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ARTICLE

"Kind regards": negotiating connection to Country and place through collective storying

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Abstract
Within this paper we explore the process and outcomes of a year-long exchange that investigates how active learning can emerge through collective place-based storying. Beginning with Country as our guide, we shared, responded, yarned, listened and revisited one another's contributions. Using the "threads" of an extended email exchange and online yarning sessions, we wove together this collaborative work to present findings generated from the creative practice of storying and sharing knowledge. This work required ongoing openness to vulnerability; we resisted the urge to remain silent and risked being wrong. Our responses, and the writing styles reflecting them, incorporate both academic and creative approaches. As we negotiated connection to Country and place through collective storying, six key themes emerged: Country and personal sites of significance, honouring children and childhood, relationality, the significance of sensory engagement, the significance of vulnerability, and acknowledging Earth violence. This collaborative paper explores a practical approach, grounded in kindness, to negotiating connections to Country and place. We reflect on how we carefully nurtured the conditions that enabled the work to occur, sharing our experiences to help guide others navigating their own collective research practices.

Keywords: Storying; yarning; Country; kindness; relationality; collective research

What happens when seven individuals sit down to share stories with Country as their guide? Imagine us: all from different backgrounds and various points across this place now known as Australia; some First Nations, others not; a few coming with years-long friendships connecting them, and others never having met. This is how we describe ourselves:

- Wendy Somerville is of Jerrinja Country, born and (mostly) raised on Ngiyampaa Country.
- Vahri McKenzie is a Wadjela (non-Indigenous) woman born on Whadjuk Boodja, writing on Whadjuk, Martu and Ngambri/Ngunnawal Countries.
- Lisa Fuller is a Wuilli Wuilli woman, also descended from Gooreng Gooreng and Wakka Wakka peoples. She was born and (mostly) raised on Wakka Wakka Country.
- Naomi Joy Godden is a Wadjela (non-Indigenous) woman who lives and works on Wardandi Boodja (Boodja is the Wardandi word for Country).

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- Ashley Harrison is a Walbunja woman from the Far South Coast, New South Wales. She was raised on Walbunja Country.
- Renae Isaacs-Guthridge is a Noongar and Yamatji woman with matriarchal connections to Countries across each Nation. Renae lives and works on Wardandi Boodja.
- Bethaney Turner is a non-Indigenous person who grew up on Jerrinja Country, now living and working on Ngunnawal and Ngambri Countries.
- Wendy and Vahri worked closely as lead weavers of this work, with all Kind Regarders working collectively. Listed author order does not imply a hierarchy of effort but rather, after Wendy and Vahri, follows alphabetical last name order.

Within this paper, we explore the process and outcomes of a year-long exchange that investigates how active learning can emerge through collective place-based storying. To ensure a safe and inclusive environment, our core tenet was kindness and we dubbed ourselves the Kind Regards collective. Throughout the paper we identify variously as Aboriginal, First Nations and First Nations Australian people. Those people who aren't are identified as non-Indigenous. This collaborative work was prepared in line with the four guiding principles set out in the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It was Indigenous led, and Indigenous perspectives and knowledge were privileged and respected.

As we negotiated connection to Country and place through collective storying, six key themes emerged: Country and personal sites of significance, honouring children and childhood, relationality, the significance of sensory engagement, the significance of vulnerability, and acknowledging Earth violence. We followed the path we created together and, as in all things, Country guided us to places we could never have predicted but seemed just right. Here we reflect on how we carefully nurtured the conditions that enabled this to occur, sharing our experiences to help guide others navigating their own collective research practices.

