A WHITE WOMAN
STORIES TO DECOLONISE
(HERSelf)

MY CONSCIENCE IS A MANY FEATHERED THING

Melissa Razuki
My conscience is a many feathered thing

No pride in genocide
The history of the concerned Australian conscience in its awareness of the degradation of the Aboriginal people has not been written. Should it ever be written it will not, of course, be victory history and it will find its evidence mostly in the work of novelists, poets, dramatists, artists, film-makers and some anthropologists and archaeologists.
It will not be easy to write.

Bernard Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini*, 1980
Great Australian Silence

Why weren't we told

Situate

Reynolds Smith

Stanner Rowley

Mjecke Hokari

Ngulti Clendinnen

My conscience

Accessible to reader

Birds as a metaphor

A message to pay attention

Awareness

A layer of cosmology

Other ways of knowing

Tотems; Moieties
Tell good stories (Heiss)
Collect about FNP
Combat social conditioning
Challenge negative stereotypes
Synthesise
Reimagine
Alchemy
Co-creating like pull you in, you can
Bowerbird
Think with reader
Reader is more than a consumer
Me in the story
Research evidence in the story
Continue
Be subjective
Transformation
Manifestation of white guilt + shame
Personal
CONCERNING MY CONSCIENCE

You might have gathered I have a bird thing going on. In this chapbook, pages are flocked with birds, especially spirit birds with messages, song and the odd opinion. Why so many birds?

It could be because my favourite song tells of a spirit bird.

1 Here in the footnotes you will find the voice of the Weaver, the researcher, the academic element of this collection. She tells you about the researching and the making of these stories in reflective and reflexive ways. She also advises where the information comes from, often giving the academic context to what is going on in the body of the text.
Spirit bird
she creaks and groans
She knows she has,
seen this all before she has,
seen this all before\(^2\)

Australian singer songwriter Xavier Rudd, a fiercely proud man of Wurundjeri
descent, sings of

Many tribes
of a modern kind
doing brand new work
same spirit by side
joining hearts and hands
and ancestral twine,
ancestral twine\(^3\)

Accompanying him are the cries of a red-tailed black cockatoo, a spirit bird he
encountered in the Kimberley. Rudd tells of the day he was returning from a sacred site
in the desert when he noticed a mob of red-tailed black cockatoos in a dead tree near the
road. He had an urge to stop, aware it is unusual to see them up close. The birds began
screeching and talking to him and one old-woman spirit bird locked eyes with him and
began to creak and groan. He felt as though his feet had sunk into the ground, anchoring
him, and he couldn’t move. She looked through him, and visions and memories, places
and faces and times passed through his mind; they were not his memories. He felt her
sadness at the changes to her Country and the fear in her heart. The spirit bird gave him
the song that poured out of him that night.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) See interview with Xavier Rudd. ‘Xavier Rudd On WBD TV’, YouTube, uploaded 22 February 2013, https://
www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpLK3M1RsBY.
Rudd explains that the red-tailed black cockatoo in some First Nations cultures represents ancestors, ‘those beautiful old people, wise old souls [who] have been ground down for far too long’. The message he brings to his people is to ‘Soldier on, soldier on my good countrymen’ and keep fighting for your children, culture and land.\(^5\)

It could also be because spirit birds are so prominent in The Songman’s cosmology.\(^6\) The crow is his personal totem and in his Gunditjmara culture the red-tailed black cockatoo and the white sulphur-crested cockatoo are totemic moieties, which means they are integral to their kinship system. First Nations kinship systems govern social interaction, particularly marriage. Every Gunditjmara person and family belongs to either the black or white cockatoo moiety and within each moiety there are totems and further layers and laws to guide marriage and bloodlines within the tribe.\(^7\) The Songman is a red-tailed black cockatoo, so he could only marry into the white cockatoo line; a white cockatoo can only marry a black cockatoo. They don’t see many red-tailed blacks in the skies these days as the bird’s habitat has been ruined.

These two anecdotes demonstrate other ways of knowing in action. For Xavier Rudd, the red-tailed black cockatoo embodies ancestors and connection, and for The Songman it embodies lore and Law, ways to live and thrive. Both tell us of a highly developed social and spiritual order built over millennia, which we may find hard to see as it is in such a different shape to Western ways.\(^8\) For both, the bird is ancestral twine.

Somehow, I feel certain that native birds have become ancestral twine for me, too, though obviously not in the deep way Rudd and The Songman speak of. Birds tether me to another way of knowing: birds, especially the crow, are my daily reminders that this

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5 Rudd, ‘Spirit Bird’.

6 The Songman I refer to in the stories is my friend and mentor, Associate Professor Dr Richard Frankland. Richard is a Senior Man of the Gunditjmara people of southwestern Victoria. He is a Songman, musician, playwright, filmmaker, poet, cultural warrior and teacher. He has shared his life’s work with me for these stories. He boasts of having a possum-skin mankini and I hope this is not true.

7 Richard Frankland, in discussion with the author, February 2019. I am so fortunate to have Richard at the end of a text and phone line as a cultural advisor.

8 I explore First Nations peoples’ social order in the story ‘Ancestral Twine’ in Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing?
land is enchanted by song and spirit, and that Country is alive. Birds are a connection to my conscience, which is shaped by the fact that I live on stolen, unceded lands.

In other parts of this collection, I have portrayed my conscience as a physical manifestation, like a stone in my shoe, or the sensation of a baby moving inside me. In this chapbook, I am sharing with you how birds have poetically emerged as feathers of my conscience.

**CONNECTING CONSCIENCES**

Mine is a concerned conscience, wretched with anguish for the past and present treatment of the First Nations peoples in Australia. This conscience is not about shame and guilt, although I allow myself to feel both. It is about looking back, because I believe the past needs to be truthful and recognised, but it is also a hopeful and optimistic conscience that soars with possibilities.

While birds tether me to other ways of knowing, of a spiritual world and the connectedness of all on this earth, they are also another layer, a poetic tool, feathered metaphors.

All writers strive to achieve connection and resonance with their readers, and the craft of evocative autoethnography offers a prescription for doing this. I will share my secrets with you, revealing the lengths I go to, to engage you in my stories.

I begin with storytelling at the centre, with a moving story. Often, it is a tale of two selves where the main character (me) moves in a believable way from who I was, to who I can become. It is transformation through experience and writing as enquiry.

In this type of writing and research, it is important to move beyond the superficial to get to honesty and vulnerability. Evocative autoethnography is a hybrid method of

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9. I feel increasingly wretched as the more I learn, the more I can see what has been damaged by colonisation; but as a counter, I also see incredible hope and resilience in First Nations communities.

10. Shame and guilt are the reason many choose to stay on their couch of comfort; these emotions are too uncomfortable. This is the context into which I am writing the cultural abyss.


12. I explore the vulnerable part of my writing in *Skin in the Game*. 
writing with an orientation to research, a commitment to storytelling at the core, while acknowledging the lenses through which I see the world and engaging multiple layers of consciousness. In this way, it is a project of immersion, a way of being, seeing and living. I am constantly researching, writing, thinking and reflecting, always connecting the personal to the cultural, the autobiographical to the ethnographic, the observed to the observer. Another ‘rule’ of autoethnography is that I must willingly contaminate the data with myself. It asks that I saturate the text with the personal, my subjectivity, examining my actions and thoughts, digging for the black soil (see ‘Meandering’ in Seeping, Oozing, Blooming for an explanation of this). Although it seems to be about me, it is not really; I just use myself to connect with you, to connect lives lived apart from the time and place of the story. If I write truthfully, ethically, vulnerably, making you privy to my thoughts, I may be able to pull you in and make you care.

In this space, I must be conscious of how all these elements relate to each other and put meanings in motion. This entails understanding the co-creating of meaning that is that alchemy between you and me. I unpack this further in ‘The Bowerbird’ at the end of this chapbook. My goals are to start conversations, offer fresh eyes, promote possibilities,

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13 I have two points to make here. One: my project is immersing myself in my own way of being, seeing and living and trying to understand another way of living too. Two: I am the researcher who observes but is also observed. As this is a way of life, I draw on my everyday existence for inspiration and meaning, and this is where the birds come in. At the farm, they are constant companions and easy targets for metaphor and symbolism. See Bochner and Ellis, Evocative Autoethnography, 254.

14 Carolyn Ellis, The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography (Walnut Creek and Oxford: Alta Mira, 2004), 89.

15 Bochner and Ellis, Evocative Autoethnography, 237.

16 I go into more detail on writing vulnerably and being reflexive in my chapbook Skin in the Game, where I confront my whiteness. Pulling you in and making you care is my hope with my story ‘The Mopoke’ at the end of this chapbook. Poetic layers are my strategy here, layers of showing and telling and sharing, and I explain more about this in ‘The Bowerbird’, this chapbook.
provoking empathy and call for social justice, driven by my concerned conscience. I hope this is also my contribution.\textsuperscript{17}

How is all this achieved? I liken it to weaving. I structure and layer this collection of chapbooks with personal stories to show my connection to the subject. I synthesise other stories and incorporate relevant literature, bringing into contact the strands of the past, present and future. It is about threading and connecting lives and experiences.\textsuperscript{18} It is about ‘joining hearts and hands’.\textsuperscript{19}

You might be wondering, what were the origins of this concerned conscience? I have described some pivotal moments in ‘Epiphanies and Turning Points’, in \textit{The White Woman}, but I will share some other writers who have influenced my thinking as it situates my works. I begin with a writer who speaks to my fury that my schooling was devoid of any information about First Nations peoples and culture. In my school years, I learned more about the dispossession and oppression of Native Americans than about our home-grown genocide.\textsuperscript{20} This chapter of learning began with labelling and covering school books for my own kids.

\begin{center}
\textbf{WHY WEREN’T WE TOLD?}
\end{center}

The question leapt off the cover of the book. It was 2008, and I was unpacking boxes of my children’s schoolbooks in the hot January weeks before school was to return for a new year. As I rolled out the contact to protect the covers of the texts from exploding lunch bags and typical school-kid grime, I emptied the box of prescribed books onto the kitchen table. One title caught my eye: \textit{Why Weren’t We Told?: A Personal Search for

\textsuperscript{17} This is a ‘what am I hoping to achieve’ statement. I explore my aims, goals and contribution further in \textit{The White Woman}. Originally, I listed ‘giving voice to the silenced’ as one of my goals. It was quite rightly red flagged, as I cannot speak on behalf of people and as an autoethnographic practice this is about my voice. That white saviour creeps up on me all the time.

