the ongoing journeys young people are on in learning their stories and place of belonging.

Constructing place

Place has many different meanings and layers of histories that are not known to all the people that have relationships with it at different times. Sometimes these layers form the foundations that cities are built upon, and a place takes on a new story. But the old stories do not end when the new ones begin.

The data collected for this chapter was based on a yarning workshop, a focus group and individual interviews with First Nations students connected to the Indigenous student centre – Murrup Barak – at The University of Melbourne. There were 19 participants involved across 11 data collection activities in total. Data collection activities included a large initial yarning workshop, which was an informal session with 14 attendees held at Murrup Barak; a focus group involving three participants; and nine individual interviews. Participants were self-selecting, invited to participate via email, social media posts and flyers posted through Murrup Barak communication channels (Appendix C), and at the initial yarning workshop they were invited to indicate if they would like to be involved in further data collection activities.

The yarning workshop focused on a series of themes, but was also open ended and based on the interests and directions participants wanted to take it in. Art and craft materials were supplied as a technique for engaging with students, allowing participants to focus their energy and attention on various activities, listen to and contribute to the conversation as they wished, and to share skills and knowledge relating to art and craft with each other. Food was also supplied at the workshop, as it took place over dinner time.

This next section provides descriptions by First Nations young people living in Narrm of what places they occupy, but is also an examination of the ways young people navigate and negotiate the different meanings of place and belonging, and how they actively contribute to and make places of belonging for themselves and each other. It also examines the ways in which place is constructed through the university – and the meanings that First Nations young people are making of these constructions.

Murrup Barak as a student place

For the initial yarning workshop, we sat down as a group – me, as a researcher (though also a student) and undergraduate students at Murrup Barak. As I waited for people to arrive, I wondered how many might turn up. Murrup Barak is tucked away near the Union House building at the university. At the time of this workshop, it had a bit of decal on the windows, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags out the front, but otherwise it was not so obvious it was there. If you did not know what you were looking for you would probably miss it when walking by. But for the students who frequented the place, it was like a second home. When I came here, I would generally see the same students in the computer lab, or the common room, hanging out on the couches. The small kitchen area was always a complete shambles, dirty dishes piled up in the sink. There was always a large box with fresh fruit sitting waiting to be eaten. On the night of this session, I put paints, canvases, raffia, plastic needles, emu feathers and beads out on the tables for participants to use as they wanted.

As people arrived, they looked at me briefly, smiled uncertainly and sat down, sometimes starting by talking to their friends. On this occasion, I was a stranger here – in a familiar place. I cleared my throat and spoke loudly enough to make it clear there was a purpose for my being there, but not so loudly that it sounded like I was about to present to everyone. I introduced myself, gave a bit of an explanation about my research, let people know they did not have to participate if they did not want to, and then handed out all the bits of paper needed as per the ethics requirements for the project. I gave people a chance to ask questions, and I then asked what they wanted for dinner, before dashing across to the Union building to collect the food.

When I returned there were more people in the room – the group was much bigger than I had anticipated. I worried about how I would manage to record it, and if people would feel comfortable speaking in front of so many people. I had hoped eight people would come, but there were about double that number. People were already getting stuck into the art materials. One young woman showed others how to start the weave of a basket, another had started to weave emu feathers into a bracelet. I put the recorder on and started by asking people to introduce themselves. My worry about the recorder picking up the conversation was unfounded – participants handed it around as they spoke. They introduced themselves by their name, language group if they knew it, what they were studying, where they grew up and how old they were. Most were in the first or second year of university – though a few were a little older, and the group made a point of teasing them about their age when it was revealed. A few people identified themselves by gender, but not everyone did. It seemed that most people in the room had moved to Narrm specifically for the purpose of study.

The discussion quickly turned to the place we were in – Murrup Barak (some participants use 'MB' in the excerpts that follow). Participants spoke about what this place meant to them, and how it had enabled them to connect to culture and community in Narrm.

> Aisha: for me - to be able to come into uni and hang out where there's a safe space where it feels like I'm home when I'm here, because everyone is really nice and connected, and we all share similar experiences and stuff like that… Murrup Barak for me is definitely how I connect to culture.

People nodded and murmured their agreement to this statement, reflecting on their own connection to place. During introductions, most people spoke about moving to this place to study, and said that finding community and ways to connect was essential.

> I guess engaging in different activities with mob from within Melbourne, like going to the Invasion Day March and participating in the Indigenous Games… is a good way to meet other people from around Australia. Yeah, I think just any way you can engage with Indigenous people when you're away from home is a way to feel the connection, because you're not around your family – but this is your second family. (Bula)

A number of participants seemed to be sitting back and observing, rather than participating in the conversation. Although the space felt safe, open and inviting for participants to share their ideas and add to the conversation, occasional moments of discord snuck in. As with any group, there were existing dynamics and friendship groups in the room. When one young person spoke, it was clear others did not always agree with what was being said:

> I just feel like if I’m meeting with the Aunties and doing community projects – it’s a really awesome way to connect, but yeah, MB is really the only place where I see other Indigenous people. Where I come from you never see Indigenous people? I definitely think that MB is a really important connection. (Clara)

This comment had an impact on the group – though exactly what it was wasn’t immediately apparent. A few people bristled and, upon probing, the issues of in/visibility and assumptions around identity revealed themselves. The air was thick – waiting for a qualification that never came from Clara. There seemed to be no understanding that an act of stereotyping had been committed – making assumptions about people based on appearance. The effect of erasure of identity based on appearance was not unfamiliar to many participants in the room, and it was apparent that a cross was marked against Clara for making this claim of non-belonging and weaving in implicit assumptions that were loaded with invisibility. Perhaps this seems like a lot to read into a few seconds of pausing, but the comments later showed this judgement had occurred.

> Probably being down here and being involved with MB in this community is probably my first real exposure to the idea of community, ’cause my parents tended to keep me sheltered from the other blackfullas ’cause in [the country town I grew up in], you know, they’re not really all that great down there… moving to Melbourne you hardly ever met another blackfulla, like especially in my school. There was another, like,

> three apparently, well four, that's me and my sister and two others, but the two others I think were pretty suspect in my opinion. So yeah, coming here and seeing all these Indigenous students trying to make something of themselves is quite inspiring, and my first real exposure to community. (Fergus)

The comments made by Fergus were uncomfortable. But for some reason, they did not seem to cause the same issues for other participants in the room as those made by Clara. Fergus was well known to most people and seemed to be accepted, but perhaps not agreed with, for the ways in which they presented themselves. Fergus also seemed to qualify statements by saying that they had learnt so much during their time at Murrup Barak. The young people in the room were from different backgrounds – both in terms of geography, from all across the continent, and language groups, but also in the ways they understood their identities as First Nations people and how they connected to this place. There were different ways of knowing, expectations, histories and ways of being First Nations on display, and in the discussion. Some of the discussion leant towards ways of practising Indigeneity as seemingly more acceptable than others, while others were more inclusive. In general, even though there were moments of tension, participants were still respectful and kind to each other, and the conversation that flowed was inquisitive, with listening and hearing obviously at play, as people expressed their diverse experiences and ideas.

> yeah, my idea of community definitely changed a lot when I moved down to Melbourne to start studying. My idea of community shifted from being

> place-based to being a lot of people coming together, and MB became my new community. It was from that that I was able to meet the people in the wider community, like Elders and then community members. So I could also connect with a lot of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people at MB but then also branch out and make connections that I could have outside the uni, for when I finish studying and, like, ongoing connections now that I'll have forever. (Marra)

Participants spoke about the idea of being on Country, and being place-based, and the possibilities of what a community coming together in a different place meant – what it meant to be connected like this. Participants considered the importance of specific location in understanding their own identities, as First Nations peoples, and specific roles and responsibilities to place, even if they were not from that place or did not belong to place.

> here in Melbourne it's a wider community, like there's mobs from all over the country down here. The mob here really appreciates what everyone has to add to that, and everyone is really made to feel welcome. (Djirra)

> my Dad's family is from [a particular place] but they're not descendants of that area. But… my Grandma… they considered her to be one of the Elders. She had buildings named after her… she was really positive in the community… Me, as well, not being from that area, or from that mob, I still was really involved in a lot of stuff. They [Traditional Owner of the area] really wanted you to be involved regardless of descent. (Eddie)

Participants also spoke about the challenges to their identities moving away from home had. In particular, one participant was able to articulate the difficulties they were having in reconciling their specific connections to their Country as a First Nations woman, with their understandings of the place they had moved to, and what responsibilities that entailed.

> At home I never had an issue, ticking the box. Obviously, growing up I was surrounded by community, you don't think twice about what it means to be Indigenous. But coming to uni, or maybe not uni, maybe just Melbourne, I've learned that Indigeneity is so broad and it's such a grey space, and I found it quite a difficult space to navigate because there's no rules around it. To move from a culture where there's – being not an Indigenous woman but a [specific language group] woman – there's set rules in the way we conduct ourselves and I know what it means to be [that] woman completely, versus in a [pan-]Indigenous space where people can interpret that however they want to. That was a really challenging concept for me – that anyone could be Indigenous however they wanted, and that it could mean anything to people. That's just so opposite, that clashes pretty much directly with my own culture. So I found that really… really hard and I'm still sort of trying to figure out whether I feel as though I am Indigenous. Obviously though I do, because of our shared culture, like the term [Indigenous] has to unify all of Australia. That's been a very interesting identity to have and to take on,

> that you’re part of a bigger picture, not just a singular sort of tribe… (Yalbi)

This difference in experience was clearly an interesting point for participants to explore, as they shared their stories of how they connected to place and their identities, struggled with concepts of pan-Indigeneity, or embraced these. It sparked further discussion, and as people spoke, handing the recorder around, I could see more artwork being produced – bracelets being beaded, weaving, painting, fidgeting – but mostly, deep listening. The conversation moved to the ways people felt about who they were, how they belonged or where they were on their path of understanding their identity as a First Nations young person in Narrm.

> What makes me feel Indigenous is the communication I have with other Indigenous people, not so much my Country or where I come from. I mean, that’s a big aspect of it, but for me the biggest aspect is communication I can have with other people from other places, hearing their stories. I don’t know, it’s kind of like I’m living my Indigeneity through other people because I don’t have that connection and knowledge. I’ve always been Indigenous by law or whatever, because my parents said that I was, but it never actually became a thing that meant anything until the last three years. (Fergus)

> I found out that I was Aboriginal when I was in primary school, but my family – it’s my Mum’s side that told me. I started to identify when I was younger, but I was always told that I wasn’t and I could never justify it to

> other people because my family was so separated from it… I've always really wanted to know about where I've come from, but it's been really hard. With my family not being open and not wanting to find out… I want nothing more than to find out about my own culture, generally, but also specifically for myself and I hope that the journey I'm taking here will get me closer. (Issy)

Issy cried as she told us this. After this story, Yalbi offered that wherever First Nations flags were flown, Issy, still searching for her belonging, was welcome – that she belonged. More people wiped tears away as they related to this desire for belonging or felt sympathetically for Issy's experience. Participants spoke of the importance of this acceptance and belonging – this knowing how and where you fit. Some nervous giggling bubbled through the discussion as people said they were afraid they would cry too if they started to share their stories. The conversation continued.

> I just think, obviously it's my experience from not growing up on Country and not knowing my own language, I would like other people in this space just to be respectful of that and know that we shouldn't have to prove our stories or our experiences to be Aboriginal. Not everyone has grown up on Country and not everyone knows their language, and it's really important for everyone to be respectful of that. (Leon)

The growing confidence of participants to share their different experiences, and also reveal some of the challenges they felt seemed to open up the conversation.