Reading and re-reading, telling and re-telling: Our methods and approach

Our collective's approach to storytelling, listening and responding forms the core of this paper. A key aim is methodological: to present a practical application of an approach grounded in collaboration and attention to principles of "respect, responsibility, reverence and reciprocity" (Archibald, Xiiem, Lee-Morgan & De Santolo 2019, p. 1). We have curated this work as a collective of First Nations and non-Indigenous scholars, artists and storytellers responding and relating to Country and place across Australia as we experience it. Using the "threads" of an extended email exchange and online yarning sessions, we traced, reflected on and wove together this collaborative work. Beginning with the prompt, "How do you relate to Country?" we each shared personal stories and memories of Country or place, people and experiences. We drew on the generative capacities of storying (Phillips & Bunda, 2018); notably, how story for First Nations Australians provides ways of teaching and learning (Spillman, 2017) when "you're ready to hear and learn" (Fuller, 2022, p. 32); and how storytelling can be "a means of thinking through the complexity, contingency, and plurality of co-creating knowledge" (Wright et al. 2012, p. 41), to identify and dwell with the entangled, varied and difficult experiences of colonisation, while nurturing a space created through rigorous and active practices (Dorling, 2019; Forester, 2021) of co-operative kindness.

Two premises provide the foundations of this work and are seen in our place-based stories: patience, trust and care are essential to our wellbeing; and Country nurtures, guides us and relates us to all things. Each story contributed during the process of our collective's work has been a healing "mark of measured trust as we move back and forth, through circle after circle of experience" (Worby, Tur, & Blanch, 2014, p. 2). This circling is important: our reading and re-reading, telling and re-telling revealed how transformation can occur, with small shifts becoming apparent as we wove our words together. This repetitive, care-full practice provided opportunities

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for new informal learning, unlearning and relearning with and for the collective and Country, honed through ongoing responsiveness. Like the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bawaka Country Collective (see for example Country et al., 2020, 2019, 2018, 2016, 2015; Wright et al., 2012), our work explores the need to find "ongoing way[s] of working" together that may not resolve "ethical dilemmas and obligations", but which are grounded in responsiveness and relationality with each other and Country (Country et al., 2019, p. 693). In this section, we outline the first steps taken to develop this work as a guide to other researchers to form their own Kind Regards collective, before we move on to explore the generative and transformative potential of such collaborations for the Kind Regarders.

The Kind Regards collective formed in 2022 over a cuppa and a yarn, expanding to seven members, including some who had known each other for more than a decade and some who had never before met. One of our members had crossed the continent to a new institutional base, tying the first knot in our weave. With starting points that included displacement from and longing for a sense of home, we found a willingness to explore the different ways we relate to Country and place. Early on we addressed the fact that we had become a collective of women only and agreed we were content with that. We began slowly with small group warm-up conversations, not knowing where we would go together but attending, rather, to shared concerns and following the path that opened up.

Our willing curiosity extended to include orientations towards relearning, loving, feeling and hearing, as this Special Issue invites us to. We aimed to creatively share stories and conversations to develop reciprocal relationships across two institutions on different sides of Australia. Written communication via email provided a structure that enabled our stories to be reflected on asynchronously and iteratively, making space for divergent temporalities of work. In addition to the repetitive aspects of our approach, breaks and silences created space to feel vulnerable and to dwell with it for a time. Describing and weaving our relationships with Country and each other was a creative act that marked similarities and differences. In our work, we encountered the violence of colonial naming and the potentially empowering act of stating and relearning Aboriginal names, pushing towards an understanding of how different place and identity naming conventions can coexist. From this premise, naming ourselves the Kind Regards collective captured both our affective orientation centred on kindness and our adaptation of personal letter-writing practices: we were weaving with words.

Using a term adopted from performance practices to describe instructions for action, we developed a simple *score* that we hoped would lead to sharing and engagement with Indigenous knowledges and storying. The score was a way of expressing the rules of engagement, while making it clear that they could be productively bent or broken in a playful and affectionate way, in keeping with the kindness, care and trust we were committed to maintaining. Storywork as methodology is creative, and our collective includes artists familiar with the ways arts can enable change. For storywork to serve decolonising goals, we cite Indigenous scholars with expertise in the links between storytelling and transformation: "We feel, we experience, we take action" (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 12).