\textsuperscript{18} Ellis, \textit{The Ethnographic I}, 296.

\textsuperscript{19} Rudd, ‘Spirit Bird’.

\textsuperscript{20} Bizarrely, I also knew how Native Americans used every single part of a buffalo in their daily lives. First Nations peoples also used every part of a kangaroo, but that was not on the curriculum.
the Truth about Our History, by historian Henry Reynolds. Reynolds’s Why Weren’t We Told? (2000) is a frank memoir of his personal journey towards the realisation that he – like generations of Australians, including me – grew up with a distorted and whitewashed version of Australia’s past. He explains that the extent of that deficiency was not apparent to him at the time. He grew up knowing little about the history of Aboriginal-European relations, and nothing about contact and conflict on the frontier, of massacres and punitive expeditions. Like so many Anglo-Australians, Reynolds knew nothing of protective and repressive legislation and of the ideology and practice of white racism, although he had a basic awareness ‘we’ had treated ‘them’ rather badly in the past.

Why Weren’t We Told? is Reynolds’s own story of his career as an Australian historian and his shifting lens. What is important about this text (part history, part memoir and part historiography) is his reflection on the process of researching and writing history, and his critical reflexivity, seeing how the process affected him, his peers and family and the reading public.

My journey to decolonise is similar to that of Reynolds, as we have both had to unsee the past painted as peaceful and heroic, and shatter the myths that are celebrated in classic white Aussie ballads, poems and paintings. With this book, Reynolds confronts anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner’s Great Australian Silence that pervaded the twentieth century, examining frontier violence without glorifying either side, revealing murders, betrayals and genocide. It is not about apportioning blame and shame, but it may prompt the non-Aboriginal reader to confront their complicity in racism and their own patterns of racist thought and prejudices.


22 Bruce Elder’s Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Australian Aborigines since 1788 (Frenchs Forest: Child & Associates, 1988) is another book that taught me about the devastating violence visited on the First Nations on the frontiers.

23 Think of the work of Banjo Patterson, Henry Lawson, the Bulletin, and the Heidelberg School of painting. I elaborate on this specifically in my story ‘Pioneering Propaganda’, in Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing?

Why Weren’t We Told? was a prescribed text for my son’s Year 10 Indigenous History elective. I had encouraged him, and in subsequent years his two brothers, to take the subject, envious that no such subject had been available to me in my schooling.

At the time, I dutifully (and as I reflect now, somewhat ironically) covered the book in protective plastic, named it and placed it among the neat piles which promised the year’s learning for each of my four offspring. I did not open the book, but the title lingered like a wart in my unconscious mind. What weren’t we told?

Each week, my son began to fill in the gaps for me ... invasion, dispossession, exploitation, appropriation, dislocation, raped women, stolen children, hundreds of massacres like Myall Creek and Coniston, sweets laced with strychnine, damper dosed with arsenic, smallpox-infected blankets. How could I know so little about our Australian history and treatment of the First Nations peoples? I began to read.

In 1968, Australian anthropologist W. E. H. ‘Bill’ Stanner put a quoll among the parrots during a Boyer lecture, in which he pilloried our society for its ‘cult of forgetfulness’:

25 The issuing of government blankets contributed to the death of individuals and the death of a cultural practice. In cooler climates, possum skin cloaks had been each person’s ‘blanket’ from birth, a few pelts sewn together for each baby and added to as they grew, until they were buried in the cloaks, by this time decorated on the inside with their Dreaming path. Inevitably through dispossession, First Nations peoples’ access to resources such as possums and kangaroo sinew to sew the pelts was disrupted too. The pelts were resistant to water; blankets not so. There are suggestions small pox came with the First Fleet and it was spread to the First Nations peoples in an act of biological warfare. This cannot be proven. For more information see Chris Warren, ‘Was Sydney’s Smallpox Outbreak of 1789 an Act of Biological Warfare against Aboriginal Tribes?’, Ockham’s Razor, Radio National, 17 April 2014, https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/ockhamsrazor/was-sydneys-smallpox-outbreak-an-act-of-biological-warfare/5395050. However, there is documented evidence that this was a strategy in the United States, specifically at Fort Pitt. As Field Marshal Jeffery wrote: ‘Could it not be contrived to Send the Small Pox among those Disaffected Tribes of Indians? We must, on this occasion, Use Every Stratagem in our power to Reduce them.’ Patrick J. Kiger, ‘Did Colonists Give Infected Blankets to Native Americans as Biological Warfare?’, History, 2019, https://www.history.com/news/colonists-native-americans-smallpox-blankets.

26 I began writing to a ‘reluctant audience’. As I began to share this work with people around me I could see that it was the curious people who wanted to know more. Why chase the ‘intractable’? I needed to create something that those who felt the same gap as me would like to read.
It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale.²⁷

He argued that Australian history was incomplete. In a presentation titled ‘After the Dreaming’, he invoked the spectre of ‘the Great Australian Silence’, asserting that narratives of Australia had been positively perfumed, rendering Aboriginal voices and experiences of colonisation invisible.²⁸ Stanner’s view was that it was a systematic and


²⁸ Ibid.
calculated process to deny the presence of the several hundred thousand Aboriginal people who lived and died due to colonisation. Such views were later taken up by historians like Charles Rowley and Henry Reynolds, who suggested that settler Australians had a mental block which prevented them from coming to terms with the past. They were telling us our history stank.

In his 1980 Boyer lecture, ‘The Spectre of Truganini’, historian Bernard Smith echoed Stanner’s laments and explored the ‘mechanisms of forgetfulness’. Both argued that this silence was a structural mechanism for writing the First Peoples out of sight and mind. Entire generations of non-Aboriginal Australians passed without ever meeting, thinking about, considering or seeking an engagement with anyone from the First Nations.

Smith’s lecture had a great influence on my thinking, especially his question: ‘What effects did the continuing presence of the Aboriginal culture have upon the emergence of Australian culture?’ There was a continuing presence, but the First Peoples were invisible, voiceless, unrepresented. Smith’s lectures, told through the prism of literature and creative arts, guided my understanding of how white people have been socially engineered through our culture to not see Aboriginal Australia. He could see ‘that a conflict of attitudes and feelings existed between Aborigines and convicts from

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31 I explore this from a personal point of view in ‘Decolonising Myself’, in The White Woman.

32 Smith, The Spectre of Truganini, 7.

33 Through my friendship with The Songman (Richard Frankland) I see now that First Nations peoples are increasingly using the arts for their voice: musicians like Gurrumul, Xavier Rudd, A. B. original; the ABC television shows Cleverman, Redfern Now and Black Comedy; writer and actor Nakkiah Lui; filmmaker Warwick Thornton; writers such as Ellen van Neervan, Bruce Pascoe, Anita Heiss, Melissa Lukashenko and Natalie Harkin; artists including Bindi Cole, Brook Andrew, Yhonnie Scarce and weaver Yvonne Koolmartrie. I feel the Australian psychic landscape changing as these voices gain agency and momentum, but you have to be open to hearing them.
the first days of settlement at Sydney, and that from this conflict the history of racist attitudes could be traced’.  

In 1999, another Boyer lecture poked and prodded the nation’s conscience. In her lectures, *True Stories*, Inga Clendinnen posits that we need true stories about our history and argues for the rejection of any single, simple account of the Australian past. She urged us to be responsive to a multiplicity of stories and open to the experiences of different individuals in different situations.

Historian Minoru Hokari also argues for us to be open to other ways of seeing history and other ways of knowing, to challenge the monoculture of the mind with ‘dangerous history’. As Hokari began to see that First Nations peoples see the past differently, he spoke up against the dominance of ‘good history’ and questioned the nature of constructing history through the Western academic paradigm. He saw good history as a product and captive of Western knowledge, distracted by empiricism, disenchanted through science, and centralised and universalised by the institutions that hold and maintain it. These histories seek to uphold and maintain the dominant culture’s power relationships.

I am not alone in my struggle to reconcile this inherent contradiction of writing about decolonisation in a colonial context of creating new knowledge (that is, within the academy). For some, like Professor Stephen Muecke, a pioneer in Indigenous Cultural Studies, this awareness evolves and adapts as his experience deepens. Significantly, he addresses this in the preface to the second edition (2005) of his book *Textual Spaces*, first published in 1992, titled ‘Would I Do It Differently Now?’

34 Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini*, 9. See my story ‘Pioneering Propaganda’ in *Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing?*, which tells of how I came to the realisation that the First Nations peoples were painted out of the landscape.


In this reflective essay, Muecke acknowledges a controversial and terrain-stamping representational shift in his career to appreciate that it ‘was as materially and politically important how Aborigines were talked about as it was to say what “they” might “be”’. This was a reaction to ‘othering’, the practice of discussing Aboriginal people as if they were not present in a distant third person, and it motivated Muecke to develop a style of language and practice to position himself and include others.37

Muecke concludes the reflection with revised guiding principles to consider in research. He advocates an open and inventive attitude to the world where we use our intellectual projects to make connections between new tools and new methods, rather than reinventing discourses. I see my methodology of evocative autoethnography including poetic layers as following Muecke’s guidelines as it challenges certainties and harnesses the experimental nature of research, welcoming the accidental and the contingent as new ways of looking at the world. I sense he sees the infinite interconnectedness in the natural world as he has had exceptionally generous teachers in Paddy Roe and the Goolarabooloo.

37 Stephen Muecke, Textual Spaces (Perth: API Network, 2005). Muecke recounts that this position won him few fans among the empiricist ‘conservative truth addicts’ who viewed language as transparent and giving access to the real. This was the academy flexing its dominant knowledge-production muscles.
I hear when he is up, cruising the thermals. The sky is raucous with protest and panic, worried birds warning friends. That clever feather on the wings of the crested pigeons does its job, whistling alarm. Some take to the sky to chase him away, fight in flight.

Reggie, the brown kelpie tracks him on the ground, barking.

The chooks and ducks take cover.

Above is Bundjil the wedge-tailed eagle, creator spirit to the Boon wurrung people, the traditional owners of Mornington Peninsula. Bundjil taught the Boon wurrung to always welcome guests, but they had to promise they would obey his laws not to harm the children or the land of Bundjil. Often, you will hear these words in a Welcome to Country.
Arweet Carolyn Briggs tells of the time in 1803 when the first settlement of white men arrived in the town we call Sorrento. Her ancestors were frightened, although they had heard of these white people from other groups and nations along their trading routes. The Old People convened to discuss the crisis confronting them and returned to the people to share the two visions they had seen for the future.