Some of the participants who had been sitting back started to engage in the conversation.

> We all have our own stories, and we are all wanting to share with each other. It’s awesome hearing from our friends from all over Australia, you know, like where they’re from, where they grew up, what they did, like their practices and their families and I think it’s nice to be able to share stories and not always have the same upbringings… not everyone was brought up with a very cultural background. (Jarra)

> I think I struggle more identifying myself as an Australian because it’s such a blurred line as to where you stand and stuff, like not having constitutional recognition and stuff like that, make it so much harder that you just find your own identity as to where you sit as an Australian. I think that’s what I struggle with more, and then as well as what you said about being around family and stuff, that not having to really justify yourself. Like you grow up, you’re black, you do what you do, that’s just it. Then, coming to Melbourne and having to say, I don’t know, it kind of felt more like I was more in the spotlight, specifically about being Aboriginal and stuff like that, and it sort of felt like I had to prove myself more and it’s hard not being around your family and your mob, and then trying to figure out who you are without them. That’s like a crazy thing to do, because your whole life, you have been your family, like one, and then moving away, it’s weird. (Leon)

Participants reflected on the challenges to their identity – having to justify themselves. But some also discussed the meaning of First Nations identity, and their growing awareness of the feelings of responsibility that go along with claiming this identity.

> For me, Indigeneity is the sense of belonging. I think a big part of it is self-recognising, you know, when you tick that box it's more than just ticking the box. It's about knowing that part of your present, and your past, and your future. Being able to use that as part of your identity, and part of what you write, and what you think, and who you're friends with, and all that kind of stuff. So I think Indigeneity is a lot about self-discovery and about community and being able to use both aspects to build on what you have, building on how you see things. (Harry)

The relationship between their identity and their relationship with the university began to emerge. Which brought up many different discussions about responsibility.

Becoming flash blaks – the re-orientation of responsibilities

The discussion about bringing identity and knowledge of culture and self into the different aspects of life at the university began another thread of considering how people are placed as knowledge holders in classrooms at the university, in educational settings, and back in their home communities, and how they responded to these situations.

> I find my visibility down here maybe increased just because I don't live in a predominantly black society anymore. I wasn't ever reminded at home how black I was on a daily basis as much as I am in Melbourne, especially in an educational institution where I guess people feel they maybe have the right to enquire and ask me questions about it and in classes where Indigeneity might come up. I remember… a friend of mine, she's also Indigenous, wasn't getting the same looks and questions as I was, does that make sense? Like people didn't know they were Indigenous and didn't assume they were and so when the topic of Indigeneity came up they wouldn't get the same kinds of questions. (Yalbi)

In this comment, Yalbi is presenting the responses she is considering in relation to her classmates' feelings of entitlement to knowledge about her, but also her feelings of responsibility in relation to her friend's experience. Other participants spoke about classroom interactions.

> I definitely feel it's a responsibility of mine to educate people. I've been given, well as much as I can, I've been given the discourse to start doing that. I didn't realise until I came to Melbourne how many people haven't met an Indigenous person, or they think they haven't or whatever. I feel like I do have a responsibility to start to break down the stereotypes, even if it is only in a small way, even if it's tolling, undoubtedly it is, I think, but I can't not talk to them about it, there's no part of me that

> cannot describe to them and break down any sort of stereotypes for the moments I have with them if I can. (Harry)

> we had an Indigenous week at our high school and, basically, we had… a traditional dance and welcome to country, but literally the only class we did on Indigeneity was where we tracked the different places that were colonised. That was it, you know? I think it lasted for two hours, one or two hours of my life. [The teacher] stood in front of the board and wrote down all the times and dates of when Australia was visited and other places were visited and colonised. That was what Aboriginality and Indigeneity meant. (Dhani)

After this statement, and a few nods around the room, Dhani continued:

> And then when people asked you questions, like, 'Oh, is this true…' and then they'll make a statement and assume you should know it… it's like this assumption that you would know things. It's like, 'do you realise that the way our country has been colonised and the way that we're educated actually means that our culture is kept from us. Do you understand why we don't know these things?'… That was the only understanding that I had, being asked that question and not being able to answer it, but not understanding why not being able to answer it was actually significant, and how processes were put in place to ensure Indigenous people couldn't answer those sorts of questions. (Dhani)

Dhani's realisation of how there came to be a gap in their knowledge of the history of First Nations people across the continent, apart from through the lens of colonisation, was a profound one for them. They discussed their realisation that there were issues with the education system, and the construction of knowledge about First Nations people, and that this had empowered them to be critical of other 'logical' assumptions playing out in educational settings. Recognising that it was the institutions and disciplines in which they were educated, and not a fault of their own, that they did not have more knowledge was an astounding one for the room.

> I think it also helps us understand the deficit of how you're established and how programs are established, especially how you're taught and the way that you're looked at. But I came to uni and learned about deficits, like looking at things as if Aboriginal people are the problem. And then I actually realised why things were happening a certain way, why there was a stigma around living in an Indigenous space. You know? Why there was this idea that Indigenous people couldn't look after their children… I started to realise those things so it helped me analyse them and work with people who were experiencing them, like with my friends who are, like, 'Oh, I find it really hard to get a job' and I'm like, 'this is why' [laughs]. This is the idea that people actually have or this is the theory that explains the racism that you're experiencing. (Dhani)

As the discussion continued some participants spoke about the ways the knowledge they were acquiring at the university also accumulated community expectations when they went home about how they would use it and what benefit it would bring, and what responsibilities they now had. Sometimes there was also some hostility towards participants for going to a university.

> I don’t know if you guys have found it, going back home, with certain members of your family, you can be ostracised, because now you’re the educated flash blak that’s been to Melbourne University? That’s personally a big focus area of mine at the moment – people going back with this experience and this social capital that we’ve gained from this. (Eddie)

Participants spoke about their feelings of responsibility and obligation, but also feeling like they were not sure they knew enough and felt uneasy being put in the position of knowledge holder in certain situations.

> Even just talking with [my boyfriend’s] family and mine about things like native title and stuff. We know that the documents that we are reading about, well, I know my family don’t understand, and they’re kind of looking at me like, ‘well, what are you going to do’ kind of thing, like ‘are you going to be going and talking on our behalf, are you going to be in court for us, because you’re the only one of us that knows what this is saying, and none of us are going to have the agency to speak’. It’s kind of like, ‘well, if you’re not learning for your blak people, then what are you doing at Melbourne Uni in the first place?’ So, yeah, that pressure definitely exists. (Yalbi)

This question – of how to reconcile education with community obligations – also coalesced with another conversation – how to hold culture and identity in the university space.

Reconfiguring the university as First Nations space

Knowing your place in different contexts – such as the community or the classroom, or knowing when to speak and when to listen – was a point of tension in the group. Some participants seemed to have a very strong sense of specific protocols around this, not speaking without the authority, and remaining quiet at specific times. Other participants were less interested in these protocols, or less familiar with them – and the tension caused by this was apparent in a number of exchanges throughout the workshop. As the conversation looped back to experiences in the classroom, the following interaction between Clara and Yalbi took place.

> When you talk about Indigeneity it's assumed to be a certain thing, like when you say, 'I'm Indigenous', they're [non-Indigenous students] like, 'Oh, you must be from up north, you must hunt and gather and know how to do these certain things', and I'm like, 'I've never done these things before, I don't know what that is', or… they'll use words from Indigenous places that I've never heard of and they'll assume I know what they are because I'm Indigenous, ignorant of the fact that there are so many language groups. I find particularly that within this space, within Melbourne Uni, I can be visible, because I can come here [to MB], you know? I can be in classrooms, and to some extent I like being the token

Indigenous person in the classroom because I'm not the stereotypical Indigenous person. So I can explain, like, you know, not all Indigenous people come from this place, not all of them have language and not all of them have the right, including myself, like, I have no right to talk about what it's like to live in the Torres Straits or wherever because I've never lived there. I think it's particularly harmful having this one story of what Indigeneity is because it means when you enter into certain spaces your story and your agency becomes invisible and unimportant because it doesn't fit that idea. (Clara)

Can I ask you a question? (Yalbi)

[Clara nods]

Did you say you just recently found out you're Aboriginal or something? (Yalbi)

Kind of. It was more along the lines of my parents said that I was Indigenous since I was a kid, but I didn't say that I was Indigenous because, it was kind of along the lines of if I said I was Indigenous in a job interview in my town you wouldn't get the job. (Clara)

So you said before that people will ask if you hunt and gather and stuff and they'll say names of places and you won't know what they are. Do you feel pressured to do that stuff, like get more involved with your Indigenous side? (Yalbi)

> Yeah, I definitely feel the pressure. Particularly when I come here and other people know where they're from, and have community and stuff. I definitely feel the pressure to learn about my culture – but it can be really difficult because I don't have that many connections to my culture, to my land. Because I've never really been there. But I have connection to other people's land. I definitely feel that you have this pressure to find out more, but at the same time there's this kind of understanding that that is always available, whereas for some people it isn't. (Clara)

Although this interaction was respectful, it was clear that Clara felt like they had to justify themselves, and it was an uncomfortable interaction. It was also clear that the questioning was coming from a place of curiosity. Yalbi had specified that she was guided by protocols relating to knowledge, connection to culture and identity, which had made moving to Narrm a challenge in terms of how she saw herself and her own status as a First Nations person. There was a subtle 'putting someone in their place' – or holding Clara to account for their claims to Indigeneity, but also an interest in understanding how different levels of knowledge, connection to culture and identity interact. Clara's vulnerability in opening up about their challenges to accessing greater connection and knowledge contributed to this interaction feeling open and honest. There was also a provoking of a question – about responsibilities, which was interpreted as feelings of pressure by Clara.

In the context of a university, participants spoke about the ways in which identity and culture were sometimes at odds, especially in the ways they were learning to see themselves. But there was also an emerging possibility of the coexistence of culture and identity in university spaces – through a community of other First Nations academics and supports – in ways that were affirming and strengthening.

> I find that there’s a pressure, not so much to be a voice, but more so the pressure to show that these things [culture and education] are possible, you know? I’m the first of, like, three generations of people [to go to university]. Going back home my nieces and nephews are actually really active in culture, which is awesome, because their Mum made sure that they were, and I think particularly showing them that it is something that they can carry, something that they can keep hold of as they keep going, as they enter university… but it can be difficult sometimes, showing them that… culture can exist within this space. (Garraywarra)

> up home we were very much part of culture. But before coming to Melbourne University, I hadn’t had any mentors in the more intellectual side of Indigenous [spaces]. I was lucky enough to work with a lot of people at this university who I am really proud to say are almost friends now. And I think that’s important, to know there’s space outside the classroom where you can identify on both levels as well, because I think a lot of people get caught up in the tutorial/lecture space and don’t realise this [MB] actually should be a dialogical place as well. (Leon)

Participants shared their growing awareness of the community they were part of, which was making its presence known on campus.

> Well, I actually decided to go to… Melbourne University because I was part of an Indigenous program. I met lots of academics through that, and when I came to university, I actually went from them being my mentors, to them being my friends. So it was a different kind of relationship but it was interesting seeing how that evolved and how those people became sources of knowledge to a greater extent. It became [a community of] people I could have those conversations with about identity and belonging, about Indigeneity, which I previously didn't understand or have the communication networks to explore. (Harry)

Some participants shared that this community, and especially the connection hub of Murrup Barak, was a deciding factor in where they chose to go to university. These relational elements connected students with academics, the space that was Murrup Barak and the place the university was on.