According to a loose schedule, in the body of an email to all collective members, we each shared a story. We asked for stories to be an opportunity to express who the storyteller was and where they were from. Many included images. As each story was released, we encouraged responses to track connections elicited, observing a protocol in which all responses were shared via reply all email so that everyone was included in the entire correspondence. We encouraged a willingness to be vulnerable in these responses, asking that if a story created a connection, sparked a memory, interest, or question, the reader replied spontaneously (a *reflex*). We suggested that responders identify what sparked the reflex and to use this as the subject heading in our ongoing email thread. These became subheading markers in our resulting transcript and aided our later analysis.

Responses frequently acknowledged the vulnerability we felt in sharing spontaneously. For some, adjusting to writing and relating in this responsive, immediate way required some unlearning of our academic practices and the need to retrain as if "learning to use a new muscle"

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(Hughes & Barlo, 2021, p. 357). Delays in responses ensued, as we attended to the ever-growing list of tasks and care work demanded by the neoliberal university, revealing other vulnerabilities. Kind Regard's culture of generosity, kindness, and a flexible approach to temporal engagement made space for these delays, while highlighting the challenges of nurturing such a culture in workplaces where the time and labour to do so is not acknowledged or valued by persistent bureaucratic demands.

While the score began with two distinct actions, writing and responding, these rapidly turned into a fluid exchange in which responses became premises for new stories. This phase of the project set the scene for later yarns, emergent themes, and the eventual interpretation of the stories into the paper presented here, which aims to inform approaches to nurturing collective, active learning in other settings.

Following the release of all scheduled stories, the collective email thread was drawn into a single chronological document of around 14,000 words. In a first full group online meeting, we shared aspects of our experiences of reading the thread as one document and began to identify themes, those signalled by email subject headings and those newly emerging. Our project's next phase entailed a yarning method that invited Country as a participant, with an intentional process harnessing the "visceral receptivity" required (Hughes & Barlo, 2021, p. 352; Country et al., 2016). The yarn itself was informal but purposeful, structured by appropriate principles and protocols as we have described (Hughes & Barlo, 2021, p. 355). Our three-hour online yarn was audio recorded and AI-transcribed, with one of our members additionally scribing in real time. These documents became the source material for the six themes that follow.

The process of producing the final written expression of our work was undertaken with kindness, which requires care, time and space. Excitement attended this process as we negotiated tensions between academic expectations of written communication, and real-time work at the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007), to produce writing that synthesises our voices and perspectives but also makes space for different points of view. Taken as a whole, our approach produced a shared sense of going somewhere together, with ideas and intentions cohering around a shared love of Country.

"Could these be your sites of significance?"

We weave threads throughout this paper to present findings generated from the creative practice of storying and sharing knowledge. The generative capacities of storying (Phillips & Bunda, 2018) were used to navigate perspectives and positionality (Kwaymullina, 2016). Each story shared relationships and memories of Country, and the sites shared hold special and personal significance. As Tynan (2020, p. 163) speaks of the ways ancestors whispered stories into the land, each story attended to relatedness and represented shifting, multivocal connections across Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships with Country and place. Relationality is at the centre of this body of work. In forming a collaborative relationship with each other, we also considered the ways we "exist in relationship with Country, how we learn from and with Country, and how we cultivate respectful, reciprocal, and accountable relationships with Country" (Hughes & Barlo, 2021, p. 353).

Through story and yarning we responded to Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 8; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). For First Nations people, Country is belonging and a point of connection beyond a physical place (Terare & Rawsthorne, 2020, p. 946). Country encompasses the ground, the waters, and the sky above. Ancestors, ancestral beings, stories and knowledges are drawn together through the relationships of First Nations people with their Country (Hughes & Barlo, 2021, p. 353). The words shared here are fragments of individual stories put into dialogue, the product of a meaningful collaboration between the collective members to tease out important conversations about identity, knowledge sharing, emotion and

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experiences. This collective conversation was guided by Country in an associative process drawn from the stories we shared.