The first vision was of a time of great crisis. These visitors were not going to leave and they were going to break many laws of Bundjil: they would kill animals but not eat the meat; the murnong (yam daisy) crops would be destroyed; the creeks and rivers would be dammed, which in turn stopped the ilk (eels) from breeding. The water would turn from blue to brown and fire would ravage their Country. The Old People saw death and pain in their communities.

The second vision foresaw a time many years later. The white people had stayed and eventually they began to understand the laws of Bundjil and the Boon wurrung. The Old People saw that the spirit of the Boon wurrung would be reborn, water would again run clean, forests would regrow and the strong spirit of the traditional

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38 Arweet (leader) Carolyn Briggs is an Elder of the Boon wurrung (also written as Boonwurrung and Bunurong) people in Victoria. Aunty Carolyn is recognised as a keeper of the history and genealogies of her people. She is a language and linguistics expert and is dedicated to recording her Boon wurrung language in oral and written form. She has been active in community development, Native Title, cultural preservation and cultural promotion. I have chosen to spell Bundjil with a ‘d’ (also written as Bunjil) as Carolyn Briggs does in her text The Journey Cycles of the Boonwurrung (Fitzroy: Victorian Corporation for Languages, 2014).

owners, their culture and their enjoyment of Country would again be reflected in this land.\textsuperscript{40}

We have a pair of eagles nesting next door, high in an old gum. Sometimes they are three, until the fledgling takes off. They are my feathered reminders of what \textit{was} and \textit{is}, a social order and way of knowing, unbroken for millennia.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
'Tell good stories about our people.' The overwhelming message from the writers’ workshop was that we must strive to send out good stories about First Nations peoples and cultures; there is enough detritus in the zeitgeist already.

Writer and scholar Dr Anita Heiss, a formidable Wiradjuri woman, led us through a whiteboard exercise to list all the negative thoughts that fester in our minds, impregnated with a social conditioning that espouses a social order where white is right, West is best.
This social conditioning just happens in our society where white Western ways are the dominant culture. It is there in our heads, whether we want those perceptions or not. Welcome to whiteness.  

Such superficial perceptions, negative narratives and lazy stereotypes sabotage First Nations peoples. Australian writers should take responsibility for challenging such stories and tropes and encourage new and positive ways to view the First Nations peoples and their cultures.

Our stories should respectfully explore other ways of knowing and being, engaging with the extraordinary cultures and practices integral to this land for millennia: song, art, dance, story and its modern evolutions. We should try to demonstrate the incredible connection to the natural world and the role, obligations and responsibilities First Peoples assume in caring for it. We should represent the diversity of the First Nations peoples whether they are saltwater, river, sun-up, sun-down, desert or urban dwellers. Traits such as resilience, humour, mischief and hospitality are all pertinent to storytelling around the First Nations peoples. We do not need to inhabit their characters to do this.

I build on this in the chapbook *I’m Not Racist, but …* and the story ‘Ancestral Twine’ in *Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing?*
A trick to weaving these elements into my work is to link them to universal stories and the human experience, as readers want stories they can connect to. Mindful that Australians love a cheeky character, I decided to deploy a wily willie wagtail as an omnipresent First Nations anecdotist.

This literary device was inspired by the novel *The Book Thief* (2005) by Markus Zuzak, and his use of Death as an omnipresent narrator. Readers finds themselves beguiled by Death’s voice, which ironically exudes more humanity than humans, exposing the contours of their inhumanity, leaving him to reflect in the final line that he is ‘haunted by humans’.42

I chose the willie wagtail as it is curious and bold, but it is a bird to be wary of as it has quite a reputation with certain Aboriginal communities. Many are cautious as it is known to be a gossip and stealer of secrets, so they practise respect and exercise discretion in its presence and stay tight-lipped. It is thought to loiter around the edges of camps, listening in to conversations, then sharing the secrets. The Kimberley peoples think it will tell a recently passed loved one if they speak badly of them. In Arnhem Land,

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it is a liar and tattletale. Others see it as a bad omen and expeditions would have been cancelled if a willie wagtail was spotted in the morning. The Arrernte people believe if you kill one you will be punished with a spell of very cold weather. The Songman’s Gunditjmara people are also circumspect about this bird.

The Pitjantjara people in central Australia call it *tjintir-tjintirpa* due to the clicking sound it makes and I was given permission to use this cultural name for it in my writing.\(^43\) One would visit me when I was writing; chatting and wagging near the doorway. It seemed to ‘talk’ to me for a while but then its voice became drowned out.

The crow took over, possibly because he is *my* omnipresent narrator. First Nations peoples have totems that are integral to their deep spiritual and custodial connections to Country. The Songman’s totem is a crow. The day he said he would share his life’s work with me, he explained it came with a personal promise to keep me ‘safe’ in his world (as it takes *some* navigating). I found I had developed an ear and eye for the crow and I mused it was watching out for me.\(^44\) Whenever I hear or see a crow, I smile, nod, or say hello, much to my family’s amusement.

I asked The Songman if I may share this with you. Rather than say yes, he built on my understanding of this connection (that is also an invitation), showing me how an Elder teaches in wise, wily ways.

Sometimes, when a person has too much noise and chaos around them, he tells them to find just one sound and to listen to it in a tube in their head. When they have listened enough, they pack away that sound in the tube and find another sound and do the same. One by one, they filter and file the sounds until the noise becomes manageable. By segmenting the noise, you can choose what you want to hear and listen to, and what

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\(^{43}\) One of my doctoral supervisors, Professor Barry Judd, introduced me to this bird. It is ‘his’ bird and they call it *tjintir-tjintirpa* in his mother’s Country.

\(^{44}\) On the morning I was travelling into RMIT University for the third milestone for my doctorate, the completion seminar, I was waiting at a busy Richmond station for a train and there was a persistent crow calling. I smiled. My phone then rang. It was The Songman to wish me luck. I proffered that the crow was saying good morning to me; he said it was saying much more than that and went on to explain what the crow’s calling meant.
you want to visualise. The Songman said this way teaches you how to see deeper than the edge of the trees, you can see right into the bush.  

I asked him if I could share this with you; that is why I told you, he said. Such is the story of how the crow usurped the wagtail.

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45 I have tried it. It enchants your space. You sense the layers of consciousness. It makes my heart sing, especially when I do it with bird song, or the wind. It is a lesson in paying attention.
Do you remember the kerfuffle about the desperate plight of the orange-bellied parrot? This rare migrating indigenous bird (one of only two migrating parrots in the world!) sent Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett in a flap in the 1990s, scuppering his plans for chemical storage outside of Geelong. This ‘trumped-up Corella’ (Kennett’s moniker) also threatened a potential wind farm until its guardians negotiated special funding for its recovery, and an ‘endangered’ status, on its behalf.

I wonder whether this lucky parrot’s defenders would be so passionate about the traditional custodians of that Country, the Wathaurong people, and their endangered culture and language? ‘I think that Australia holds one of the world’s records for linguicide, for the killing of language’, declared the University of Adelaide’s linguistics
Professor Ghil’ad Zuckermann. ‘I often wonder why so many people are so afraid of pandas disappearing and they couldn’t care less about language’, he said.\textsuperscript{46}

Here are some facts on the state of First Nations languages in Australia.\textsuperscript{47}

More than 250 Indigenous Australian languages, including 800 dialectal varieties, were spoken on the continent at the time of European invasion/settlement in 1788.

Today, approximately only thirteen Indigenous Australian languages have a sufficient number of young people speaking them to sustain the language into the future.

Approximately another 100 or so are spoken to various degrees by older generations, with many of these languages at risk as Elders pass away.

‘In my community, it was common to speak ten languages. Speaking three wasn’t that impressive’, recalls Pilbara woman Lorraine Injie when reflecting on her childhood.\textsuperscript{48}

The colonial powers and settlers assumed the First Nations languages were primitive, just like the people who spoke them. On missions and reserves, speaking First Nations language was forbidden. This devaluing of languages eventually hardened into government policy and white society reinforced the approach through education and employment practices. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were made to feel ashamed of their language. This shame, embedded in the policy that brought about the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} These facts are courtesy of Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Studies (AIATSIS). The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages. ‘Indigenous Australian Languages’, AIATSIS, last reviewed 14 March 2019, https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/indigenous-australian-languages.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Lorraine Injie remembers the rich patchwork of Aboriginal languages used during her childhood in Australia’s remote Pilbara region and laments the decline in use of ‘native tongue’, a result of generations of children being told never to speak in their mother tongue for fear of shame, retribution and discrimination. This is a good story, telling how Lorraine would travel from Port Hedland to Sydney six times a year to join three other First Nations women at Sydney University’s Koori Centre, where she joins three other women to study for a Master of Indigenous languages. After their graduation, all of them planned to introduce classes in local schools. See ‘Australia Tries to Halt Loss of Aboriginal Languages’, \textit{Courier Mail}, 25 October 2010, https://www.couriermail.com.au/news/national/australia-tries-to-halt-loss-of-aboriginal-languages/news-story/0d0ccbf9745bf6c81c98f4f0764dbfed.
\end{itemize}
Stolen Generations, sought to break the link between generations, and many children grew up without any knowledge of their kin’s language.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provides a classification system and an online interactive ‘Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger’ to show just how ‘in trouble’ these languages are.49 ‘Safe’ indicates the language is spoken by all generations and intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted; I imagine this as the kangaroo of languages. There are seventeen ‘vulnerable’ languages where most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains such as the home; think of the Australian humpback dolphin. There are thirteen ‘definitely endangered’ languages in communities where the children no longer learn the language as a mother tongue at home; in trouble like the Tasmanian devil.

‘Severely endangered’ languages, of which there are thirty across the continent, are spoken by grandparents, and while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to the kids or among themselves; as rare as a Leadbetter’s possum. Sadly, top of the list is the ‘critically endangered’ languages, where the youngest speakers are grandparents and older and they may not be fluent or use it often. This pertains to forty-two languages; the fauna equivalent is our orange-bellied avian friend. Extinct means there are no speakers of the language to be found, like the Tasmanian tiger.

The irony of white Australia’s fervent campaigning for vanishing native flora and fauna and the contrasting apathy

about the finite future of First Nations languages struck me when I came across the insights of Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis. An ‘Explorer in Residence’ for *National Geographic*, Davis urged us to action. This articulate defender says every time an Elder dies, he ‘carries to the grave the last syllables of an ancient tongue’. Ancient thoughts, stories, songs and sounds of Country will cease to be whispered into the ears of children. First Nations languages are ‘old growth forests of the mind, a watershed of thought, ecosystems of social, spiritual and psychological possibilities’. The media bombards us with biological ecosystems we should be preserving, but are the stress levels and preservation of old growth river red gums in the Murray more deserving than the culture of their traditional custodians such as the Ngarrindjeri, Wemba Wemba or Yorta Yorta peoples?