Unlearning this city place

Students shared their growing awareness of their connections to the university as more than a city or educational place.

> I always thought coming to Melbourne I wouldn't learn that much about culture because, I don't know, it's a city and I didn't really see a city as a place where Indigenous people were, which is quite a shallow view, but that's what I grew up with. Then I came here and I actually learned more about culture being in this setting than I did being around Indigenous people where I came from. (Clara)

The conversations flowed throughout the workshop and after two hours showed no sign of slowing down. But it was getting late and participants were looking tired. I waited for a good moment to interrupt, and suggested we could hold another workshop, or do some individual interviews if people wanted to keep talking. There were nods, and so we wrapped it up for the night. Participants went off in different directions, to colleges, to share houses, to friend’s houses. We said good night, knowing we’d be seeing each other again soon in one way or another – connected as we were across the communities of this place.

Following on from the workshop I had many discussions with students about interviews and repeat workshops. We got to organising these – the second workshop was more like a focus group, it was much smaller and included some participants who had been at the first one and some who had not. In both the focus group and the interviews participants built on some of the ideas from the workshop, if they had attended, and also went into more depth about their personal experiences on campus and in their daily lives more broadly.

Although it was not addressed specifically in the first workshop at Murrup Barak, urban place as disconnected and disassociated from First Nations identity was a troubling presence in follow-up interviews. Speaking to young people about this research, it was clear that this kind of thinking had managed to seep into their own ideas about their identities, or legitimacy of First Nations identities.

> Up north, when I told people I was coming down here they were, like, ‘Oh, all the Murri’s down there are white!’ Like every single one said that,

> like – they think you are all white down here, all of you! (Bibarra)
>
> [laughter]

Even though this comment was met with laughter from people in the room at the time, it had a sting to it. Both in delivery and reception. Being white is a comment of skin colour – but it is also a comment on authenticity and belonging in city places. In follow-up interviews with other participants, there was an implicit questioning of their own identities because of where they grew up. These pervasive thought patterns impacted on how participants were received and perceived, and how they saw themselves too.

> I mean, I guess I didn't grow up in a proper Aboriginal community… (Barrliyin)

> It's weird because in [the town I'm from] people were, like, 'You're too city, you're… beyond this' and maybe that's the reason people struggle seeing me as Indigenous, because… I'm more than what that is, do you know what I mean? Well, I'm more than what it is [in my home town], and then when I'm down here I'm too bush and I'm too Indigenous to be in the city, so I'm constantly… never winning… (Kat)

For young people to think their Indigeneity is somehow compromised by place – that there is such a thing as a 'proper Aboriginal community' and that there is a division between being 'city' or 'Indigenous' – not a possibility of being both – is concerning, as it points to feelings of unresolved discomfort and non-belonging. Sometimes, shortly after making these statements, I could see that the participant was caught off guard and realised they had expressed something they did not want me to see. Sometimes following these moments I could see participants grappling with what they had just said, and examining or explaining other interpretations of being First Nations and urban. As a process of navigation, it became clear that young people were getting stuck on ideas of being one thing *or* the other in making sense of their experiences of the world. Plurality was not a possibility. In the interview with Kat, it was clear that the idea of 'city' was synonymous with 'white' or non-Indigenous.

> you shouldn't get sucked into the white life, even if you are an Indigenous person that grew up in the city, don't forget where your roots are. (Kat)

The implicitly drawn conclusion here is that roots cannot be in, or do not come from, urban places. This city place – Narrm – is also and always has been Country that First Nations people are connected to, for tens of thousands of years, despite attempts of erasure and displacement, disconnection from place and continued narratives of non-belonging.

Discussions about claiming space

Through the discussions with participants the importance of developing a relationship to place – to the university place, and to each other, in making community – was made clear. People spoke glowingly about the space created through Murrup Barak, and the other communities of First Nations people across the university and beyond, which had enabled them to find connection and belonging. For some participants at different life stages and with different needs to the undergraduate students mainly accessing

Murrup Barak, the desire for another space to connect to other First Nations people was clear.

> Having… MB and stuff does really help to form connections with community. And the IGSA [Indigenous Graduate Student Association], actually, I really fucking liked that space that they've just created for Wednesday afternoons. I think that centre [MB] sometimes does just feel like a centre for college kids... But I really like that space the IGSA just created for Wednesday afternoons, I reckon that's really nice. (Ngalany)

This connection to place was important for finding strength, connection and healing. Ngalany described that over the time they had been at university, they had become stronger culturally, and stronger in their identity. They spoke of their connection to place – their growing knowledge of how they were connected to place and how this was a way in which to protect themselves from the effects of erasure and invisibility in city places, and university spaces.

> Just talking to other Aboriginal people and getting reinforcement from them that this is actually a really common way to feel [disconnected and uncertain about identity], and I think a lot of people feel it regardless of the colour of their skin. I think we are made to feel like it, particularly living in urban spaces... (Ngalany)

Ngalany's reflection on the important connections being made through the university with other First Nations students demonstrated the ways belonging was being made and space was being taken up for these important conversations. Ngalany expressed a desire for access to a place or places that better suited their life stage and needs, and while this was not available to them at the time of this study[17], it was clear that they were creating these kinds of spaces for themselves.

Relationships and place

What seemed most important to the participants of this research was finding community and, through this, relationships to each other and place. Creating belonging spaces is complicated, especially in places where young marginalised people are often not made to feel they belong. As Habib and Ward (2019) describe, belonging is an ongoing negotiation that is constructed and in turn constructs concepts of identity and place. While much youth research has focused on this concept of belonging and place, it has rarely been explored through First Nations worldviews, with First Nations young people on First Nations land (for some examples, see (Aikau et al.,, 2016; Bang et al., 2014; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021a, 2021b).

Belonging in the place of a university has a complicated and fraught history for First Nations people, and especially young people. In 2016 at The University of Melbourne's Wominjeka event, Dr Lilly Brown (2016) addressed this directly as she spoke to staff and commencing First Nations students about the history of university engagement with First Nations knowledge and peoples:

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[17] Since this interview took place, a dedicated space has been made available for postgraduate First Nations students at the university, and Murrup Barak remains a place all First Nations students are welcome to use.

> for much of last century the university, like universities across Australia, was not a place where Aboriginal people felt they belonged. Not because we didn't possess the knowledge and intellectual aptitude to succeed here, but because our knowledge was not valued. And not because we didn't fight to have access to the education and the social and cultural capital that attending this institution provides. But because the power brokers of this place – the academics, intellectuals and administrators – felt more comfortable appropriating our knowledge in books with their names on them for their own purposes, and literally keeping our ancestors' skeletons and remains in basements, than dealing with our living, breathing presence.

The limited research on First Nations student belonging, engagement and retention within academic settings shows that this is positively influenced by staff support and peer-to-peer relationships (Carter et al., 2018; Pechenkina, 2017). Although these findings were reflected in the discussions with students in this chapter, such as Leon and Harry's experiences of feeling like they are part of a community with First Nations academics, or Fergus and Issy's feelings of connectedness to the community of other First Nations students at the university, there was an additional aspect of relationship to place and the obligations of relationality that went along with it that emerged from the activities. This was a specific element of belonging relevant for First Nations student identities and can be seen in Yalbi's grappling with her concept of identity in a place that is different to her Country, but that she is trying to become in relation with.

The term ‘place-attachment’ or ‘place-making’ is used by Carter et al. (2018) to describe the formation of a relationship between students and universities as places. Without denying the importance of place-making in creating a sense of belonging for groups of people more broadly, especially marginalised people, in First Nations contexts, place is embedded within a framework of relationality that contributes to First Nations identities, that recognises the ongoing and enduring connection of First Nations people and cultures to place. This is more than simply forming an attachment to place – it is acknowledging the deep and ongoing relationships First Nations have with place, how this informs and contributes to identity, and the efforts of colonisation to disrupt and erase these connections. It is also complicated by the fact that many First Nations people are not living on their ancestral Country and are navigating contemporary processes of coming into relation with place.

This element – of place as a relation – came through in the discussions with students in subtle and overt ways. Some of the more subtle ways place as a relation was discussed in the yarning workshop was in Dhani’s realisation that the reason she did not know enough to be able to answer the questions of non-Indigenous students at high school was because of the ongoing disruption of knowledge and connection to place and community due to colonisation. Dhani spoke of her awareness of deficit framing of First Nations people, through university, school and government, and her recognition that this was racism, which explained the daily experiences of her friends who couldn’t get jobs or the increased rates of child removal in First Nations families. She was able to see the ways she was being placed in university settings – and to restore her place as knowledge holder rather than knowable object. In this way her relationship with temporal and geographical place mattered, and she was working to restore her connections to place. Overt examples of place as a relation included Yalbi's examination of her relationship to her Indigeneity, which changed in relation to place, or Harry and Leon's explorations of community and the possibility of culture existing in a place such as a university.

The experiences in classroom settings described by participants was of stereotypes (Clara), having to educate other students and teachers (Yalbi, Dhani, Eddie and Harry) or being made to feel that somehow not knowing more about culture or history was a shame you were responsible for (Issy and Clara). As discussed in earlier findings chapters, the reality for marginalised students is of being targeted in classroom settings (Chapter 4), of experiencing racism (Chapter 5) and of being on the receiving end of harsher punishments and higher levels of surveillance (Chapter 6). First Nations students are pushed out of education spaces and taught to see themselves through the same negative lens that frames First Nations cultures, identities and lives as despairing and doomed (Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson, 2016; Bond, 2005; Brown, 2018; Pechenkina, 2017) or as fixed and static. But the participants, like Dhani, also spoke of their growing awareness of these processes and their ability to think critically about this in a way that repositioned their sense of belonging and power.

Renewing responsibilities in place

> Indigenous peoples' complex and overlapping sets of relationships, obligations, legacies, loyalties and languages… are intimately tied to and

> dependent on specific places and their meaningful histories. (Justice, 2016:21)

Just as participants did at the start of the workshop, often introductions for First Nations people start with people introducing themselves by their names, but also by the nation/s they are from and sometimes identifying features of Country or place. This helps people to understand place, connection and right to talk. It also identifies people to each other.

Although participants of the workshop followed this protocol, it was clear there were differing levels of interest or knowledge of other specific protocols around knowing place. Knowing and naming who you are is also about knowing place and your connection to it. Are you a guest on someone else's Country? Are people talking on behalf of you or your Country when they speak on land your family are custodians of? Do you have a deeper knowledge of this place than others in the room? What are the correct protocols that need to be respected, and what are the associated responsibilities? Knowledge of place is about knowing when you can speak, in what contexts, if it is appropriate for you to say something or if you should wait for others to speak first. Knowledge of place is also about listening. Sometimes knowing your place means stepping aside and making space for someone else, sometimes it means stepping in and stopping other people from doing harm or responding when someone is doing something that can be harmful. Eddie described his feelings of compulsion to educate non-Indigenous peers in class settings – he saw it as his responsibility, or perhaps his place to do this. Sometimes knowing your place means listening when you are being told you have done the wrong thing – even if it isn’t explicit, such as the interactions between Yalbi and Clara, where Clara was being told implicitly that identifying as First Nations comes with responsibilities of educating yourself.