Early on, a story posed a question, "Could these be your sites of significance?" Responding to this, fragments were selected from each of the place-based stories. These fragments speak to a process of seeking out or trying to sense Country and its presence. In dialogue, a new story emerged, crossing cultural boundaries between collective members. Each fragment speaks to a personal significance and connection to a place.

> Could these be your sites of significance?
>
> I grew up between and with waterways along the Shoalhaven River. Scampering through the bush, I could feel that these places had sheltered many before me.
>
> I never felt lost, even though there were no trails to follow. I have no right to feel "invited" and safe in that bush, but I do.
>
> We name, know, and wander through.
>
> We walked. My favourite was the Littley dam. The earth in the Littley was soft and smooshie when it had water in it. The mud would squish between my toes just right. Even when it was stone dry and the earth all cracked, the Littley was soft underfoot. You could jump on the cracks of the Littley and soft dirt would puff out.
>
> We wonder about the stories Country keeps.
>
> We travelled to Wardandi Boodja, searching for Great Great Grandmother's grave. My sister, with her eagle eyes, was the first to spot it. We all raced in her direction, eyes wide and mouths open. We found her!
>
> We know Country in the memories of dust, dirt, and sand. We attempt to pin down flashes of feeling about our places, not one place, but a mother. Country.
>
> I feel some things are more a soul or body reaction that can't be intellectualised. We know some places are important. Country hums a harmony that resonates within your body. I cannot and will never speak for others, but personally, if someone is on our Country and feels that connection, whilst paying respects to our people and elders, I'm happy and think it's a good thing.
>
> What does it mean that I feel that in this Country, too?
>
> With regard to feeling welcomed by Country, my feet encounter and embrace the softness of sandy earth. There are spots where I can feel the beat and heaviness of the earth. The salty smell and taste of Jerrinja Country calls to me, but I am taking my time going back.
>
> I went to my favourite beach, Calgardup, and climbed the hill to walk amongst the burned-out scrub. I felt, deeply, with Boodja. My 5-year-old was with me on this walk. With her, I marvelled at Boodja's resilience. We also shared our pain that colonisation abounds through the prolific weeds, back with more gusto than ever. We shared our determination to love Boodja with our all.
>
> Something changes – feeling welcomed happens.

Our personally significant sites connected the collective and led to the sharing of a wider story that situates and entangles First Nations notions of Country with non-Indigenous senses of place (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 44). This collective paper is just one version: our stories could be revisited and yarned over and over, and each time would generate a new account. Our key focus has been on creating and documenting the conditions that enable such practices to guide other collectives.

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Honouring children and childhood

Embedded in the Nyoongar creation story, "The Carers of Everything", is the key value of "*Dalbarbak koolangarra* – the honouring of children and childhood" (Robertson, Nannup, Coall, McAullay & Nannup 2021, p. 13). In the story, children are treated as children and prioritised as they are the future and will become the carers of everything (Robertson et al., 2021). This means that *moort* (family) must ensure children receive a caring childhood and recognise childhood as a special time (Robertson et al., 2021). The priority that Nyoongar people have placed on children for thousands of generations has not been lost with the relatively recent signing of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention includes the right of the child to play (Article 31) and the need for the child to gain an appreciation of the natural environment (Article 29) (United Nations, 1989).

Memories of childhood activities was identified as a theme in the Kind Regards storying and yarns. Children were central in drawing on and framing points of engagement and connection to Country. We intimately described how we were given the freedom to explore, imagine and be children, and at the same time to feel safe in our surroundings:

> . . . growing up . . . we had creeks, rocks and trees and I was proud.
>
> . . . growing up . . . I would wander around the bush and never felt much danger . . .
>
> . . . often alone, I never once felt scared . . . I also never felt lost . . .
>
> [I was] part of a pack of kids who rambled over stony dry earth studded with scrubby bush and roly poly weeds.
>
> My childhood was spent . . . surfing endless waves . . . traipsing across the limestone ridge, and exploring magical forests of Wardandi Boodja.