First Nations languages are much more than vocabulary and grammar. They carry essential characteristics unique to people and communities. Language is the vehicle within which cultural knowledge is stored: collective memory, values, morals, stories, knowledge, song and identities. Languages embody the spoken spirit of country, the ancestors, human and non-human kin (like totems). Dreaming stories and tracks are embedded in language, enabling the culture’s soul and knowledge to come into the material world and be transmitted.

By respecting and valuing First Nations heritage, the First Nations peoples are encouraged to find strength and sustenance in the past and inhabit the contemporary world with a strong sense of identity, connectedness and belonging.

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Yolngu Elder, Yalmay Yunupingu, a Rirratjingu woman from Yirrkala, a gifted linguist, teacher and strong advocate of bilingual or ‘two-way’ learning explains: ‘Yolngu language is our power, our foundation, our root and everything that holds us together. [It] gives us strength, language is our identity, who we are. Yolngu language gives us pride. Language is our law and justice.’51

Words are easy, words are cheap
Much cheaper than our priceless land
But promises can disappear
Just like writing in the sand
Treaty yeah treaty now treaty yeah

This land was never given up
This land was never bought and sold
The planting of the Union Jack
Never changed our law at all
Now two rivers run their course
Separated for so long
I’m dreaming of a brighter day
When the waters will be one
Treaty yeah, treaty now, treaty yeah, treaty nowah treaty now52


52 I include Dr M. Yunupingu’s comments about this song as they reveal how this ‘anthem’ is grounded in language and culture: ‘The intention of this song was to raise public awareness about this so the government would be encouraged to hold to his promise. The song became a number-one hit, the first ever to be sung in a Yolngu language and caught the public’s imagination. Though it borrows from rock ‘n’ roll, the whole structure of ‘Treaty’ is driven by the beat of the djatpangarri that I’ve incorporated in it. It was an old recording of this historic djatpangarri that triggered the song’s composition. The man who originally created it was my gurru (maternal great-grandmother’s husband) and he passed away a long time ago in 1978. He was a real master of the djatpangarri style.’ See SBS News, ‘Read the Lyrics of Yothu Yindi Song “Treaty”’, SBS News, 3 September 2013, https://www.sbs.com.au/news/read-the-lyrics-of-yothu-yindi-song-treaty.
Regardless of whether language is acquired later in life, as has been the case with many of the Stolen Generations, this knowledge instils a cultural connection and a sense of belonging and wellbeing. First Nations peoples’ culture and the Dreaming introduces us to different worldviews and is an invitation to share in the traditions and wisdom of the First Nations peoples. ‘In the language are our ideas and we need them, the world needs them’, posits Bruce Pascoe, Boon wurrung writer.53

I don’t see this as the traditional versus the modern. Rather, we need to ask ourselves, what sort of world do we want to live in? Homogeny is overrated. In the last 200 years, colonialism has silenced the country’s diverse tongues. We must acknowledge that our worldview is not the only way. Do we want these extraordinary voices silenced forever?

The Adnyamathanha people in the Northern Flinders Ranges are one of the many communities who are vocal about the need to revive, reclaim, protect, preserve and strengthen traditional languages. Coordinator of the language group, Gillian Bovoro, says:

Australians and the rest of the world need to know that Aboriginal Languages are still here and need to be encouraged and preserved to keep our people strong. We have a voice that make us uniquely Australian. We have a language that goes on for thousands of years, and some are still as fluent as it was all those years ago. I think it’s important and should be brought forward for all Australians to see and hear and respect.54

53 Pascoe, cited in Parker, ‘NT Government Accused of Endangering Culture’.

54 Bovoro, cited in Parker, ‘NT Government Accused of Endangering Culture’. In History and The Poet, Robert Wood laments the dominance of English in Australia and the ‘great silence on Indigenous languages in the poetry community’ (34). He argues for poets to realise the potential of the available linguistic material, especially First Nations’ (non-sacred) linguistic knowledge, and calls for the ‘possibility of new poetry, and with it revolutionary decolonisation’ (32–3). Many poets, he says, use this situation so that they are spared from engaging in an authentic way, which in itself is complicity. ‘That we should continue to be so uneducated on Indigenous issues is plainly criminal’ (34), he writes. There is no excuse for us writers: ‘the archive is bountiful and … one can visit country without ever leaving one’s computer’ (34). To create literature that resonates with our nature and society, writers need to cultivate a playful, respectful relationship with First Nations languages. He says these languages are the ‘firm bedrock … all else is top soil’ (34). Robert Wood, History and the Poet: Essays on Australian Poetry (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2017).
With the spread of English as the dominant language through the efforts of British imperialism, and later, American globalisation, language speakers are fighting for the survival of their first tongues. A writer’s or singer’s reach and success can be so much greater if they write or perform in a dominant language. Along one of my many meandering research paths, I came across a writer who chose to abandon the dominant language, English, although it had been the vehicle of his success. I will tell you a little about him, as his actions are a fierce declaration of defiance and decolonisation.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o is a Kenyan literary giant and one of Africa’s most articulate social critics. He was born in 1938 as James Thiong’o Ngugi, but later adopted his traditional name once he became more sensitised to the insidious effects of colonialism in Africa. Born into a large peasant family, he was schooled in Kenya and later studied in Uganda and Britain. Kenya, a British colony, was a major theme of Ngũgĩ’s first works, explored through his literary skills including his short stories, newspaper columns and prizewinning novels. His successes drew him into academia, where he specialises in English Literature, which he has taught at the University of Nairobi, and holds ancillary fellowships and professorships at international universities. He is currently Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine.

Ngũgĩ was drawn into the politics of schools’ English departments in Africa, championing changing the name from ‘English’ to simply ‘Literature’ to challenge the conflation of literariness with the English language and to reflect the global diversity of literature. In 1972 he co-authored the manifesto ‘On the Abolition of the English Department’ with his colleagues Henry Owuor-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong, galvanising a debate at home and abroad, which went on to become the heart of postcolonial theories. In this piece, they questioned the dominance of Western culture and sought instead to centralise African literature.

Ngũgĩ published further novels and plays to both acclaim and criticism as he was deeply critical of the inequalities and injustices of Kenyan society, attacking capitalism, religious hypocrisy and corruption among Kenya’s rising economic elite. Ngũgĩ publicly

aligned himself with ordinary Kenyans, championing their cause and communicating with them in the languages of their daily lives, Gikuyu, the language of the Bantu family. Following performances of these plays, Ngũgĩ was detained in prison for a year without trial.

While in the maximum-security Kamiti Maximum Prison, Ngũgĩ made the decision to abandon English as his primary language of creative writing and resolved only to write in Gikuyu or Kiswahili from that point on. Amnesty International named him a prisoner of conscience and an international campaign secured his release in December 1978. He was barred from jobs at Kenyan universities but continued to agitate, and there were threats to his safety. Ngũgĩ was forced into exile in Britain and the United States, where he is now at the University of California. He is a distinguished speaker and the recipient of many honours, including the 2001 Nonino International Prize for Literature and twelve honorary doctorates.

My connection to Ngũgĩ’s work was through his book *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), a collection of essays about language and its constructive role in national culture, history, and identity. He advocates for linguistic decolonisation, insisting on the freedom for people to tell their own stories in their own cultural shape, in their own languages:

> It is an ever-continuing struggle to seize back their [the colonised] creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space. The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe.\(^\text{57}\)

> ‘Without a language, you do not have cultural autonomy, you do not have intellectual sovereignty, you do not have culture, you do not have heritage’, laments Professor Zuckermann. \(^\text{58}\) This is supported by Torres Strait Islander woman Leonora Adidi, whose language is Kala Lagaw Ya. She says without her language she would be

\(^{56}\) Also written as Kikuyu.


\(^{58}\) Zuckermann, cited in Haxton, ‘Call to Protect Dying Indigenous Languages’.
unable to express vital parts of her culture: ‘It concerns me that we are rapidly losing it and because language is a large part of our identity, that if we lose our language, we lose a big part of ourselves, we basically don’t know who we are and we can’t express who we are.’

‘What could be lonelier than to be the last of your people to speak your language?’ asks Wade Davis.

I’m sure that ‘trumped-up Corella’ would agree.

59 Adidi, cited in Haxton, ‘Call to Protect Dying Indigenous Languages’. Robert Wood suggests a reframing of how Australians ‘see’ First Nations languages. He advocates we see First Nations language work as ‘aesthetic rather than anthropological’, and then we may begin to engage with ‘the bedrock of language here in this place’. He argues that it is about retraining the senses, listening and seeing Gunditjmara or Yolgnu poetics, their tongue, learning from their archives, their Elders, their ways of seeing and being in the world. Robert Wood, History and the Poet, 54.
I bought them from the Gippsland chook sales: a curious day out. Three runner ducklings to add to the chicken coop. The coop has a number of names, dreamt up by my husband. He was so pleased with his array of names, he has included them all above doors, gates and even a sign post: Palais de Poulet, Cluckingham Palace, Angkor Wat The Cluck, Chook Mahal, The Egg Whitehouse, Burj al Orp ...

I was hoping they would be pets and love me, but, sadly, I call them my running-away-ducks as they refuse to be friendly. I have Darlene, the brown female, and Phil and Bill, the drakes. I had to Google how to sex them as babies. As adults, the male has a yellow beak and sprouts a ridiculous curly feather on its behind, but this takes...
time to show. To sex as ducklings, you have to catch them and listen to their sounds: drakes make a Donald Duck rasping noise and ducks quack.

They have changed the pecking order of the chicken coop and the two drakes appear to rule the roost. This morning I watched as Bill, the white drake, chased our rampant black rooster, Mandingo, off a chicken as he attempted copulation. Bill looks cross, leans forward, head down and waddles at speed towards the rooster, body slamming him off the chook. (Once he tried to hop on himself, but I put a stop to that.) This is a daily dance that has revealed to me the impact my research has on my everyday lens.

I see Bill’s persecution of Mandingo as a metaphor for colonisation. This unconscious association has come from an artwork hanging on a wall in our living area, a coloured linoprint of a large white swan clutching the neck of a wounded and bleeding black swan, a water fowl endemic to southern Australia.