In his article *Re-envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and sustainable self-determination* (Corntassel, 2012), Jeff Contassel explores the relationships between resurgence, renewal and responsibility for Indigenous peoples. His considerations on responsibilities are particularly relevant in relation to the discussions of the young people in this chapter. For Corntassel, responsibility and renewal are interwoven, facilitated by acts of resurgence (2012:97). Resurgence is an act of connection that begins to remedy the disconnection of colonisation. Resurgence is an act of carrying forward culture, identity and restoring Indigenous presences. Resurgence is a responsibility held by the present between the past and the future. By claiming Indigenous identities, individuals are enacting resurgence, and are therefore entering into a set of responsibilities. The discussions in the room revealed that some of the young people were finding the tension in their responsibilities, which they often referred to as ‘pressure.’ Dhani’s responsibilities became apparent as claiming space in classroom settings, assisting others to see the systemic discrimination they were experiencing and realising that the shame associated with not knowing certain things was not their responsibility. Eddie and Yalbi both expressed feelings of responsibility and pressure relating to education and returning home – and knowing how to put their knowledge to use for their communities. There were also tensions and responsibility expressed in different ways between culture, education and being in a city place.

There were no Traditional Custodians in the room during the yarning workshop, focus group and subsequent interviews, though there were some mob from clan groups within the perimeters of Victoria. This is not to say there were no Traditional Custodians at the university, or who accessed Murrup Barak – there certainly were, they just were not present during these discussions. Participants seemed to be aware of this fact, though it was not named specifically. This awareness was in Djirra's assertion that 'the mob here are really welcoming' – and Yalbi's understanding of the ways in which the protocols and rules for her Indigeneity were not the same in this place, but that the need for respect and understanding of place and diversity of cultures was universal. The discussion about city places not being cultural places echoed across the data collection activities. This was an interesting theme when considered in relation to the fact that the Traditional Custodians of the city place of the university were not present to assert their belonging and remind participants that, in fact, this is First Nations land.

Conclusion – learning place

First Nations people are frequently reminded of our places, our belonging or not belonging in place, our disconnection from place, our inauthenticity and out-of-place-ness, and the places we occupy in narratives of and about this continent. University places have not been welcoming places for First Nations people in a multitude of ways – through the reinscribing of colonial knowledge and power, through the construction of First Nations peoples as 'knowable' (Ahmed, 2000) objects by non-Indigenous experts, through the expansion of racist and racialised knowledge embedded through law, policy and education, through the exclusion of First Nations people as people, and then as potential students. Universities continue to be dismissive of ongoing First Nations knowledge practices and worldviews, privileging colonial science as superior, even in its ignorance of place-specific knowledge, while students continue to feel the impact of this embedded racism (Andrews et al., 2023; Behrendt et al., 2012; Gray and Beresford, 2008; Hogarth, 2022; Taylor et al., 2019): ‘within setter societies, the university functions as an apparatus of colonisation; one that refracts the “eliminative” practices, modes of governance, and forms of knowledge production…’ (Grande, 2014:48).

Despite being in a place (a university) where First Nations people are often constructed as objects of study, or as ‘vulnerable populations’, young people engaged with Murrup Barak found ways to subvert these messages and to critically engage with the production of knowledge relating to First Nations people. As participants said throughout the discussions, the place of Murrup Barak – a little building tucked away behind some old sandstone ones – had a profound impact on the lives and experiences of belonging for participants – it was a student place, but also a place that facilitated the building of a First Nations community, a re-storying of belonging in place, and explorations of what First Nations identities meant for urban-dwelling young people.

The discussions with young people reflected an awareness of the ways in which people learn about culture, their identities and about themselves, but also the ways in which culture and community change and adapt over time – and are different in different places. As Gudha demonstrates at the start of this chapter, identity adapts and changes in ways that might not be perceptible from the outside, but it is meaningful and important as a way to find belonging and connection. In the workshop there was a willingness and generosity to include people (such as Issy and Fergus) in a learning process that recognised that First Nations identity is a journey for some/many that does not start with inter-generational transfer of knowledge through family. Place is important, and specific with regards to ancestral knowledge, but people are not born knowing all these stories. They have to learn them and unlearn the ways in which we are taught to feel inauthentic for not knowing – and to do that, as Ngalany expressed in their interview, and Leon and Jarra asserted in the workshop, they need to be supported to learn, and made to not feel ashamed when they do not know things.

There were multiple dynamics that emerged throughout the workshop that revealed some of the ways the young people involved were creating their own places, with their own rules and ideas about belonging. There was active renewal and resurgence work happening by participants in the discussions and outside of them. There was a diverse array of examples of grappling with increased responsibilities that accompany the claiming of First Nations identities.

As the workshop at Murrup Barak took place, participants quietly became involved in art and activities – sometimes whispering to each other to pass this or that item – some emu feathers, paint, a brush, a canvas or some beads, but without ever really distracting from the conversation. Sometimes when the conversation was heavy, or slightly tense, I could see participants lower their heads, focusing on what they were doing but still listening to what was going on around them. The art and materials provided a good distraction from anything too confrontational and was a source to channel any anxieties into. Some young people in the room did not want to speak or share their thoughts, but they also did not want to just sit and watch, so the art materials provided an avenue for involvement and participation. No one specifically spoke about what they were working on, or what they were trying to produce. The art materials also acted as a binder of sorts – as one participant inadvertently rubbed blue paint all over their face without realising just as they were about to respond to another participant's statement about Aboriginal people being 'no good' where they grew up. Nervous giggles diffused the tension – and a sheepish smile from the blue-faced participant, followed by a light rebuke for saying such a thing. The group and paint combined to create an inclusive space where acceptance and belonging were more important even when boundaries were being drawn.

The community and place of Murrup Barak was frequently commented on in the workshop, focus group and interviews as a site of belonging by participants. The regular lunches were a place to congregate, find community, get a free feed and connect with Elders and visitors to the University. The men's and women's groups were a way of making other kinds of connections for the young people participating in them to share knowledge and learn. The staff at Murrup Barak were frequently visited and offered a listening ear to students struggling with study, or income or with each other – and also provided advice on what was next for some students or what the point of the study was at all.

Not all participants loved Murrup Barak, the way it was set up, the way it ran sessions or provided support to students, or the fact that it was sometimes seen as a common room for college kids rather than an open space for everyone. It is hard to comment on what other ideas and concerns First Nations students at the university who were not accessing the support and services of Murrup Barak might have, as they did not attend the workshop, focus group or participate in interviews. Rather than a specific list of praise for Murrup Barak, this chapter is an exploration of how young people restore and re-story place, and ways of belonging, and how they create spaces where different elements of their identities can be expressed, whilst they navigate the responsibilities of these acts of resurgence.

Young people are contributors to the adaptation of culture to its continuation; they seek and establish communities, they make places, they challenge notions of erasure and non-belonging, and they challenge each other too. Sometimes this challenging is gentle and prompting; sometimes it is cutting and harsh. For First Nations young people making their places in Narrm, there are multiple sites to navigate – becoming independent, for the young people involved in these activities, learning how to study, learning how to critique how they are being taught/being told about themselves, how to figure out their own measures of success, how to navigate cultural belonging and what it means to be off Country. There is a searching and probing that still reveals how colonisation continues to inscribe ideas of inauthenticity in the subconscious, but an energy and drive that young people demonstrate that questions and disrupts the status quo.

At The University of Melbourne there are four River Red Gums that stand next to the sports ovals, away from buildings and without any signage. They are part of Billibellary’s Walk and have been here longer than the university and possibly the settlement of Melbourne (Murrup Barak, 2013). They still mark this place as a place beyond the constraints of settler colonisation, beyond the sandstone confines of a university and its colleges. This is a place they belong to, make, and remind us of belonging – and the importance of knowing our place. They are not in the past, though they have lived through it – they are present and future. Their roots stretch well below the soil’s surface, deep and searching for the waterways beneath that have sustained the past and make the future possible.

Chapter 8. Discussion and conclusion

> whether literal or symbolic, representational or physical, place always matters, and for Indigenous peoples – and the forces of imperialism and settler colonialism – it matters profoundly. Perhaps nothing matters more: Indigenous peoples' complex and overlapping sets of relationships, obligations, legacies, loyalties, and languages that deepen as they extend outward in time and space are intimately tied to and dependent on specific places and their meaningful histories. (Justice, 2016:21)

In Narrm, First Nations young people have many challenges to, and questions about, their identities to contend with – not least, the explorations of researchers, who come equipped with big ideas and little questions. This thesis was pretty good at reminding me of my place or, specifically, teaching me about it. In my investigations of the importance of place and identity for First Nations young people, participants were very good at putting me in my place. But they were also extremely generous in sharing the ways they were constantly navigating and negotiating their places and connections too.

At the start of this thesis, we met Grace – a First Nations young woman who had moved to Narrm with her boyfriend and was doing her best to look after her sibling, keep her household running and maintain a vision for their futures together. First Nations young people are often categorised according to their perceived level of risk, or danger of 'disengaging' from systems such as education and employment and being engaged by other systems – such as justice. But sometimes disengaging from these systems is what keeps young people safe, or is needed to maintain a sense of sovereignty over identity, dignity and their futures. Grace was facing several challenges that would probably put her into one or more of these 'at risk' categories, but being disengaged or at risk was not how she saw herself. First Nations identities are framed through biomedical concepts of health as 'risk' identifiers. For Grace, her identity as a First Nations woman was something she drew strength and connection from.

Looking further afield internationally, non-Indigenous academics Chandler and Lalonde's (1998, 2008) decades-long research with Western Canadian First Nations communities shows that culture and identity for First Nations communities and individuals are, in fact, connected protective factors for positive health and wellbeing. Beyond this, connecting the cultural practices of the past with the present and imagining community-controlled First Nations futures was shown to positively influence health and wellbeing outcomes for young people (Chandler and Lalonde, 2019).

Although continents apart, colonisation has similarly made strong attempts to disrupt and sever cultural continuity and community and Country belonging for First Nations people in Australia, with Narrm experiencing particularly rapid and aggressive colonisation. The call to this work for me was to refocus research on hearing the voices and stories of First Nations young people about the ways connecting to identity, community and place are meaningful to them.

Responding to the research question

Following a desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009) incorporating the interconnected elements of relationality, the experience and knowledge of First Nations urban young people connected to four sites in Narrm were engaged to understand and answer the question, ‘How do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander urban Victorian young people practise Indigeneity?’

In addressing this question, this study explored how young people connected to their Indigeneity, their communities, where they were from and where they were/are. Sites selected for this research were chosen for the differing perspectives potential participants would bring, and for the contexts and histories the sites were situated within. Resisting the positioning of First Nations young people in what Walter (2016) terms ‘5D data’ – or in similar youth-specific terms such as ‘disengaged’, ‘at risk’ or ‘justice-involved’ – this work included the voices of participants in describing how First Nations identities are lived, imagined and celebrated in Narrm.

Centring the voices and desires of participants in this research in the stories they wanted to tell and reflecting deeply on the process of the research as it progressed, this study makes an original contribution across a range of disciplines, including First Nations health and wellbeing, youth resistance research and Indigenous methodologies. The unique contribution this thesis makes is its engagement with concepts of relationality and place in contributing to the specific identities and connections of First Nations young people in Narrm. Place is remade through this lens. This is evident in engagements, refusals, resistances, responsibilities and relationships being navigated by participants in relation to Country (acknowledging that urban place is Aboriginal land) and Australian institutional regimes. Resisting the positioning of First Nations young people in terms of deficit or ‘at risk-ness’, the voices of participants describe how they live their Indigeneity and imagine and desire First Nations futures that renew and re-story place and centre the ongoing presences of First Nations people in Narrm.