As in Collard's ". . . trilogy of *boodja, moort* and *katitjin* [knowledge]" (2008, p. 69), we also privileged, honoured and described our *moort* and the ways they cared for us. One collective member shared the early passing of her mother and how she would find her in Country, especially by the river: "I knew she loved this place. She had also known it when she was young . . . ". Another shared a vision told to her by a Wardandi Elder that "children of all backgrounds will build a 'collective consciousness' for a new (old) way of being with Boodja".

We demonstrated how we now prioritise our own children and the knowledge they are given as we know they are the future carers of everything. A collective member took her children and nieces to an Ancestor's grave: "[We] sought out his impressive memorial headstone". Others said:

> [My family] take the kids exploring and they disappear over the rocks, heading for the top of the falls.
>
> [My daughter] was far more upbeat than I was. She spoke about the sadness of the fire, and then proceeded to show me the beautiful flowers . . .

We noted that there are tensions in describing childhoods without acknowledging that for some, profound sadness colours our newer interactions with those places. One of us described her special places being "ingrained", but also knowing "of Aboriginal people that were violently displaced here". Another described a natural playscape dotted with evidence of mining. Another member noted a "disconnect between the way a place was when I was younger . . . to now visiting it as an adult with a belief . . . I can never live on Country again (no jobs here)".

From our stories it was evident that the closeness we felt to our physical world as children established our connection to place or Country as adults. Furthermore, it is through the connectedness of ". . . country, place and shared experiences where one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self . . . " (Moreton-Robinson, 2017, p. 16) that relationality deepens.

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Invoking relationality

In our stories we invoked the relationality that underpins First Nations Australian's knowledge, not only of place and people, but also of the knowledge of past and continuing practices that signify connection (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003; Rey & Harrison, 2018; Tynan, 2021). All of us identified learning and connection with people, place, and practices. When she spent a day hunting with women of the Western Desert in Western Australia, a collective member described being "astonished" that her Martu guide "could find this one goanna hole in that vast spinifex desert". She was learning on Country with women related to that Country.

Relationality and connection were at the heart of the stories we told each other. In her story of seeking the burial places of ancestors with family members using GPS on mobile phones, a collective member describes risky behaviour: "It was hot, I was in thongs, we had no water and my phone was nearly dead". She felt the ancestors were telling her to carry on. It is likely that her young niece also felt the pull of her ancestors towards the burial place.

Ancestors and relations and place were foundational in our storying. We described our oral histories, our connection to entities and knowledge:

> Auburn Falls is a special place on my great grandmother's Country. You can feel it the second you walk out onto it … This place is important, it hums a harmony that resonates within your body.
>
> As a family, we proudly talk of our Great Great Grandfather's heroic efforts … Our Great Great Great Grandmother, buried with her baby, and mother … Our precious Great matriarch hidden in Wardandi Boodja.
>
> I now walk gingerly on Country in awe of all that I do not (and will never) know; in humility as a Wadjela (non-Indigenous) settler … I softly spoke some Wardandi words to Boodja, and a few tears fell.
>
> My mother passed … I found her in the stories my Nan would tell. I would find her in the bush that surrounded my home, or in a lady satin bird that always landed on the kitchen windowsill and peered in at me … But mostly, I would find her by the river.
>
> These places always felt ancient … Berry is ingrained in my body and I am connected to this place … I could feel that these places had sheltered many before me … I wondered if I should be there.
>
> Calling on the help of ancestor grandmothers on the sacred burial mountain … Only that one time did the grandmothers take my burden, though I do try not to call on them often.
>
> She always felt at home there … The stones had been arranged by some ancient being with the power to carve river valleys and build outlandish shapes with giant boulders.