Supping on swan was once a mark of status in Britain. For a plate of swan, one had to pay the monarchy for the privilege, as all unmarked mute swans swimming in the open waters of England and Wales belong to the reigning monarch. Thus, the white swan is an eternal emblem of royalty and a fitting representation of the Crown in Wiradjuri artist Kevin Gilbert’s artwork Colonising Species (1989). Gilbert (1933–1993) was amongst the first of his People to practice lino-cut print-making.

In Gilbert’s artwork we see a white swan holding a black swan in its beak. The black swan is drooping, dead. The blood drips onto the crown and into the lower half of the backdrop summoning the symbolism of the Aboriginal flag with its central sun. In the other half of the work is a backdrop of ancestors including Wandjina figures, watching what has passed over time. Colonising Species is a deeply cultural and spiritual work, and a politically charged and highly symbolic reminder of the cruelty and brutality of colonisation. Gilbert explored many platforms to advocate for justice and a treaty for

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60 I suspect you are wanting to have a word with me about the naming of my rooster. It was a bit of mischief on my part, but the name stuck. Is it fetishising, is it racist, or is it just funny to those who remember the film? We have a history of dubious naming – my sister calls our other unwanted rooster Herpes for obvious reasons, which has given rise to an unfortunate theme among his young male offspring, all of whom are destined for a stock pot. When do I decide to reconstruct my family’s ways, and when do I step back?

61 Kevin Gilbert, Colonising Species, 1989, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
his people, including art, playwriting, poetry and political writing, such as *Aboriginal Sovereignty, Justice, the Law and Land* (1988), *Because a White Man’ll Never Do It* (1973), and *Living Black* (1977).* In a speech in 1992 at the National Gallery of Australia, Gilbert described his evolution as an artist:

As a child sitting, drawing in the ashes of the campfires with twigs and charcoal, aware of the old pieces of tin, hessian bag and canvas that formed our shanty, our humpies, I never even dreamed of being an artist. I was very much aware of the colonial attitudes, the injustice of having my land, Wiradjuri land, stolen from us, my people forced to live in refugee situations, on travelling stock reserves forbidden to be in the white township after dark, the tens of decades of massacre, oppression, abuse of our human rights.*

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Throughout this story are verses of a found poem I wrote about this journey. The words are taken from Gisela Kaplan, *Tawny Frogmouth* (Collingwood: CSIRO, 2007).

I AM HAUNTED
BY A STORY
AND A SONG -
A BOY AND BIKE
AND A DEATH BIRD
IN A BARK CLOAK
WHO SEES DANGER
WHO CALLS DEATH
MO-POKE, MO-POKE.

64
There is this bird ... She turns to wood. She masquerades as bark or branch. Her cryptic plumage is pale grey with white flecks, heavily streaked and mottled with charcoal and browns. There is an adorable tuft of long, fine, feathery bristles above her blue-grey beak, which is slightly hooked and feathered to the tip. It is a very broad beak with a huge gape, like a frog; hence her name, which is designed to scare. In bird anatomy, the gape is the inside of the open mouth of a bird. The width of the gape determines what she eats: insects, small invertebrates like frogs, worms, slugs, snails and small mammals like mice. She glides noiselessly, catching a moth or mouse with her mouth, not her feet. In fact, her toes and talons tell us much about what she does and what she is. She’s not an owl because owls catch with their feet. She catches with her beak, she is a nightjar.

She is a night hunter. Until nightfall, life has little interest for her. Her daytime roost is on the branch of the Jacaranda outside our bedroom window. Some call her sullen, or a little scary, but I fear she is judged by her unlovely face. When I see her, I feel both delight and foreboding. I will start with foreboding.

I think she’s a mopoke and I don’t want to hear her cry.

In First Nations stories, birds are often the messengers of the spirit ancestors. They feature strongly in tales, totems and dance. If we pay attention, birds have much to teach us.

The Nyoongah people of Western Australia say the call of the mopoke – the *gubulgari* – is a harbinger of doom. When they hear the *gubulgari* after dark, they hear an omen, a message that they will die or that somebody among them will be affected by death.⁶⁵

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The Songman says his Gunditjmara people say the same. The mopoke is the death bird, hence my foreboding. I have a harbinger of doom snoozing outside my bedroom window each day.

When I tell The Songman she is there, I think he sounds concerned. Hmmm, he says.

What does it want with me, I wonder?

It may be the Old People watching out for you ...

This is what happens when you open yourself up to another way of seeing and knowing. You take notice of nature around you. What the land is saying. That is not to say I know what it is saying. But I am choosing to pay attention and see where it leads me, walking the Muecke way.

I know about the mopoke because The Songman is haunted by the boy and a bike.

Was a Koorie was Malcolm Smith

He sings:

How did he die?

Did he hear the mopoke cry?

In the late 1980s, The Songman was an investigating officer for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. He was required to investigate the deaths of Aboriginal people in custody in Victoria, Tasmania and parts of New South Wales. He was twenty-five years old. All the stories scarred his soul, but one in particular broke his heart. It begins with an eleven-year-old Koorie boy who borrowed a bike for a bit.

Black boy pedals a bike

Laughs 'cause he loves his life

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66. As a reminder, The Songman is Richard Frankland.

67. See ‘Meandering’ in Seeping, Oozing, Blooming.

68. These are the lyrics to the Richard Frankland’s song ‘Malcolm Smith’, from the album Down Three Waterholes Road (Australia: Larrikin Records, 1997).
They took the boy away from his family, and for the next seventeen years, he was free for seventeen months. It is a story about a system that took his life.\(^{69}\)

**Policeman come and say he’s bad**

He came to know the boy through the family’s tears. He learned that grief is love: ‘And the grief I seen amongst our mob was profound. It was profound to me for several reasons – the most primary reason is that grief is love, and one of the greatest things our people have got is that capacity for love. That’s what the job meant to me.’\(^{70}\)

He says it was the hardest job he has ever had: ‘The scar that it left on my soul was forever business. It’ll be with me for the next 10 lifetimes.’\(^{71}\) Some of the deaths were absolutely horrific:

Sometimes mothers called you their son’s names and you’d let them. Sometimes you’d go and live with a family for a couple of days, because it just wasn’t right to walk in and snatch part of their heart and soul and walk out again. And you cried with them and they cried with you.\(^{72}\)

Travelling enormous distances, working in isolation with no formal training, The Songman would locate witnesses, take statements, gain the trust of families of the dead and do his best to protect them. Often those who died were his extended family.

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\(^{69}\) Eventually, all of Malcolm’s five brothers were taken by ‘the welfare’. The state left the sisters alone for some reason. A generation later they came back and took the sons of Malcolm’s sisters, as Frankland records in ‘Letters to My Father’.

\(^{70}\) Frankland, cited in Ella Archibald-Binge, ‘“This Is Forever Business”: Investigator Reflects on Deaths in Custody Inquiry’, NITV News, 15 April 2016, https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2016/04/15/forever-business-investigator-reflects-deaths-custody-inquiry. Richard has generously shared his trauma and scars from this period of his life to demonstrate to fellow Australians, ‘black, white and brindle’, the ugly legacy of colonisation we all carry. It is not about guilt and blame, but rather, about acknowledging the past and moving forward together to forge a ‘tomorrow Australia’.

\(^{71}\) Ibid.

\(^{72}\) Ibid.
He has carried too many coffins. ‘Everywhere I look around I see broken bodies and broken hearts.’

He developed relationships with the families and took on roles and responsibilities, assisting families to trace relatives taken by the state and providing direction with housing and discrimination issues.

He recounts his experiences in a documentary called *Who Killed Malcolm Smith?* (1992) and these are some of his comments:

The cultural abyss between black and white was incredibly wide.
The most common comment I heard from authorities was ‘I can’t recall’.
One police watch house book said: ‘He’s a good bloke for an Abo’.

When he reflects on his time as a field officer, it is the resilience and love he witnessed that has left a lasting impression. ‘What I’ve seen in our people was a strength, a strength of spirit that’s amazing. I’ve seen great heroes, great warriors.’

Eighteen months after the commission, The Songman started writing poetry and music and the song ‘Malcolm Smith’ fell out of him.

Tears fallin’ years gone by
Don’t want to hear you cry
It’s hurtin’ me so bad
I knew Malcolm, Malcolm’s dead

Malcolm’s death was one of the first he investigated. It kept going around and around in his head. Why would he want to die that way? Richard could see there was little separating him from Malcolm. They were ‘on the same side of the fence’.

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74 Ibid.

75 Ibid. In the documentary *Who Killed Malcolm Smith?*, Richard tells the story of Malcolm Smith, who died in police custody, to a group of police recruits.
I remember when I was about ten years old and police raided our home. I can still see the look of disgust on one young copper’s face – it was like he hated me. I saw how he spoke to my mum, like she was dirt. I knew that Malcolm would have been treated the same way, and these are the attitudes that broke up his family. The only difference between Malcolm Smith and myself was that I was lucky. The same laws that took him away could’ve taken me away. The only difference was is that he was caught taking the push bike and I wasn’t.76

The Songman’s harrowing years investigating deaths has manifested itself in much of his body of work in the past thirty years: films, plays, songs and poetry, using his art as a voice. A constant message of his voice is a freedom, and freedom is responsibility.77

Do you know

What it feels

To see a photo of a hanged man

Who could be you

To have his mother

Call you his name

To have his wife

Cry to you his name

76 Ibid. When Richard tells this story of a police visit to his family home, I can see how I was so blatantly on the other side of the fence. He and I are around the same age, both one of six children, both our mothers were single mums. As his mother was Aboriginal, her children were constantly in danger of being taken, no matter how well she looked after them. Eventually they took away her youngest. Richard found her years later as an adult; he says she is still coming home. My mother was white; we were never going to be taken away.

77 In the opening chapbook, The White Woman, I refer to this mindset and how it inspired me to be responsible with my voice in ’The Songman.’
To have his children
Look for a father

To taste bile in your throat as you
Search for the answer

To questions that should never need
To be asked

To tie the knot in the rope which
T ook his life

To get drunk for peace of mind and
Scream insanely inside

For peace of mind
Do you know what it feels?78

The Songman could see that Malcolm’s story had the power to show how First Nations peoples have been and continue to be dehumanised: ‘Malcolm’s death became a vehicle in song and film. His death wasn’t wasted because it took to the world the shame of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in Australia.’79

The documentary Who Killed Malcolm Smith? enabled Malcolm to live beyond his death; his life and death may have saved many lives. The Songman knows that Malcolm’s story changed attitudes. The film is still used today as a cross-cultural awareness tool by the government, the police academy and by those who want to humanise the First Nations peoples. He still gets calls from people thanking him for that piece of work.80

80 Ibid.
Malcolm’s song and the story feature in two of The Songman’s plays, *Conversations with the Dead* (2002) and *Walking into the Bigness* (2014), a testament to its enduring impact on him. In *Conversations with the Dead*, he writes:

Imagine seeing that much death and grief that you lose your family and you begin to imagine when the job’s over, but the nightmares remain, and the deaths keep on happening more than ever. What would you do? Where would you put the memories? What would keep you sane? Who do you think could understand what you carry inside you wonder at your own sanity?