Although there is a body of work internationally (for examples, see Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017; Gagné, 2013; Peters and Andersen, 2013), there is a clear gap in literature in Australia that includes the voices of First Nations urban young people in understanding the ways they are restoring relationships, connections and understandings of their place and identity (Shay and Sarra, 2021). This study addresses this gap and, through this thesis, literature from across a wide range of disciplines – including education, sociology, youth studies, public health and Indigenous studies – was drawn together to understand and position this question. This includes examining literature on strengths-based approaches to health and wellbeing in Indigenous contexts, such as the social and cultural determinants of health (Anderson et al., 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2021), thus drawing attention to the ways in which the structural and racialised violence of colonisation impacts First Nations health and wellbeing.

In this thesis I have argued that relationality was an important framing for the construction of identities of First Nations participants. Four sites collaborated on this research, including a youth drop-in program run through youth services in the inner northern suburbs of Melbourne; an arts mentoring program run by the Victorian

Aboriginal Child Care Agency; a cultural visitation program for incarcerated First Nations men, staffed by First Nations (and non-Indigenous) student volunteers; and an Indigenous student centre, Murrup Barak, at The University of Melbourne. Participants came from very different backgrounds and places across the continent, with different levels of knowledge, connection and comfort to/with their status as First Nations people. Some were extremely comfortable with their identity as a First Nations young person living in an urban place, while others were still navigating their connections to Indigeneity or their sense of belonging in an urban place.

In describing these different understandings and negotiations I have been mindful of avoiding the homogenisation of these identities and experiences, which is a challenge when considering how best to describe findings across the sites and stories shared. Despite the very different sites and young people involved in this research, there were many similarities in the ways young people were connecting to community, identity and culture – which emerged as an obvious element of their engagement with and practice of relationality. The stories in this thesis described complex processes of navigating, maintaining, resisting, reinterpreting and re-storying First Nations identities, experiences and relationships.

In this thesis I have argued that the pressures to perform particular kinds of 'authentic' First Nations identities are rooted in genocidal policies in the Australian context that sought to eliminate First Nations cultures, belonging and identities. Concepts of authenticity and undermining of identities continue to circulate and are sustained in the same institutional settings this research was conducted in. The impact of these colonial policies continues to impose particular stereotypes that influence the constructions of identities for young people, which can manifest in the policing of 'authentic' identities in and external to First Nations communities. This was evident in the experiences of students of Murrup Barak as they described their interactions with other students in classrooms. These pressures can and do have health and wellbeing consequences, as seen in Ginan's story about her health and wellbeing after being marginalised and bullied in educational settings. Research in Australian educational institutions demonstrates the prevalence of racism in classroom settings and the impact on health and wellbeing of those targeted by it – including First Nations young people (Priest et al., 2011; VicHealth, 2012, 2014, 2021).

The framing of First Nations people in deficit terms in research and policy, and the translation of this to institutions such as education, justice and health settings, continues a particular story of dysfunction and hopelessness that confirms settler colonial belonging in place by reinscribing an inevitability of failure. This framing, of First Nations people and communities in despair and dysfunction, is perpetuated through media and becomes 'common sense' – a logic of elimination (Wolfe, 2016). We see echoes of this in the educational experiences of Malayar and Nini in Chapter 4, in Ginan's experience of racism in school in Chapter 5, internalised versions of this in volunteer attitudes to 'Indigenous prisoners' before they come into relation with incarcerated men in Chapter 6, and the young participants of the yarning workshop in Chapter 7 when they discuss their experiences of interacting with student peers in the classroom. By resisting this 'common sense' deficit framing and focusing on the voices and experiences of First Nations young people in Narrm, other stories emerged that described the strengths, desires and futurity of participants, and the different viewpoints and understandings of place, belonging and relationships young people had in relation to their identities.

This thesis takes place across different spaces, settings and times with different groups of young people. The findings represent these specific experiences – which were in relation to the places and participating organisations and programs. If young people had been engaged in different ways, the findings would likely highlight other aspects of Indigeneity for First Nations urban young people. What emerged early in this study– and shaped the approach to the rest of the research process – as the important finding that acts of refusal and resistance need to be listened to carefully, in order to understand what they are saying. Reflecting, reframing and resisting enabled the engagement of a desire-based interpretation of the ways that First Nations young people are practising and living their Indigeneity in the always First Nations place of Narrm.

Relationality and connections across the thesis

The first three chapters of this thesis focused on the framing of the research question and its relationship to the ways that First Nations identities have been constructed and controlled over the period of colonisation in Australia (Chapter 1); an overview of existing literature and the ways that research problematises First Nations communities and young people, leading to a conceptual framework that guided the choice of methodology for this thesis (Chapter 2); and the methods and analysis for this work (Chapter 3). These chapters considered key texts from Indigenous academics globally that directed the shape of this research as strengths and desire-based and focused on the futurity of First Nations cultures and identities.

In Chapter 4, the first of the findings chapters, I outlined the process of setting up a Koori youth drop-in program that sought to connect First Nations young people labelled as ‘isolated’ or ‘disengaged’ accessing youth services in the northern inner-city suburbs of Melbourne. I argued that resistance and refusal were a voice used by young people involved in this program to advocate for different futures than those imagined for them. I was challenged by having predetermined ideas about identities and expectations of ‘need’ for young people. I found that absence and silence were expressions of choice and action enacted by First Nations young people to resist the imposition of ideas about the kinds of identities they inhabited.

Theories of youth resistance and refusal (Tuck, 2011; Tuck and Yang (Eds), 2014) were used to interpret the interactions occurring in the failing program, including the eventual exit of the Indigenous Outreach Workers, who were facing the same systems of discrimination and erasure as the young people they were trying to support. The incorporation of a desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009) was required to reframe the youth services offered (and my position as a worker/researcher). A framework of desire moves away from a predetermined theory of change that positions young people as in need of changing and accepts the multiplicity and complexity of young people’s lives, which creates space for a positive repositioning of young people as agential and full of potential. This was an important finding for the program, but also an important lesson for me as I approached the rest of the data collection activities for this research.

Chapter 5 described a First Nations Arts Mentoring Program, where five participants worked alongside First Nations Art Mentors to produce artwork and an exhibition. In this chapter ‘counterstories’ are introduced and used to examine the ways participants enacted resistance to colonial narratives of invisibility and passivity. Participants refused to be defined in deficit terms and engaged in acts of resistance and reframing throughout the program in ways that subverted stories or produced specific stories that they wanted to share about their identities. Cultural resurgence and intergenerational teaching and healing was an important backdrop to the program. Relationality was used to understand connections, culture, belonging and relationships, made present through intergenerational teachings. Building on counterstory, I argued that First Nations stories are not only responses to colonial narratives but exist in their own right – and that what participants were exhibiting was a process of restoring their sovereignty – ‘re-storying’ – which incorporates resurgence and presencing original and ongoing connections to place, identity and belonging. This builds on Corntassel’s discussion of re-storying, which I expand on shortly (Corntassel et al., 2009).

In Chapter 6 art and culture were revisited in the context of a cultural visitation program run by volunteers for First Nations men incarcerated at a maximum-security prison. I argued that the First Nations volunteers of the program were engaging in the creation of new ceremonies that strengthened connections to community and place, and presencing their identities in places that desired their invisibility. The importance of place as a relation that holds connection, community and meaning was an important finding of this chapter.

Building on the concepts of resistance and refusal discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the place of the prison taught young people volunteering for the program about the systems they were participating in and resisting, and helped to make sense of some of the refusals they witnessed while involved. In this chapter participants were doing much unlearning and unravelling of stories they had internalised about Indigenous dysfunction and deficit. Involvement in the program and its design and implementation also offered a glimpse of what desire-based frameworks can look like for working with young people to imagine a different kind of relationship with place, systems and possibilities for the re-storying of First Nations futures.

Chapter 7, the last of the findings chapters, described a series of interactions through a yarning workshop, focus group and interviews with First Nations young people engaged with the Indigenous student centre, Murrup Barak, at The University of Melbourne. In this chapter young people were figuring out and defining their relationships in, with and between the spaces of a university and a city. Relationships and knowledge about place and cultural identity were negotiated and reinstated as participants navigated and challenged persistent narratives of non-belonging in urban and academic places. Interesting dynamics emerged about the ways young people were negotiating their identities in relation to each other, the university, the city and being away from family and Country, and in their growing awareness of their positioning within classroom and educational settings, and their responsibilities across these settings. Multiple dynamics that emerged throughout the workshop revealed some of the ways the young people involved were creating their own places, with their own rules and ideas about belonging.

Across the sites and chapters of this thesis, the voices of participants became louder and clearer. The voices of young people were quiet and absent in the Koori youth drop-in program in Chapter 4, as they refused the theories of change imposed upon them. Young people's presence and voices were more obvious in the Arts Mentoring Program in Chapter 5 – emerging through the safety of an intergenerational learning and connecting space where re-storying processes were engaged. In Chapter 6, participant voices became more determined as they took control of the Indigenous Group of Learning and participated in acts of unlearning, engaging in unravelling processes that desired and drove change in a prison setting. The conversations at Murrup Barak in Chapter 7 were so engaged in processes of learning and unlearning, reorienting the possibilities and responsibilities of knowledge and connection, that they were hard to stop. My own desire is that those conversations continue.

Resistance, refusal and cultural resurgence

Colonial narratives of dispossession continue to echo in health and wellbeing policies and practices that focus on individual responsibility rather than structural and contextual impacts on First Nations peoples. Young people are largely left out of decision-making processes but are the subjects of decision making and control (Wyn, 2009). This was certainly evident in the young people accessing the Koori youth drop-in program in Chapter 4 – in setting up the drop-in program, which could be seen in young people’s responses to the program and within the program; in Yira’s disengagements with services and education; and in Malayar’s resistance to our imposition of ideas about his engagements with ‘other’ young people. Young people have, and desire, agency, and are often at the forefront of making change and desiring futures with greater potential than the ones mapped out for them. What does a desire-based framework look like in this context? For this thesis is looked like engaging with the possibilities of placemaking and connection, the diverse representations and constructions of what it is to be First Nations. It looked like learning to leave plenty of space for young people to imagine and articulate what contributes to a sense of belonging, and what a desirable and sovereign future might look like.

In many instances throughout this work, young people were part of larger networks involved in actions of cultural resurgence (see Chapters 5 and 6) and enacting a particular kind of teaching about how to resist and refuse systems (see Chapters 4, 6 and 7). Resistance is situated in social and temporal contexts – it is not generic. The stories shared through this research were about what young people were building and seeing – how they were making change and what was important in their lives relating to the embodiment of First Nations identities. This was in specific places and timeframes, within specific networks of relationships. Young people involved in this research were in relation to these broader networks through a variety of means – and were enacting their interpretations of the learning and knowledge gained through these relationships.

Understanding identity as relationality

Although the construction of Indigeneity has a specific history of marginalisation and discrimination in colonised Australia that continues to impact on the experience and expression of these identities, First Nations identities exist outside of these colonial framings and are constantly being negotiated and reframed by each adaptive generation.