Underpinning relationality and fundamental to our approach were "respect, responsibility, generosity, obligation and reciprocity" (Moreton-Robinson, 2017, p. 71). Relationality occurred through the interactions of us as a collective of seven women, and within the stories we wove. This relationality generated an affective force that fuelled and sustained our storying practices and guided individual responses to our collective sharing of story. Together we learnt to sense and attune to each other through story.

Sensing place and Country

Storytelling is informational and affective, offering vicarious encounters that nourish thought, body and soul, according to Phillips and Bunda's first principle of storying (2018, p. 44). Through our collective exchange of stories, some of us were struck by our ignorance of places within our

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vast and diverse continent: we learned new (often contested) names and locations and visited some for the first time. But while some of the information and detail fell away when the storying occasion passed, other traces lingered. Affective qualities of sensory experiences and associated feelings remained, and remain open still to being revived and relived with new storying events: walking with Country in ways that appear to go with the grain of subtly felt affirmation and permission, of being carried safely . . . The sound of moving waters and unseen critters . . . A sense of those who walked before . . . Kinship, particularly maternal, connections kept through births and deaths . . . Such sensory encounters with place exceed and undermine the dominance of Western rational explanations grounded in myths of a nature/culture and mind/body divide. Val Plumwood refers to the subject crafted through such imaginings as the Western "narrative self" (1996, p. 2) born from old forms of humanism that fail to recognise our inextricable relationalities and mutual vulnerabilities. Through the stories we share, our collective rewrites these narratives, demonstrating how the affective force of emplaced, sensory experiences motivate us to act: to notice, to be attentive and to respond with care.

An affective orientation centred on kindness holds together our diverse origins stories and kinship relations with people (human and otherwise) and places. We understand kindness to involve generous and welcoming approaches in relationships, along with a sense of responsibility to others, their stories and to places. Kindness is enjoying a renaissance in scholarly cultural relevance, as seen in feminist academic cultures (Black & Dwyer, 2021), sociologies of leadership (Witzel, 2022), and the emerging Kindness in Science movement (Boulter et al., 2022). This attention reflects a deficit of kindness in political contexts, internet cultures, and towards the places in which we live. Yet it is clear to us that an orientation towards kindness affords learning and understanding that can weather confusion and discomfort as well as celebrate mutual appreciation.

In our collective storying, we attended closely to Welcome to Country, both the modern ritual and ancient protocols. The growing familiarity of the modern ritual (which was revived in 1976 by Noongar writer and performer Richard Walley at the request of visiting Maori and Cook Islander dancers; Penberthy, 2016) offers a site or occasion of cultural interface (Nakata, 2007) that illuminates more than factual information about places, inviting ways of relating unfamiliar to some. A Welcome to Country is a collaboration with Country that offers great feeling and great responsibilities; we are welcomed to care for and be cared for by Country. We shared stories that revealed what a Welcome to Country can do: a powerful sense that *something happens*; feeling welcomed is achieved. Conversely, when we have not been welcomed to a new Country, we found a sense of disturbance and disorientation; distinct recognition that *something is missing*. There are some places we cannot and should not go. It is as much a gift to learn these things as it is to be welcomed. Welcome to Country, then, is a key protocol for environmental education. It may be an occasion for formal education and learning about new people, practices and places. More importantly, it can cultivate sensations of connection to Country that may guide decisions about our places and encourage reciprocal care.

Writing raw

The affective power of the stories generated feelings of pride, love and strength, and also, at times, feelings of doubt, confusion and discomfort. We observed that these affective dimensions acted as an important guide for how we connect and care. With the support of this collective way of working, we acknowledged and sat with the embodied viscerality of these feeling-events to explore how they can be harnessed to create more generative relations capable of weaving together innovative research possibilities.