Malcolm’s story lives in films, theatre performances and songs, contemporary mediums deployed by The Songman to give voice to his people’s stories and culture. He says: ‘Culture is a living, breathing, entity and like water, it will always find a path, a way to evolve, even when it stays in the one place, water will promote life.’ What he is telling us here is that although the arts serve the purpose of telling the wider world a story, they also work to nurture and strengthen his people. There is solace in hearing their voice, in seeing themselves and their experiences reflected back at them through

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81 Richard Frankland, *Conversations with the Dead*, in Tammy Anderson, Richard Frankland, John Harding, Jadah Milroy, Tracey Rigney and Maryanne Sam, *Blak Inside: 6 Indigenous Plays from Victoria* (Strawberry Hills: Currency Press in association with Playbox Theatre, 2002); Richard Frankland, *Walking into the Bigness* (Strawberry Hills: Currency Press, 2017). *Conversations with the Dead* was staged at the Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne; Playbox Theatre, Melbourne; and Bellevue, Sydney in 2002, and was performed for the United Nations, New York, in 2004. An additional season of the play was funded by the State Attorney General’s Department, in recognition of the importance of the work – it was also referred to in Hansard in the Victorian parliamentary debate leading to the formation of the Koori Court system. The Australian Society of Authors listed *Conversations with the Dead* in its top 200 greatest Australian literary works. *Walking into the Bigness* is a theatrical collection of stories and songs from Richard’s life as a child abattoir-worker, a young soldier, a fisherman, and a field officer for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. It premiered at the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne, August 2014.

82 Frankland, *Conversations with the Dead*, scene 2.

83 Coursera, run by the University of Melbourne, presents online interviews or episodes across a multitude of disciplines, and Richard is featured in a few. In his episode ‘Music and Voice’, Richard discusses how he uses the arts to give voice to his people. ‘Malcolm Smith’ is a good example of this. Richard Frankland, ‘Music and Voice’, Coursera, University of Melbourne, 2019, https://www.coursera.org/lecture/music-life/music-and-voice-TLkxP.

the arts. The arts can be moulded in their cultural shape, thereby making it a safe space to inhabit.

So, I grew up, and went to a lot of different primary schools because the assimilation policies were in full swing. And there’s a whole heap of privilege that went to non-Aboriginal people that we didn’t get. And so, everywhere you looked there were symbols and images in the shape of the dominant culture, and the access point to the wealth and power of education, of good health, of safety wasn’t in our cultural shape, it was in the shape of the dominant culture.

There were lots of things that made us safe, despite that type of oppression. And some of the things that made us safe was art, music, Old People coming around and – well, they were old to me then – singing country and western songs, laughing ... it created a bond, a cultural network, if you like, which knitted people together and facilitated our voice.\(^85\)

Pre-contact, The Songman’s people used song, dance and performance to record, share and educate in their own cultural shapes. Today, First Nations peoples are using the dominant culture’s methods to educate the dominant culture with content moulded from their own cultural shape. For example, music is used to protest and to record political events by such bands as Yothu Yindi and A.B. Original. In 1990, The Songman wrote one such song, and when he granted me access to his life’s work, I inevitably learned of the story of Malcolm Charles Smith.

Which brings me back to how I know about the death bird in the Jacaranda tree outside my bedroom window. Is she there for a reason?

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85 Frankland, ‘Music and Voice’.
Is it a haunting? A talisman? Or is she simply a short-legged, weak-toed night bird that realises, aesthetically, she is better staying put until sunset? Whatever her purpose, her sleepy vigil prompted me to read about this man who lived from 1953 to 1983 and died by his own hand.

I found myself back in the Stolen Generations and the sick irony of the Aborigines Protection Board and later its equally nauseating monikered successor, the Aborigines Welfare Board. The spectre of cultural genocide hovers, unsettling.

Why do I feel so compelled to tell this story again in my own way? You might be thinking, we have already had a Royal Commission into this, investigating ninety-nine deaths. I have ten good reasons.

First, there is a death bird willing me to do so.

Second, I am taking you to the awkward edge of your comfort zone where empathy and the conscience dwell and the skin is thin and learning is let in.

Third, since the end of the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody in 1991, another 407 First Nations people have died in custody; in the period 2008 to 2018, 147 First Nations people died in custody. This means it is still happening.

Fourth, First Nations people are dying in custody from treatable medical conditions and are much less likely than non-Aboriginal people to receive the care they need.

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86 I explain in *The White Woman* that learning of the Stolen Generations was a motivating factor for me to learn more.


88 As evidenced in the Guardian Australia’s ‘Deaths Inside’ project.
Fifth, agencies such as police watch-houses, prisons and hospitals failed to follow all of their own procedures in 34 per cent of cases where First Nations people died, compared with 21 per cent of cases for non-Aboriginal people.

Sixth, mental health or cognitive impairment was a factor in 41 per cent of all deaths in custody. Of those First Nations people in prison with a diagnosed mental health condition or cognitive impairment, such as a brain injury or foetal alcohol syndrome disorder, only 53 per cent have received the care they need.

Seventh, families are waiting up to three years for coronial inquest findings in some states, with the longest average periods in South Australia and Western Australia.

Eighth, of those 147 deaths investigated, forty-three were of people who were born after 1991, when the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody were released.

Ninth, 2.8 per cent of the Australian population identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, but First Nations adults are 13 times more likely to be jailed than non-Aboriginal Australians. Juveniles are twenty-four times more likely to be jailed. The fastest-growing prison population is First Nations women. Twenty-two per cent of the deaths in prison and nineteen per cent of the deaths in police custody from 1 July 2013 to 30 June 2015 were of First Nations people.

Tenth, the tragedy of Malcolm Charles Smith demonstrates on several levels the physical colonisation Dr Yellow Bird describes. First Nations peoples suffered the physical loss of their Country, as shown by Malcolm’s family, who were dispossessed and moved on, drifting around the fringes of pastoral leases on marginal land. Places were renamed by colonists, traditional names whitewashed. We also witness the loss of traditional food sources and First Peoples’ inability to fulfil custodianship responsibilities, as their connections to land was disrupted, if not severed.

Additionally, Malcolm’s story demonstrates the violent physical colonisation of the black body. A boy stolen from his family, incarcerated and abused by those who claim to protect him. This is a story that resonates with First Nations families across Australia. What we see now in First Nations communities are individuals

subjected to disproportionate levels of chronic disease, incarceration, violence, addictive behaviours (substance, gambling, alcoholism), sexual abuse, lateral violence, racism, discrimination, poverty and generational trauma.

The tragedy of Malcolm Smith screams physical colonialism, of the legacy of the Stolen Generations, a legacy evolved into trauma shared across generations. Yes, it is history, but it is crucial history. People are still living with stories like Malcolm’s. We need to talk about atrocities, so they are not repeated. Through my research I have come to understand that without knowledge of stories like Malcolm’s, we cannot hope to understand the cultural abyss and intergenerational trauma of the First Nations people.

I remember Malcolm Charles Smith because a mopoke outside my bedroom window became my feathered conscience.

We will help you if we can
Remember all those years again

NOWHERE TO ROOST

TAWNIES ROOST
SIDE BY SIDE
TOUCHING,
IN THE SAME NEST
OF UNTIDY STICKS
THEY MATE FOR LIFE
SHARING THE SITTING
SHARING THE FEEDING
UNTIL ONE DIES.

In 2014, writer Amy McQuire, a Darumbal woman from central Queensland, wrote in New Matilda: ‘It has been 24 years today since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody [that] investigated 99 deaths in custody. But do you remember any of their names?’

Malcolm’s story begins in 1950 with Gladys and Joe Smith and their thirteen children. Gladys’s traditional tongue was Paakantji, river people, whose home had always been along the banks of the Darling River. Joe’s People were Ngiyampaa, dryland people. Gladys only had one hand.

The family lived a roving existence, travelling in horse-drawn vehicles and sleeping under tarpaulins along the riverbank of the Darling. Huge pastoral stations had swallowed up their Country and in the 1920s, the drought and the poverty of their conditions forced families to move from their remaining lands. Many were forced to live in the missions, but this family refused to, as the conditions were dire.

Their itinerant lifestyle was less choice and more necessity as they tirelessly tried to avoid the attentions of ‘the welfare’ and their faithful henchmen – the police.

By now we are in the late 1950s, the middle of the era of the Stolen Generations, and the Smith children with their mixed ancestry fitted the brief of those to be taken away.

The ninth child out of the thirteen Smith kids was Malcolm, born in 1953. His was a happy, carefree existence with plenty of siblings to play with, irrigation channels to swim in and lots of small game to catch to feed the mob. He was deft at killing birds with a shanghai, and with a billy and some flour, they would cook and eat them on the spot. The kids were often truant from school, which was made doubly unattractive by racial prejudice and its irrelevance to their life.

In 1965, Gladys died. They worked hard to keep the family together, to ensure the children remained well fed, cared for and content in a happy home.

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90 If I were to paint a picture of what that looks like, I would turn to artist Frederick McCubbin’s The Pioneer, where the First Nations peoples were painted out of the landscape, or to Eugene von Guérard’s Mr John King’s Station, where the Gunnai/Kurnai People are represented in their varying stages of dispossession and dependence. I discuss these artworks in the stories ‘Pioneering Propaganda’ and ‘Paperbark Roses’ in Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing? Frederick McCubbin, The Pioneer, 1904, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Eugene von Guérard, Mr John King’s Station, 1861, Fairfax private collection.
On a day when they should have been at school, Malcolm (eleven), his brother Robert (thirteen) and their cousin Jacky came across some bikes at a bus shelter. They had been left behind by some high school students on their way to school. The three boys took the bikes and rode around on them, joyriding in the true sense of the word. Joe found out, gave them a hiding and returned the bikes. The police found out and came looking for the boys.

The boys were ushered into court. They were judged on the pigment of their skin. Malcolm was charged with being ‘a neglected child’, a victim of ‘improper and incompetent guardianship’. They took them away.