Communities that First Nations young people are finding and making through active participation are continuing culture, sharing knowledge and teaching each other about belonging in this place. This is what it means to be First Nations – to belong to place, to make and connect with community and understand one's place. Young people, like Ginan, Ligie, Daku, Minhi and Ellin in Chapter 5, are contributors to the adaptation of culture and to its continuation, mediated through the intergenerational teaching of the art mentors. The volunteers from the Indigenous Group of Learning in Chapter 6 seek and establish communities, and make places, in collaboration with the men incarcerated at the prison. Young people, such as Dhani at Murrup Barak in Chapter 7 and Nini in Chapter 4, challenge notions of erasure and non-belonging and, like Yalbi in Chapter 7 and Ellin in Chapter 5, they challenge each other in understanding their places, cultures and connections – and the relationships between these. For First Nations young people making their places in Narrm, there are multiple sites to navigate. There is a searching and probing that reveals the ways that colonisation continues to inscribe ideas of inauthenticity in the subconscious, but also an energy and drive that demonstrates questioning and disrupting the status quo.

The construction and practice of Indigeneity is constantly being negotiated and reconfigured – incorporating emerging and different elements that are also important to identity, as we can see in Gudha’s description in Chapter 7. The lived experiences of young people relating to the impositions and assumptions about Indigeneity continue to impact the ways young people understand it and practise it. There are very real implications for health and wellbeing – as we see through Ginan’s story in Chapter 5 – and the ways communities and places are engaged or disengaged with – as we see from Yira’s story in Chapter 4 – and how young people come to know their identities as belonging to First Nations. Participants of this research outlined the importance of and their desire for developing a relationship to place and to each other, in making, maintaining and imagining community and re-storying place.

Resurgence and re-storying places and presences

Re-storying

The concept of counterstories presents a method of response to negative portrayals or ‘stock stories’ that are created as a process of marginalisation and deficit (Martinez, 2014; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). In the context of this thesis, counterstories seemed like a good description of what I was seeing in the resistance participants had to particular conversations, questions or interactions with me, with others and with institutions. Ellin’s resistance to my questions about the arts mentoring program and reframing of the stories she wanted to tell about herself and her art is one example of this. But the extent of the work being done in some of these interactions was not just a response to colonial impositions – it was also a continuation of existing knowledges, connections and responsibilities.

Counterstory, although extremely useful in describing aspects of the engagements witnessed, was not quite able, in my view, to capture what was happening. The conceptualisation of re-storying by Corntassel and colleagues (2009) is a process of remembering and revitalising collective and individual consciousness. It offers an alternative for resisting contemporary colonial realities, and sees this process for committing to larger Indigenous movements in pursuit of justice and freedom. A discussion of re-storying in relation to stories of residential school survivors invokes the Nuu-chah-nulth concept of *haa-huu-pah* 'as teaching stories or sacred living histories that solidify ancestral and contemporary connections to place' (Corntassel et al., 2009:1).

Young people participating in this research resisted deficit narratives imposed upon them in many different ways, across the places of this work. But they were also restoring place and ongoing intergenerational connections in their assertions of their status as First Nations people in urban place. Daku's engagement with art through learning about and drawing his totem in Chapter 5 is an example of intergenerational cultural connection – which he uses to engage with the family he is not physically with – both through specific questions he can ask of his extended family and through his cultural practice, renewing his connections, even if somewhat tentatively, to his family and community. This was a story of belonging, of continuation and of presence: 'A restorying process for Indigenous peoples entails questioning of the imposition of colonial histories on our communities' (Corntassel et al., 2009:3).

In Australia re-storying processes are happening across the many First Nations Countries that make up this continent. These are creative, generative and progressive, and engage intergenerationally and across temporal frames. Far away from Narrm, in the Kimberley desert region of Western Australia, the Walmajarri, Wangkajuna, Mangala and Juwaliny peoples hold native title of the land known as Ngurrara that they have been connected to for many thousands of years. The process of reaching a native title determination in 2007 was long and arduous (Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation, 2023) and was unexpectedly achieved through centring First Nations knowledges, connections and relationships with place in an enormous, extremely detailed painting known as *Ngurrara: The Great Sandy Desert Canvas*. This painting was presented to the National Native Title Tribunal in 1997 'as evidence of ancestral, social, economic and personal connections to land' (Behrendt, 2008). Eualeyai/Gamillaroi woman, lawyer and Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt (2008) said of the use of the canvas in the native title application:

> It has been long understood that the genesis of art within Australian Aboriginal culture was vastly different to that in the Western tradition. The creativity of creating art was, for pre-invasion Aboriginal communities, solely part of the cultural practices that showed, connection to country and honoured ancestors.

This was a deep re-storying process, which on this occasion resulted in the acknowledgement that the land 'always was' the claimants' and connected the relationships, laws and customs that have always been in place on this Country (Justice

Gilmour, 2007, as quoted in AIATSIS, 2007:6). Although this example is from far away, it demonstrates First Nations ways of connecting, being and engaging with place that have been acknowledged as always having been here. Not a counter to colonisation, but a re-storying and continuation of presence.

Presencing

The concept of presencing in decolonisation studies resists the colonial erasure of First Nations people and communities, but, more than this, it is a reminder of the ongoing relationships and connections of First Nations communities to place (Nxumalo, 2019). As Leanne Simpson (2011:231–2) tells us, ‘Presence is required to maintain those good relationships.’ It is an action that disallows colonial forgetting of First Nations presence, and it is a continuation of culture, identity and belonging in/with place. Simpson’s (2011:240) conceptualisation of presencing acknowledges the creative and generative processes of Indigenous cultures: she states, ‘Indigenous cultures understand and generate meaning through engagement, presence and process – storytelling, ceremony, singing, dancing, doing.’ These creative processes, and the meaning making that results from them, can be seen throughout the work of the young people in this thesis. The stories generated through the arts mentoring program in Chapter 5, the relational ceremonies practised by the volunteers of the Indigenous Group of Learning in Chapter 6, and the art being taught and made through that group – and the engagement with art throughout the yarning workshop at Murrup Barak in Chapter 7 – are all examples of the presencing practices young people are engaging with. The occasional presence of young people at the Koori youth drop-in program in Chapter 4 was another practice of presencing – which included declarations of desire by Nini and others for more connections and meaning making to produce stronger connections and understandings of Indigeneity.

In the context of this thesis, I offer my theorisation of presencing as an important process engaged by young people in the ways they come into relation with services and programs, assert their place and belonging, and resist the various framings of their knowledge or culture as lacking or damaged in some way. By being present in different spaces, they are asserting ongoing connections and relationships that exist beyond the confines of colonial ascribed identities and expectations of Indigeneity. Presencing is enacted through engaging in the creative processes of cultural renewal and resurgence. This could be seen through the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency's arts mentoring program. It was also in restoring ceremony in the contributions of the volunteers of the Indigenous Group of Learning to community making. In students engaging with Murrup Barak, it could be seen in their contributions to Indigenous intellectual thought and place making in places that are both First Nations and colonially constructed regimes that have not always made universities welcoming places.

Presencing is also enacted by choices of engagement and disengagement – as a disruptive process that asserts power in places of disempowerment or in places where disempowerment is felt. This was the case for the Koori drop-in program, which highlighted the need to work more collaboratively with young people, but also to consider deeply the connections needed to appropriately make a place of belonging for young people and reflect on what/who else needed to be present in order for the program to work.

The responsibility of asserting sovereign First Nations futures and desires

Across each of the sites involved in this research, involving young people in the design and delivery of a program was far more effective than trying to design a program that imagined what young people might need. This was clear in the success of the Indigenous Group of Learning in Chapter 6.

Throughout this thesis young people were active in imagining desirable First Nations futures that did not look like the institutional impositions familiar in shapes and shadows of youth, education and justice programs. Tuck (2009, 2010) resists the Deleuzean idea that although desire is productive, it is also meaningless and unconscious (Deleuze, 1983, 1988; Gao, 2013; Goodchild, 1996). Tuck (2009, 2010) asserts that desire is the extension of the wisdoms and dreams of Indigenous ancestors – and I agree – that what young people desire is different from the past, but incorporates the actions and intentions of those who have come before and connects to a future that provides self-determination and is framed on expertise and a responsibility to move these desires forward. It is what drives and motivates young people's actions, inactions and engagements. It is disruptive and productive. It is not always neat, does not always have a clear outcome and sometimes it might not be perceived as positive or progressive in the ways it makes change. On consideration of Tuck's (2010) critique of Deleuze, I also see the ways in which desire defies the unconsciousness of Deleuze and Guattari's framing of it. Tuck argues that desire is agential and it is smart. In the discussions with participants of this research, desire was evident in their actions and responses – it was embodied in their resistances and their assertions of presence. It was in the learning and unlearning that was happening inside and outside of institutional regimes.

Corntassel (2012:97) argues that ‘If colonization is a disconnection force, then resurgence is about reconnecting with homelands, cultures and communities.’ Reflecting on the experiences described by participants of this research – and taking into account that for most participants Narrm was not their homelands, but a place that was now their home – what might resurgence look like in this context? This question has many answers, and the ones that are based on the findings of this research point to the desires young people had to engage in relational processes of connecting to place, community, culture and knowledge and to understand their own relationships and responsibilities within this context. These processes contribute to the constructions and conceptualisations of Indigeneity at an individual and community level, and have no need to be framed in deficit terms or only in response to colonial narratives of erasure. These are sovereign assertions of place, resurgence, belonging and desires for futures that provide immense possibilities for ways of exploring and embodying Indigeneity.

Reflections

As with all research, there were inherent biases and assumptions in the way this work was designed. This became more evident to me as the project progressed and in the analysis of the data. Some of these assumptions were embedded in the questions I was asking – which revealed an assumed causal relationship or theory of change. Examples of this included, when collecting data with the Arts Mentoring program (Chapter 5), in-built assumptions that this program enhanced cultural connections for young urban people, or that participants needed a program to support their connection to culture and each other, such as the Koori youth drop-in program (Chapter 4). These assumptions were revealed when met with resistance by some participants – such as Ellin (Chapter 5) – and required reflective practice to unpick and try to understand what was happening. Youth resistance frameworks assisted in identifying points of assertion or assumption in the research and the emerging counterstories and processes of re-storying that took place.

This thesis revealed a lot of active ‘unlearning’ by young people, such as through the Indigenous Group of Learning (Chapter 6) and also at Murrup Barak (Chapter 7), as they spoke of being, or responded by becoming, aware of the ways in which they were framed/coded/labelled – and the futures this presented to them. This thesis also revealed a lot of unlearning for me too, in bringing to my attention the ways in which I am indoctrinated in the disciplines of my training and have internalised certain ideas about authentic Indigeneity that are in dissonance with my own Wiradjuri identity.

As a First Nations woman, doing research in my own communities, I felt conflicted at times in my inside-ness and my outside-ness – about what I was being told and not told, and the stories I would tell through this work. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2019) notes in her reflections on insider/outsider research after her 2012 book on

Indigenous and decolonising methodologies, our positioning as First Nations researchers in or adjacent to our communities actually always situates us apart:

> really, in practice, there is no inside. Even if you are a researcher in your own community, by being a researcher, you're positioned in relation to the community in a complicated way. You might know the community. You might have the language of the community. You might have relationships in the community. But the role of research always positions you in a somewhat different space with different responsibilities, including ethical responsibilities and intellectual responsibilities… (Smith, 2019:12)

The responsibilities Smith is referring to loomed large in my mind throughout this research process. I did not want to contribute to the exploitation of stories of doom and despair, which might be a tantalising tale for some. But equally I did not want to gatekeep the stories of young people, or silence particular voices in this work. I had to find a balance that was sensitive to the participants and lived up to the intellectual and ethical responsibilities of being a Wiradjuri woman doing research on Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung land. This is my contribution.