Palpable experiences of discomfort permeate our collective's exchanges in written emails and via online yarns. Discomfort emerges from the vulnerabilities we must expose to each other in

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order to story together this new Aboriginal and non-Indigenous collective. This discomfort includes the vulnerability some of us felt expressing personal stories in a scholarly space, navigating by feeling and kindness rather than more familiar academic processes: "I must admit when I didn't hear from anyone in the first few days after I sent my story, I was worried I missed the mark … and whether I answered the question!"; and the risky business of forming new relations, or reworking old ones, reliant on the sharing of personal tales filled with family, loss, violence and death. Our stories and yarns are replete with expressions of hesitancy: "My writing here is raw; not at all polished; that paragraph will probably haunt me later", where we can sense how close the author came to choosing to remain silent. But, perhaps most significantly, it encompasses the discomfort that emerges for the non-Indigenous members of our collective writing about, and responding to, Country in places where great violence has been done to First Nations peoples and Country; places where non-Indigenous authors have benefitted from Aboriginal dispossession but where they may never have been formally welcomed by those who have cared for, and been cared for by, Country for millennia. Our yarning devoted considerable time to negotiating language use, such as how to name and describe things, choosing to hold plurality and difference. At times we experienced irritation and friction, then moved on. Our aim was not to dilute or alleviate discomfort but to create space for and give voice to it. As we discovered, you need some tension to weave!

Much research has pointed to the perpetuation of trauma, violence and systemic racism that results from inaction and the avoidance of engaging with uncomfortable truths (see, for example Yunkaporta et al., 2009). "We never spoke of it", one of our non-Indigenous collective members writes of her childhood, noting that "[a]ll the while, we were in the midst of colliding and contrasting cultures and histories, privilege and loss". Challenging these silences and embracing the "discomfort zone" (Mills & Creedy, 2021; Somerville et al., 2003) of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous collaborative work has long been recognised as having transformational potential. Our collective builds on this research by exploring how storying-with and through vulnerability creates opportunities for active listening and writing; and how this, then, enlivens genuine openness and receptivity to the inter-active stories of each other and of Country, where Country is understood to underpin all relations (Country et al., 2015; Rose, 2013). This becomes possible in our collective through the manifestation of an ethic and practice of kindness.

Kindness necessitates caution and hesitancy, but it also creates opportunities for us to "risk being stupid and wrong" and ask questions of people and Country that expose our mutual, albeit varied, vulnerabilities. An ethic and practice of kindness requires attentiveness to diverse forms of emplaced storytelling and its cultural significance; we cannot and should not story all places (Country et al., 2015; de Santolo, 2019). With these conditions guiding the collective attunement of our senses and sensitivities, this project leverages the affordances of collective storying as a participatory form of active learning that allows new relations and ways of relating to emerge with each other and Country.

Flooding, burning, drying, mining, damming, polluting, massacring, displacing

We recognise that flooding, burning and drying are not necessarily damaging or violent and can indeed be healing at times; however, in the context of the changing climate, the impacts of these phenomena are increasingly harmful. Our relations with Country are imbued with the realities of colonisation as deliberate, violent destruction of Country (Whyte, 2021). Mitchell and Todd (2016, no page number) frame this as *Earth violence*: "the role of foundational *violence* in the Anthropocene, and the distinctively *colonial* violence enacted through the forces reshaping the Earth *and* the discourses arising to describe them". Earth violence, as "genocidal settler colonial, white supremacist, capitalist violence" (Hernández et al., 2021, p. 841), is ever-present.

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Our stories identified desecrations of Country through extractive interventions of dams and mines, the pollution of water, the proliferation of weeds, and spray-paint on forbidden sites ("I want to scrub the desecration away"). We expressed our pain about damage to Country caused by climate change: a manifestation of colonisation that affects places, bodies, the atmosphere, and biosphere (Neimanis, 2019). Several members discussed bushfires that "wreaked havoc" on thousands of hectares of Country with "water bomber helicopters" and the loss of wildlife and homes. Another described Country as "drought-cracked Earth". Two members shared their grief over the loss of special places on rivers due to flooding:

> Up further from the bridge, there used to be a big rock (rusty stone, maroon) that could fit many cousins – sunbaking, playing, or climbing. Nan would bring us down there to wash and swim . . . This used to be the best spot. The big rock (which was always much bigger in my memory) would heat up on a sunny day and you could lay on your towel and get warm after the swim. Over the years, the floods would bring more and more sand and eventually the big rock was covered up. Only the tip of it poked out from the layers and layers of sand . . . I always had hope after a flood that this time the sand would be swept away and not pile up – I wanted to see my big red rock again. This never happened. Only more sand.