Colonial institutions took over his small black body for the next seventeen years. First, he was sent to

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Kinchela Boys Home, 1,200 kilometres away from home.92

A soft crying
It was midnight,
Motionlessly on a branch
Sounds continually
Intermittent whimpering
Loud wailing
Close to those of a baby
Crying softly in pain
Or a cat being hurt.

92 Ibid. Between June 1924 and May 1970, authorities of the state of New South Wales incarcerated 400–600 Aboriginal boys (as well as a small number of girls in its first years) in Kinchela Boys Home. There is an old gate now part of the National Museum of Australia’s collection. It stands as a symbol of the systematic removal of First Nations children from their families. It is the second half of a pair. The first half is missing but the word is burned into some men’s memories forever. Kinchela.
Then Malcolm went to Mount Penang Training Centre.  

**IT IS A MOURNFUL CALL**  
LOVED BY SOME.  

**A FAINT TOLLING IN THE NIGHT**  
ANNOUNCING THE MARRIAGE  

**BETWEEN DARKNESS AND DEEP WONDERING**  
calling every few seconds  
for hours, until  

**IT BECAME THE NIGHT’S HEARTBEAT.**  

**A VOICE SILENCED**  
is a sort of bruise on the air.  

**NOW THE DARKNESS FLATLINES...**

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93 Mount Penang Training Centre housed inmates with hideous histories of viciousness and criminal activity alongside inmates with minor offences including a breach of parole like Malcolm. Mount Penang was about killing time, rather than teaching, training or rehabilitating its occupants. Malcolm’s illiteracy was never addressed in this place. Its aim was to maintain complete control and mindless discipline. It was unproductive and cruel.


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It was standard procedure for the court to charge children – babies included – with the offence of being a neglected child.  

There is a tree at Kinchela, a vast old Moreton Bay fig. It has a strange power over the men who once lived there. As boys, they would be chained to this tree overnight, like animals, as punishment for wetting the bed and failing to pass inspection, for dirty fingernails. Once captive, their carers could abuse them. The tree bore witness to their ordeals and the chain remains but is slowly being swallowed into the trunk.
Next stop was Tamworth Boys Home.  

**THE MOPOKE**

**63**

Malcolm became institutionalised.

**THE MOPOKE**

**63**

...continued...

**THE MOPOKE**

**63**

95 Tamworth Boys Home was built in 1879 as a colonial jail and its walls witnessed many floggings and hangings. During the Second World War, it became a prisoner of war unit and in 1947 it was converted to the use of juvenile detention, a maximum-security unit for recalcitrant youths. Former inmates described it as a concentration camp. More recently it was feted a school for killers after an ABC investigation found that more than thirty-five violent deaths in Australia have been linked to former inmates, who were there as teenagers. Malcolm slept alone in a brick-walled cell, freezing in winter and boiling in summer. Light came through an iron-barred hole in the ceiling, casting spotlight onto his steel bucket toilet. The walls were witnesses to decades of trauma and anguish, written in ink, food and faeces. The rule was silence at all times. Speaking was allowed for ten minutes in the morning and ten minutes in the afternoon. Outside these times, the boys were forbidden from looking at one another. Speaking was a privilege, not a right. He left Tamworth illiterate.

96 From Kaplan, Tawny Frogmouth, 54. Description of a fledgling Tawny being eaten by a lace monitor.
He found Jesus in Long Bay Correctional Centre.

A chaplain gave him the Book of St. Matthew on cassette that he played in his cell. Now in his late twenties, Malcom still could not read or write. One passage made a pernicious impression, which he was to interpret literally and out of context: ‘And if thy right eye offends thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.’

He throws himself down some stairs, bangs his head against walls and doors, is agitated, suffers psychotic and delusional episodes and begins openly to converse with ‘Jesus in Heaven’. He tries to gouge out his left eye with his fingers and loses the sight in that eye. He tries again and there is more self-harm.

Malcolm was happiest with a pencil or paint brush in his hands.

One day he is finishing up a drawing. He takes his paint brush and hides it in his hand. He walks past the guard and into a toilet cubicle, locking it. He takes the paint brush and forces it deeply into his left eye so only the metal is protruding.

They say his scream curdled blood.

The painting he left behind was his note, his final wish: an image of Heaven’s pearly gates and a path winding up a hill to a crucifix.

How did he die?
Did he hear the mopoke cry?

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97 From Kaplan, *Tawny Frogmouth*, 57. On camouflage.

98 Matthew 5:29.
In the seventeen years from the day he took the bike to the day he took his life, Malcolm Charles Smith was free for seventeen months.99

I have written this story three times: once as Malcolm in much more detail, always with a sinking feeling that people will disengage as it gets sadder and sadder; a second time with my first-born’s name instead of Malcolm, coupled with my encouragement for you to replace his name with a loved one of yours – the fury and indignation, the gritted teeth, as I typed the second draft was incredible. So many times, at the end of a paragraph I wanted to type in capitals: THIS WOULD NEVER HAVE HAPPENED TO A WHITE BOY. See ‘Dear George’ in Skin in the Game for more on the inspiration for this treatment. Finally, after I allowed the work sit for a while, I pared back the details, put Malcolm back into his story, leaving the parts that resonated with me most, deleting so much pain and cruelty.
POSTSCRIPT

As I researched the poetic bird layer of this story, I began to see that there is some confusion as to which bird the mopoke is. It is called the mopoke, or morpoke, because of the sound it makes: it is not the tawny frogmouth, but the southern boobook owl that calls mo-poke, mo-poke. I had been frightened by the wrong bird! The bird in the jacaranda tree is a tawny. Not the death bird.

Commissioner Wootten’s report into the death of Malcolm Charles Smith is one of extraordinary humanity. He went to enormous lengths to understand Malcolm’s story and saw clearly that it was the system that failed him. He opened his report with these words from Kevin Gilbert: ‘The real horror story of Aboriginal Australia today is locked in police files and child welfare reports. It is a story of private misery and degradation, caused by a complex chain of historical circumstance, that continues into the present.’

The story of Malcolm Charles Smith illustrates the truth of Kevin Gilbert’s words. It is the story of a body colonised, a life destroyed, not just by the misconduct of police and prison officers, but in large measure by the regular operation of the system of self-righteous, heartless and racist destruction of Aboriginal families that went on under the name of protection or welfare well into the second half of this century. Indeed, today Aboriginal families are still being devastated by deaths in custody and their children being taken away today. Since the royal commission there have been more than 407 Aboriginal deaths in custody and the number of First Nations children in out-of-home care has doubled in the decade since the 2008 Apology to the Stolen Generations.

100 Gilbert, Living Black, 2.
I AM THE MOPOKE
I assumed the role of collecting firewood for our campfire. It was winter 2015 and I was on NPY (Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara) Women’s Law Camp. I was the appointed driver, or ‘camel lady’, for three Elders, on a 3,500-kilometre road trip from Adelaide to near Ernabella and back.\footnote{I presume she called me ‘camel lady’ as I was the driver (and benefactor to a degree), ‘carrying’ them to the camp and back to Adelaide. Her moniker for me conjured images of the nineteenth-century Muslim cameleers who brought camels from Afghanistan for construction and transport across the arid centre and west. As a curious aside, we now have millions of feral disease-free camels wild in the outback and they are sought after in the Arab and Muslim world for breeding stock, racing stock and meat. Some of the Anangu people now muster and farm camels.} We set up our own little area on the red earth in the midst of 350 or so camping women.
The days were clear and mild and the desert nights were starry and very cold. We kept the fire smouldering as we slept so the billy would boil quickly for that morning cup of tea. I was on tea duty, too. Apparently when your hair goes grey, you don’t have to make tea for others anymore. You have finally arrived at the point where tea is made for you. If I continue with my regular hairdressing appointments, I will be a tea-maker until I die.

At fifty, I was the youngest in our little camp of four women and also the ‘rookie’ on Anangu Pitjantjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Country. It was enjoyable not being the boss for a change.

When the woodpile looked low, I would sit with the Elder Nellie to ask which way I should go on her Country to gather kindling and logs. I smile now, remembering our exchanges, as she has a delicious sense of mischief and I was never sure whether she was teasing or testing me. I felt like a young Padawan (a Jedi apprentice in the Star Wars films). Her chest would fill with breath and she would earnestly consider my question. Her eyes were elsewhere as though she could fly over the area and know where to go.

Go towards the sun, she would often say. On the third wood mission, it struck me how clever this was, as her instructions always sent me off around nature’s clock face, ensuring I was never collecting from the same area. She was firm about me staying on the track and returning the same way. This was about respectfully following her directions, so we could both be sure I would be safe on her Country.

One day I came across an eclectic treasury of trinkets amongst some bushes. Laid out on a nest of twigs, bark, and grasses was an extraordinary array of white bits and pieces: water-bottle tops, snail shells, pebbles, pieces of bone.

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1 This was my own personal observation. A Senior Lawman, or jilpi in their language, told me the Act was only in English, which is his fourth language. The Elder we took on Law Camp had her Pitjantjara Bible with her constantly.
and weathered plastic in shades of white. It was the avenue bower (some can be up to two metres long) of a male western bowerbird, nature’s passionate pilferer and plunderer. This was the art of seduction: mating offerings for a potential mother to his offspring. He will dance for her, too, and even if she deigns to take his ultimate ‘offering’, she will never inhabit the bower. Her preference is single motherhood.

It was like finding a treasure.¹⁰²

Back home under a roof, I reflected that my research practice can be likened to the pilfering and interior/exterior decoration of the bowerbird. I borrow, reimagine, reframe and rearrange my collections to ‘seduce’ and persuade the reader to spend some time with me.¹⁰³

Later, I discovered a fellow creative writing creative practitioner, Tess Brady, also uses the bowerbird metaphor to describe her practice, but her treasures are blue, indicating

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¹⁰² I read one account of a family living on a nature reserve near Cairns, where there were several bowerbird males vying for attention. Their three-year-old daughter’s toys were stolen from the sandpit. Later, they discovered the entrance to his bower boasted a plastic Dorothy the Dinosaur tea set: tiny pink cutlery, little purple plates, a green sugar bowl and a miniature purple teapot. ‘Bowerbirds’, Bush Heritage Australia, 2019, https://www.bushheritage.org.au/species/bowerbirds.