Limitations

Listening for silence

There was much effort and time put into developing relationships with services and programs to recruit young people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

Some of the services and programs involved in this study explicitly aimed to work with young people designated as ‘at risk’. Engaging with young people who were identified by organisations as ‘high risk’ was a problematic and elusive process, as seen in Chapter 4. One of the challenges was labelling young people in such a way – creating expectations around the need to target specific young people was based on the presumptions of a theory of, and need for, change.

Although many young people who participated in this research had considerable challenges in their lives, they were not powerless, hopeless and did not desire the ‘at risk’ title. Refusal, like resistance, is an active process of countering a narrative that does not fit with lived reality. As other Indigenous scholars (Simpson, A., 2014; Tuck and Yang, 2014, 2014a) discuss in their work, refusal is in itself a voice – speaking of a resistance to be defined by, or to participate in, systems that are suspicious and unknown, and that may look a lot like other systems of dispossession. Although the desire to do this research stemmed from a lack of representation of the diverse voices of First Nations young people, the process of doing this research revealed what silence is sometimes saying. Research is not an objective truth, and in many instances is not a useful process or outcome for First Nations communities and individuals. After trying a number of times to reach more young people labelled as ‘disengaged’ and isolated by the services meant to support them, I let non-participation speak for itself and become a voice, and a finding too.

Some important questions that emerged when undertaking this research – and in not wanting to further silence particular voices – included, how do I research resistance (and refusal) when people choose not to participate? What do I research? What stories get told, and what are young people made into through these stories? These questions were particularly pertinent in Chapter 4 when the expectations of research revealed the imaginary beings we had conjured up in order to develop and justify a youth-focused program. This was when self-reflexivity was important – unpacking my own assumptions and methods as a researcher and trying to understand the dynamics that became present in the work. What might young people be resisting in this instance? What unconscious assumptions seeped into the ways I designed the work? Refocusing the work squarely on my own practices was important to establish a theory of what might have happened. It was also important in shifting the theoretical constructions underpinning this research and in becoming aware of how research constructs ideas that can contribute to deficit narratives. This was part of my ethical reframing, but also a key finding, and helped to move my focus towards a desire-based framework for research.

Other limitations of this work included research that was seemingly beyond the scope of this study. More exploration is needed of the experiences of the intersecting elements of identity that incorporate other elements and contribute to other experiences of Indigeneity, including gender and sexuality, disability and specific experiences such as involvement with different systems, including justice, health, education and child protection. Recognising that work is happening in these spaces, this study did not specifically look at these experiences (Fernando, 2022; Muñoz et al., 2015; O'Sullivan, 2021) or the ways in which colonisation has impacted these elements of identity – but, of course, these aspects of identity are not separate and mutable/compartmentalisable.

In their examination of culture and identity for young people in Narrm, Murrup-Stewart and colleagues (2021a) identified the ways in which 'culture' is often used as a cure-all term that is seldom defined. The same can be said for 'community' – especially regarding First Nations communities. The phrase 'Aboriginal community' or 'community consultation' is frequently used, as though there is just one specific community with common interests. Delving deep into individual understandings of community for the perspectives of First Nations young people would potentially assist in understanding the ways in which young people seek to belong, or feel excluded. That was not something that I went looking for in this study, but it would assist in developing deeper understandings about how to support young people in making safe spaces and belonging.

Beyond the scope of this thesis is the need to work with young people to define issues/ideas/experiences that warrant tackling through research – and considering thoughtfully the best ways to mobilise research that makes a difference to the lives of the people involved.

Knowledge mobilisation, translation and further research

This research culminates in the production of this PhD dissertation. Publications from the findings are planned for the future, along with other ways to communicate the findings and create conversations about identity – such an art exhibition involving young people interpreting the major themes and findings of this work. The major findings of this work will be shared with organisations that participated, participants who provided input, major stakeholders including First Nations youth programs and organisations in Narrm, and government bodies making policies and funding decisions relating to the lives of First Nations young people in Narrm. Beyond this, this research has enabled me to imagine the ways in which collaborative and purposeful research might be done, with the hopes that this knowledge will be put into practice in the future.

This research is important as it challenges static notions of First Nations identities, centring the voices of First Nations young people and foregrounding the importance of supporting young people to find places of belonging and connection. Identity and cultural connection are protective factors for health and wellbeing, but they also hold the key to the possibilities of self-determination and community-controlled futures.

Conclusion

The quote at the start of this chapter, from Professor Daniel Heath Justice (2016:21), a Colorado-born citizen of the Cherokee Nation, reminds us of the importance of place. As a researcher – and for researchers – considering the 'where' of place is vital in the context of positioning research, framing questions and understanding epistemic belonging and disciplinary affiliation of one's work. This has not been an easy process, as this thesis feels like it has no clear home in which it neatly sits. As a Wiradjuri woman doing research on Wurundjeri Country, I feel my place is sometimes not clear either. But it matters – in the framing of the research question and my engagements with people, place and the elements beyond these descriptions. Narrm – the place that has allowed this thesis to be produced – has intricate relationships with history, the present and the future, with the First Nations of this place and with those who come here from many other places.

By the time this thesis is examined, we will know the outcome/s to the ‘Voice’ referendum, with preparations currently underway in Australia to decide on whether or not to amend the constitution to:

- recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia
- establish an advisory body known as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice (the Voice)
- provide that the Voice may make representations to Parliament and the Executive on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and
- give Parliament the power to pass legislation with respect to matters related to the Voice. (Parliament of Australia, 2023:1)

In Victoria this is coinciding with a Treaty process (First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria, 2023), including the Yoorrook Justice Commission’s Truth Telling process (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023). These mechanisms present major opportunities for change in the positioning and status of First Nations people and communities and offer visions of a future that is firmly centred on community control and sovereignty. The participants of this research were engaged in data collection activities before these moments of potential change were in action, and so I have not been able to ask their opinions and experiences in relation to these. However their daily actions and thoughtful considerations throughout their time of involvement, of how they navigate their places and re-story Narrm as a belonging place, make me think of Corntassel's re-envisioning of resurgence:

> How one engages in daily processes of truth-telling and resistance to colonial encroachments is just as important as the overall outcomes of these struggles to reclaim, restore, and regenerate… (Corntassel, 2012:89)

There is a menacing buzz in the background of this moment, of an increased level of racism and hate being directed at First Nations people and communities (Butler, 2023). This is a threat that is getting louder and bolder, perhaps unsettled by being presented with visions of First Nations futures. Whilst the outcomes of these processes are uncertain, I feel an assurance that First Nations young people will continue to engage in acts of cultural renewal and resurgence, building connection and re-storying place in ways that enhance and strengthen the immense possibilities and diversity of First Nations identities, as they have always done.

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Appendix A – Partnership agreement

Urban Invisibility: Identities of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban Victoria Project

Re: Organisation letter of support for involvement in PhD research

By signing this letter I provide support on behalf of my organisation for the 'Urban Invisibility: Identities of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban Victoria' research project, to be undertaken by the PhD candidate Emily Munro-Harrison, from the School of Population and Global Health, at the University of Melbourne.

This research project will include investigation of the concepts of identities of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban Victoria, through engaging with young people through my organisations and conducting interviews, focus groups and observational activities.

Emily has been working as a volunteer in XXXXXXX, which is a program for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged XX-XX years.

I and my organization support this project and research.

NAME OF ORGANISATION: ……………………………………………………………………..

DATE: ……………………………..

Yours sincerely,

SIGNED: ……………………………………………………………………………………………….

Appendix B – Theme sheets for interviews and group discussions

Interview themes: Having open ended and general discussion that promotes storytelling, with the opportu
to give examples of the kinds of issues being discussed is an important component of this research, and wi
assist in the narrative analysis of the information collected. Interviews with participants will be reciprocal,
relaxed, and use a 'yarning' approach that is culturally appropriate for working with Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander peoples. Themes may not necessarily follow the order in which they appear in the guide anc
participants will decide which themes they want to focus on. The in-depth interviews will be one to one, o
held with small groups of two participants, depending on their preferences.

INTERVIEW THEMES	ISSUES EXPLORED
Personal stories	- Connections to family, community, place - Where you grew up/ Where you live now/ length of time in the area - Family connections/Where you are from/Who your mob are (if you know) - How you see yourself - How you see your family - What are you doing at the moment - What do you want to do
Daily lives	- Study/work/other - important relationships- family, friends, other - Roles of schools/workplaces - Neighbourhood - Travelling- to school/to work/to socialize/other - Food
Identity What are the things that make you you? If someone asked a friend about you, what kind of story would they tell?	- involvement in things youth groups, church, sport, special days - Time with friends, family - Time to talk, laugh, 'hang out' - Gender/gender identification - Education - Goals - Friends - Skills/past-times - Culture/ethnicity - Sexuality/Relationships - The kinds of roles you play in your family, with friends, at school/work (eg/ oldest child in the family, a parent, the comedian etc) - Music, art, dance performances - Ceremony - Ethnicity - How do you think being Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander relates to these things?
What's it like for you being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?	- What are the ways that you express your Indigeneity? - Did you identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander when you were growing up? - Types of local area facilities and supports - In supporting you to express you identity, what works/what doesn't/why not?
Sources of strengths and support Can you tell me about a time/story when you felt it was easy to identify	- Can you tell me about when you have felt supported? - What/who are they - How do they provide this?

as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander when you were growing up?	- What things that you participate in make you feel like it is easy to identify? - When do you feel like you are most yourself, and how does this fit in with being Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander?
Barriers Can you tell me about a time/story when you felt it was hard to identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander when you were growing up?	- How did you overcome this? - What kind of things did you learn? - What kind of things do you think need to happen?
Positive expressions of identity	- Interpretations - Comments - What does this mean to you? - Can you tell me a time when you felt proud? - What do you think people need to feel good about their identity?
Health and wellbeing	- What kind of relationship is there between being Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander and health and wellbeing? - What enables good health? - What is a barrier? - What kinds of things are special about being Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander? - Ideas/suggestions to improve health and wellbeing of other young Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander people
Reflections	- On the issues covered - Do you think there is any kind of difference for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people your age living in the country or the city? - Why do you think this? - Do you have any examples of this? - What is missing from the discussion?

Appendix C – Recruitment flyer

ARE YOU A YOUNG ABORIGINAL AND/OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PERSON LIVING IN MELBOURNE?

HOW DO YOU PRACTICE YOUR INDIGENEITY?

My name is Emily Munro-Harrison, and I am a PhD student researcher in the School for Population and Global Health at the University of Melbourne. My supervisors are Dr Cathy Vaughan, A/Prof Richard Chenhall and Prof Kerry Arabena. I am a descendent of the Wiradjuri people of New South Wales, as well as of Scottish and English descent.

I am interested in hearing about what it is like being a young Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person living in Melbourne, how you connect with your Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity, and how you think this influences your health and wellbeing.

Who can take part in this research?

The research is open to any young person of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent aged between 16 and 25 (inclusive), living in Melbourne.

What do you have to do?

If you are involved in this study this will include some or all of the following activities:

- Talking about experiences you have had and your own thoughts on what being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in Melbourne is like.
- Attending up to three (3) public events in a group of other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people, which might include cultural events, or things that you find interesting like sports, music, theatre.
- Participating in creative workshops exploring concepts of identity and living in the city through art, music, film, photography and/or dance.

Why is this research being done?

Identity and culture are foundational contributors to health, happiness and wellbeing. Most research on our mob focusses on people living outside of cities. I want to hear your voice and experiences, to build a wider-ranged understanding of what being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander is.