> The floods ripped away the river banks because of all the trees being taken out. Those that were left were ripped out and acted as battering rams, taking out swathes of trees. Our river looks nothing like when I was a kid. There is grief there, because those places we went to and played at are gone. Forever changed. And I worry where we're going as things worsen.

Across the world, Indigenous worldviews expound the interconnectedness between humans and nature (Redvers et al., 2022): that we (humans) *are* Country (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019). Reflecting this, our stories shared how Earth violence has been, and continues to be, perpetrated against Country through her people. Violent acts have occurred and continue to occur in our precious places: the displacement of Aboriginal peoples; the removal of Aboriginal children; the death of an Aboriginal mother during childbirth; the deliberate lack of consultation with Aboriginal peoples in white archival research; and the stark lack of basic amenities such as power and water for Aboriginal peoples living "on the reserve". Our grief for family members who have passed was also located in place.

We each expressed anger, hurt, pain, grief, and loss as "affective dimensions of destruction". One collective member identified, "We all have great concern about the destruction of our Country", and we all nodded when another asserted, "I'm so angry about everything". Several members shared how we feel desecration and destruction of Country in our bodies, an ongoing experience of loss over time. Through yarning, this embodiment enabled solidarity with each other's losses, pain and trauma, and we sat (virtually) together in collective sorrow. Importantly, one member stressed our individual and collective agency in the context of Earth violence: "We are all complicit now". At the core of our losses are "obligation and responsibility" that demand from us a commitment to find ways of collectively caring with and for Country. Storying together can nurture, spread and enliven this care.

Reprise

Beginning with Country as our guide, this collaborative work explored a practical approach, grounded in kindness, to negotiating connections to Country and place. Beginning with place-based stories, we shared, responded, yarned, listened and revisited one another's contributions. With each iteration we generated new meanings and connections by sharing our respective knowledges. Our responses, and the writing styles reflecting them, incorporate both academic and creative approaches. Transforming this work into a scholarly paper meant losing some specificity, yet the diverse voices and varied experiences can still be heard.

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Underpinning each thematic section is attention to relatedness. It is seen in those places we storied, sensed and connected to Country, the ways we considered acts of violence on people and Country, and in the ways we connected to children, recalled our own childhoods, and acknowledged those who came before us. Each story shared attunement or a desire to know Country, acts of caring for Country, and expressions of yearning for Country. Every story contained sensory responses to Country, a visceral reaction that goes beyond intellectual responses and into our bodies.

Describing and weaving people, places and affiliations was a creative act that marked similarities and differences in our approaches and styles. We negotiated the enduring violence of colonial naming and made our own space for naming in ways that honoured our individual experiences and responses. This work required ongoing openness to vulnerability; we resisted the urge to remain silent and risked being wrong. We acknowledged the diversity of our cultures and histories. Despite our differing practices and feelings of discomfort frequently emerging, we formed a connection. Through the process, *something changed.*

In offering you a method and approach to create your own Kind Regards collective we emphasise what may be reproduced by others, though we prioritised engaging with place, feeling and connection in a way that challenges academic writing conventions. In keeping with the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we trust it will have impact and value for future collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. Ultimately, all we gained from the process can never be encapsulated here, though we have done our best. We have left some things unsaid as an invitation to you. We strongly encourage others to try collective storying as a participatory form of active learning and find out for themselves. To learn, to love, to feel and to truly hear requires vulnerability and should be done with kind regards.

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