¹⁰³ This meandering is exploring the making of my stories, offering a scholarly insight into the crafting of layered pieces. It introduces the method of poetics and it demonstrates how and why I am weaving the artefact and the dissertation into one. Doctoral submissions of creative work have traditionally contained two elements: the artefact and the exegesis (some institutions refer to it as a dissertation). In theatre studies, or music, or art or architecture they are submitted as separate modes, or languages: performance and textual; composition and textual; painting/sculpture and textual; architectural plans and textual. To discern between these different languages in the creative process makes sense in these disciplines, but in creative writing …
her muse is a satin bowerbird. One theory is that bowerbirds choose colours that best accentuate their own colour and as the satin is blue, they seek blue to show themselves off. Brady’s doctorate was a novel and exegesis, and she likens the research practice of a novelist to a bowerbird’s selection, as she needed to acquire a working, rather than specialist, knowledge across a range of areas and disciplines:

I needed to function a little like a bowerbird that picks out the blue things and leaves all the other colours. To work with this metaphor, I needed to pick out the dark blue pieces of ecclesiastical history, the azure lines of cartography, the sapphire decorations of medieval manuscripts and the Nile blue theories of archaeology. I needed to be able to write on a range of issues and yet I knew I was not an authority in any of them. 104

Brady’s reflection on her practice helped give voice to mine in this context: we both had to develop skills to know where to look, then locate quickly, filter, sort through and carry off seductive trinkets.

It may sound easy but to be able to isolate the turquoise from the aquamarine at one end of the spectrum and the indigo from the purple at the other requires nerve, a great eye and a lot of know-how. With so much information to gather, the writer needs to be able to work accurately and quickly, to know the questions to ask and to be able to isolate the essence. 105

Brady is correct in that it is not easy to restrict where you should dwell on the creative journey and a lot of time can be spent (but it is rarely wasted, as creativity is cumulative and iterative) with trinkets that are not truly advancing your narrative. I follow intuitive hunches, acknowledging if something feels right, and follow my nose. In many ways, this entire collection comprises imaginative hunches I have claimed

105 Ibid.
with creative tenacity. One such hunch was that the bowerbird’s antics could help you understand how I have written this collection of stories to positively add to and/or change what and how you think about First Nations peoples.

To work with this metaphor, I ask you to imagine the bowerbird’s bower as the core structure of a story, sticks woven together bonded with saliva. As a writer I research, shape, structure, organise, stylise and dramatise my sticks. This is my bower and it is held together by my methodology of autoethnography, the spit to my sticks. The spit insists that writing is emotional, vulnerable, and heartful, without jargon. It celebrates knowledge that is delivered in a sensory way through emotional arousal, identification and self-examination rather than abstraction and explanation. It says, ‘let the story do the work. Be evocative. Make your readers feel stuff; activate their subjectivity; compel them to respond viscerally’.

Around the bower is the bird’s treasury of trinkets and I imagine this as the poetic layers I deploy to deepen your connection and experience. Around my bower are poetic trinkets to add into and around the text: quotes, anecdotes, insights, vignettes, a crow with attitude, excerpts of another’s creative work to amplify my message or reframe it in a curious way.

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106 Terry Rosenberg argues for a poetic model of research in design. He refers to the ‘imaginative hunch’, the creative point on the horizon of practice. Traditionally in the academy, rigorous methodology is considered the trajectory and therefore the process, but Rosenberg cautions that this hunch can be subsumed by scientific rationalism, the dominant paradigm for research. Such a paradigm has ‘little regard for the richness, plurality and complexities of creative practice’ and may ‘reduce and or misshape practice itself … bent, focussed and delimited into a narrow channel of conformity’. I have followed his lead when he says, ‘the imagination needs to be supported and promoted as research in itself and not just read as just a “hunch”’. He asserts creative practitioners need to take a stand and resist conforming to formalising protocols of epistemologies as they can be ‘unsympathetic to creative practice’. However, used tactically, ‘conventional methods can inform and enrich the creative process and animate a rich field of research’. Autoethnography is an unconventional hybrid of the conventional disciplines of science and humanities, and with poetic layers I have found it has supported and nourished my imagination throughout the writing of this collection. Terry Rosenberg, ‘“The Reservoir”: Towards a Poetic Model of Research in Design’, Working Papers in Art and Design (2000): http://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/298.

107 Bochner and Ellis, Evocative Autoethnography, 60. I strategically placed this story after ‘The Mopoke’ to illustrate how I have tried to use emotional and heartfelt writing to evoke the same heartache I feel every time I read about Malcolm Charles Smith and his miserable colonised life. I even attempted to put my son into the story to try to see what it might be like to have a child treated in such a way.
If you watch Attenborough’s film clips on bowerbirds, you will see them hard at work, back and forth, constantly moving, one more beetle wing to add to his array or another berry on display, ‘but they do have to be properly arranged to show them off really well’.\(^{108}\) This speaks to my own toing and froing, the reflexive aspect of my practice. I find the fluidity of poetics gives me space to be reflective, allowing me to question what I think I know as I express it, asking how is it working?\(^{109}\) Writer Kim Lasky identifies this space as where a writer takes risks to advance knowledge, an iterative process, where understanding emerges and knowledge grows in the shift between the modes of writing and reflecting.\(^{110}\)

I felt this at play as I reworked my third or fourth draft of ‘The Mopoke’. Why did I feel compelled to tell this story again? It has been told before, what is going to be so special about my retelling? (Especially the voice of a privileged white woman). Why does my voice matter in this? What am I trying to show my readers?\(^{111}\) Evocative autoethnography asks me to cast a wide net of consciousness – personal, political, spiritual and moral – and then reflect it in my writing.

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: first they look through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations.

Bochner reflects on when this is done well: ‘One of the joys of reading and learning from autoethnography is the pleasure of following the consciousness of a thoughtful, introspective, flawed human being struggling to disentangle from some

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111 My supervisors sent me back each time with questions like these, asking me to dig deeper, which I welcomed and hated often in equal measure.
knotty experience and in the process tossing his or her voice into the confusion.’

Writer Phillip Lopate writes similarly that ‘the great adventure in reading nonfiction is to follow ... a really interesting, unpredictable mind struggling to entangle and disentangle itself in a thorny problem, or even a frivolous problem that is made complex through engagement with a sophisticated mind’.

Bochner observes that evocative autoethnographers cannot hide from their consciousness and I would add that I cannot hide from my conscience either. Both guide me in my arrangement of poetic trinkets around the spit and sticks.

The trinkets and layers are integral to a method within my methodology, poetics. Poetics is a ‘hybrid genre, a monstrous fusion of creative and critical strategies’, says Hughes, who writes on the poetics of practice-based research writing. He echoes Bochner and Ellis’s calls for writing that connects the scientific and humanities, research and story, arguing for ‘impure’ or ‘hybrid genres’ so our research can acknowledge the realm of the senses and find space for critical positions that are less abstract and linear and more ‘embodied and experienced and sensual and situated’. In this way, it is a structure that beautifully combines the researcher and the writer.

My stories are inviting you to be more than a consumer, to be my co-creator. I am asking you to think with story, take it and use it for yourself. My aim is to pull you in and make you care enough to join me to bear witness, reflect on your own experiences and see the value and meaning in another’s trials and sufferings. In many ways, you are building the bower and the treasury with me as you are making your own meaning out

112 Bochner and Ellis, Evocative Autoethnography, 117.
114 Bochner and Ellis, Evocative Autoethnography, 117.
116 Hughes, ‘The Poetics of Practice-Based Research Writing’, 296. Robert Sheppard and Terrence Rosenberg both write extensively on poetics, and between them, they list around 100 elements to reflect poetics’ irrepresible qualities. I regard poetics as the visceral layers my evocative autoethnographic methodology calls for. Both Bochner and Ellis call for writing that uses and engages the senses, that feels tensions, deliberations and contradictions. In the chapbook Skin in the Game I explore how poetics can be a way of being disruptive and unsettling.
of the alchemy of your experiences and my stories. I will finish with a story I found that illustrates what I mean by co-creating.

In 2014, a Mexican artist, Maru Rojas, was in her final days as a resident at the Bundanon Trust, in New South Wales, once the family home of artist Arthur Boyd.\textsuperscript{117}

Maru remembered bowerbirds in action via David Attenborough’s television shows on the natural world. On her wanderings around the property, she spied a satin bowerbird at work. He had been busy weaving the bower and then the interior decorating began as blue trinkets began to arrive in the treasury: bits of plastic and Jacaranda blooms. Maru decided to engage with the bowerbird in a poetic way, crafting a poem for the bird, made in blue letters. She stuck them onto two pieces of wood with Blu Tack and placed them close to the bower.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{bowerbird.png}
\caption{A bowerbird with a poem.}
\end{figure}

The bowerbird did not appreciate the incursion into his zone and removed the offending gift, dumping the poem about five metres away from the bower. The letters were still intact. Maru tried again, placing her poem a little further away. The bowerbird ignored it. She remembered she had seen the bird on a bench near his bower, so she took the letters from the wood base and placed them there. The next morning, she returned to find that her words had become part of the interior of the bower.

I share this anecdote with you to acknowledge that co-creating takes two. I can only invite you to bear witness and ask you to think with story, take it and use it for yourself. My hope is that you will allow my words to become part of your bower.

\textsuperscript{117} In 1993 Boyd donated the pastoral property to the people of Australia as he believed ‘you can’t own a landscape’ and, indeed, it wasn’t Boyd’s to own as Bundanon is on the traditional lands of the Wodi Wodi People. They share the Dhurawal language with the Yuin of the South Coast of New South Wales. The Trust works closely with the traditional owners to maintain Country in traditional and culturally safe ways.
Perhaps

I am weaving a bower for you,

Garnished with a treasury

of littered poetic trinkets

‘Properly arranged to show them off really well’

To woo and lure you

And have my wicked way

Sowing seeds of discomfort

And insight.

This is what happens when you run away with a metaphor.
APPENDIX

The lyrics to ‘Malcolm Smith’ by Richard Frankland, from his album *Down Three Waterholes Road* (1997).

Was a Koorie was Malcolm Smith
Was a reason did what he did
Was a boy who took a bike
Was a system that took his life

How did he die
Did he hear the mopoke cry
No guilt no shame
Just got locked up again

Black boy pedals a bike
Laughs cause he loves his life
Policeman come and say he bad
Lock him up and now he’s dead

How did he die
Did he hear the mopoke cry
No guilt no shame
Just got locked up again

Deaths in jail become an issue
Wipe the tears here use my tissue
We will help you if we can
Remember all those years again
How did he die
Did he hear the mopoke cry
No guilt no shame
Just got locked up again

Tears fallin' years gone by
Don't want to hear you cry
It's hurtin' me so bad
I knew Malcolm, Malcolm's dead

No guilt no shame
Just got locked up again
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