Would you like to help with this project?

If you are interested in this project please contact me:
Email: emilymh@student.unimelb.edu.au

Appendix D – Plain language statement

Urban invisibility: Identities of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban Victoria

Student Researcher: Emily Munro-Harrison (PhD student)
Contact details: 0401 950 936
E-mail: Emily.mh@student.unimelb.edu.au

Primary Supervisor: Dr Cathy Vaughan
E-mail: cmvaug@unimelb.edu.au
Co-Supervisors: A/Prof Richard Chenhall and Prof Kerry Arabena
Melbourne School of Population and Global Health
The University of Melbourne

My name is Emily Munro-Harrison, I am a descendent of the Wiradjuri people of NSW and English and Scottish descent. I am a student researcher doing a PhD in the School of Population and Global Health at the University of Melbourne. I would like to invite you to take part in this study.

What is the study about?
I am interested in your ideas about positive expressions of your identity, which I will be using the term 'Indigeneity' to describe. I want to know about the ways you express your Indigeneity living in the city, the ways you connect with your friends and family, and what you think is important.

I hope this study encourages you, as young Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, to
share your stories about the ways you connect with being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and what can make connection difficult
have a bit of fun attending events as a group, and talk about the experiences of being together
talk about the different ways people can be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in urban areas
share your opinions about the ways Indigeneity can be related to health and wellbeing

Who can take part in this study?
I am interested in talking to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people between the ages of 16 and 25 (inclusive), who currently live in Melbourne. You can be at school, out of school, working, studying or looking for work. If you are under the age of 18 you will need to get parental/guardian consent to participate in this study.

What will the study involve?
Involvement in this study will include some or all of the following activities, depending on what you would like to do:
Spending time hanging out and having discussions about your thoughts on being a young Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person living in Melbourne – this will take approximately one (1) hour at a time and location that suits you
Attending public events as part of a group with other young Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people from Melbourne, which will include individual or group discussions afterwards – the event may be longer than one (1) hour, the exact amount of time will be discussed with you depending on which event you would like to attend. The individual or group discussion will take approximately one (1) hour
Discussions either as a group, or individual interviews about the things you think are important for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – this will take approximately one (1) hour
Participating in creative workshops with artists, where you will be able to develop works that relate to Indigeneity in urban spaces, and providing written or recorded descriptions of these works – these workshops will be held over the space of up to four (4) days, but you do not have to attend for the entire time. The works you produce during workshops will be yours to keep, and there will also be the opportunity in the future to be involved in an exhibition about urban Indigeneity if you would like.

The cost of attending events and transport to the events will be covered for the purposes of this study, and involvement in the workshops will be free. During these activities I might take notes, photographs or audio record things, but I will always ask you first, and you have the right to say no to this.

Can I decide not to take part in this study?
You do not have to take part in this study if you don't want to. Taking part in this project is voluntary and you can pull out of the study at any time, even if you have agreed to take part in it by signing the consent form. You can also ask me to stop recording any conversations we are having at any time and take back any information you have provided, up until it has been analysed.

What do I have to do?
I will ask you to tell stories or give examples of your thoughts and experiences relating to a range of themes. The conversations may take approximately an hour.

I will type up the audio recordings of the discussions we have and your name and personal details will be removed from the typed version. If you decide to take part in this study and would like to pick a name for yourself you may, and we can discuss this when you sign the consent form. If you would like a copy of the written transcript from individual conversations we have had, you can ask for this.

Are there any risks involved?
Sometimes talking about our experiences of being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander can include experiences of discrimination or trauma, which can be upsetting. Although it is not the purpose of this research to explore anything that makes you feel upset, you need to be aware that this could happen. If you do feel upset about anything, you can stop or pause the discussion we are having. If you would like to speak to someone about the way you are feeling, I can organise this for you. I will also provide you with a list of contacts for support services that you can contact at any time. If there are questions you do not want to answer, you do not have to.

I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you when I write up the results of the study. Because the number of people participating in this study is small, there is a chance when this information has been written up that someone may guess the identity of people involved. I will take all care to minimise this risk.

Everything that is discussed in the conversations we have will be confidential, however you need to be aware that there is a limit to this confidentiality. If our conversations bring up significant issues of risk and safety to anyone under the age of 18, I am obliged to report this.

What will this research be used for and what are the benefits?
Contributing your voice to the conversations about Indigeneity, the things that are important to us, and the diversity of valid expressions of our identities will provide an important point of view that is missing from research in Australia. This study will provide additional stories about what it is to be a young Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person in Melbourne, focusing on the strengths and positive outcomes of Indigeneity. Your thoughts on the ways Indigeneity can be expressed will help other young people to see that there are many valid ways to be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

If you would like a copy of a short report on the findings of this study, I will take down your email details when you provide the completed consent form, so I can send this to you later. I will keep your contact details separate from any information about you including audio recordings and notes.

The notes and recording of the discussion for this research will be used in the preparation of my PhD thesis. This information may also be used for journal articles and in conference presentations. If you are interested in participating in sharing the information produced through this research, we can think about ways that you might be involved, including helping me to present, or in using the findings of this research for your own purposes.

The University of Melbourne will store the information collected for this study safely and securely, and it will be destroyed after 5 years.

Further details
If you would like more information or to take part in this project, please email me:
emilymh@student.unimeb.edu.au

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Melbourne.
If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this research project, you can contact the Manager, Human Research Ethics, Office for Research Ethics and Integrity, The University of Melbourne by phone 8344 2073 or email humanethics-complaints@unimelb.edu.au quoting HREC 1545229.

Appendix E – Consent form

Urban invisibility: identities of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban Victoria

Consent Form

For observation and interview/group discussions

Names of investigators: Ms Emily Munro-Harrison (PhD student), Dr Cathy Vaughan, A Prof Richard Chenhall and Prof Kerry Arabena (Supervisors)
Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, The University of Melbourne

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.

2. I understand that if I am under 18 years old my parent/guardian must also provide consent for me to be involved in this study.

3. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form, it will be retained by the researcher.

4. I understand that I am giving consent for observational activities, which may also include my participation in informal discussions with the researcher, spending time with the researcher, and participation in interviews.

5. I understand that during research activities the researcher will observe me, and may take **photographs** and **audio recordings**, but that I have the right to say no to this.

6. I understand that the audio files, photographs and written records of research activities will be stored at the University of Melbourne and will be destroyed after 5 years. I can ask for a copy of the written transcript if I wish.

7. I understand that this project is for the purpose of research, and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.

8. I acknowledge that:

    a. the possible effects of involvement in this research have been explained to my satisfaction;

    b. I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, that I do not need to provide an explanation and that this will not impact on my involvement in any programs or services;

    c. I have the right to withdraw any information I have provided up until it has been analyzed and incorporated into the findings of the research;

    d. I have been informed that all information I provide will remain confidential (subject to any legal requirements), but that there is a limit to confidentiality, as described in the plain language statement, and that I can make up a name for myself to be used in the report to protect my identify.

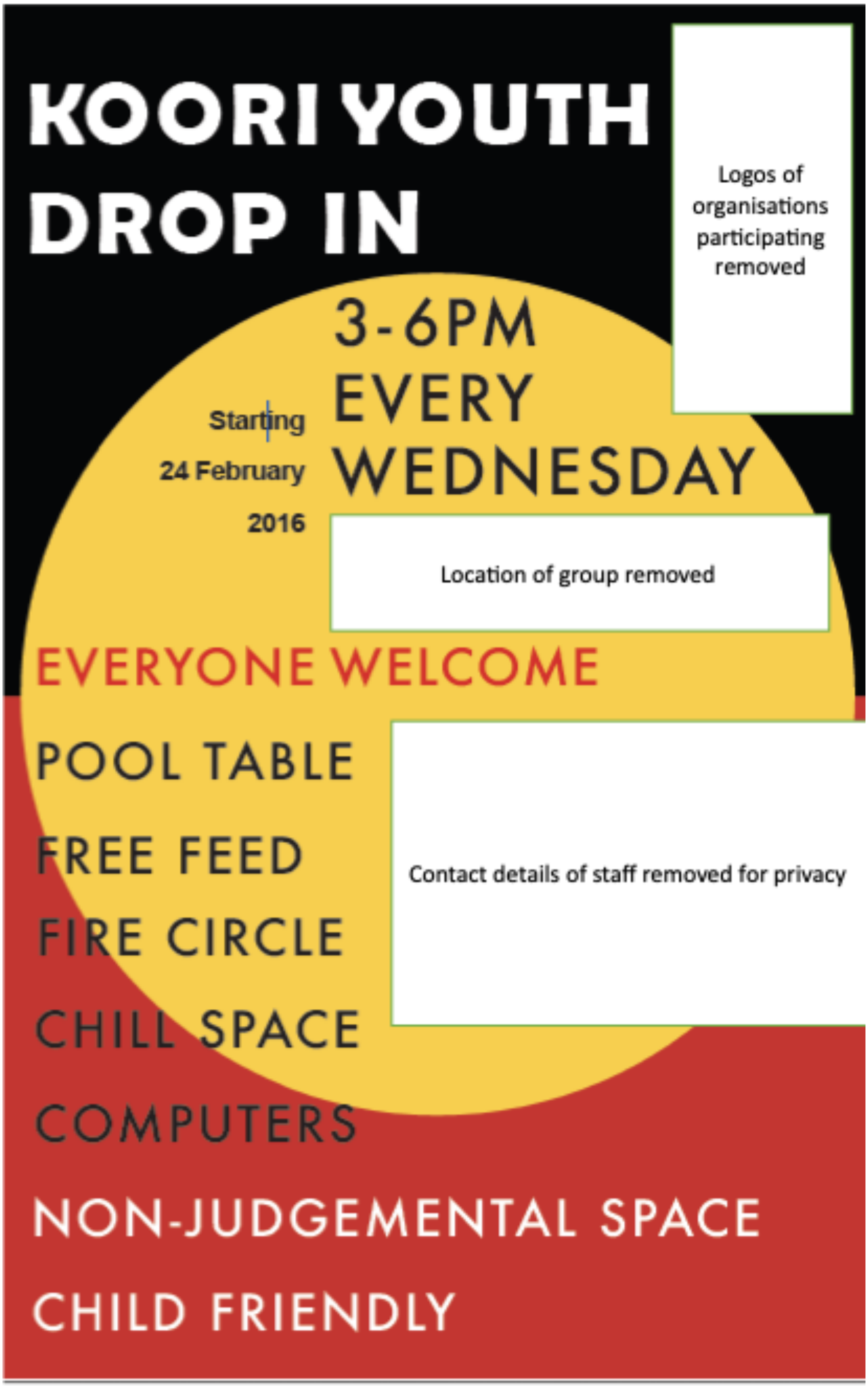
    e. Reimbursement for my involvement will be in the form of a $20 Coles Myer Voucher that I will be eligible to receive after participating in one observational activity including a discussion or interview.

Name of participant (please print):

Age of participant (if under 18 parental/guardian consent is also required):

Participant signature: **Date:**

Appendix F - Koori youth drop-in flyer



KOORI YOUTH DROP IN

3-6PM EVERY WEDNESDAY

Starting
24 February
2016

Logos of organisations participating removed

Location of group removed

EVERYONE WELCOME

POOL TABLE

FREE FEED

FIRE CIRCLE

CHILL SPACE

COMPUTERS

NON-JUDGEMENTAL SPACE

CHILD FRIENDLY

Contact details of staff removed for privacy