

# Decolonisation through Poetry: Building First Nations' Voice and Promoting Truth-Telling

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## Abstract

The impetus to decolonise high schools and universities has been gaining momentum in Southern locations such as South Africa and Australia. In this article, we use a polyvocal approach, juxtaposing different creative and scholarly voices, to argue that poetry offers a range of generative possibilities for the decolonisation of high school and university curricula. Australian First Nations' poetry has been at the forefront of the Indigenous political protest movement for land rights, recognition, justice and Treaty since the British settlement/invasion. Poetry has provided Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with a powerful vehicle for speaking back to colonial power. In this

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article, a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers argue that poetry can be a powerful vehicle for Indigenous voices and Knowledges. We suggest that poetry can create spaces for deep listening (*dadirri*), and that listening with the heart can promote truth-telling and build connections between First Nations and white settler communities. These decolonising efforts underpin the “*Wandiny* (gathering together)—Listen with the Heart: Uniting Nations through Poetry” research that we discuss in this article. We model our call-and-response methodology by including the poetry of our co-author and Aboriginal Elder of the Kungarakan people in the Northern Territory, Auntie Sue Stanton, with poetic responses by some of her co-authors.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; Indigenous Knowledges; poetry; decolonisation; truth-telling; call-and-response methodologies

## Introduction

### Pinjarra

I heard the whispering through the trees  
It was the whispers of old women  
It was concern.

I heard the shouting  
above me, around me, in me.  
It was the shouting of old men, young men  
It was fear.

I heard the sighing  
floating, hanging in the air.  
It was the sighing of young women  
It was despair.

I heard the crying of the children  
girls and boys.

It was the crying that comes with destruction  
It was the cry of war.

If you walk through this country  
anytime  
anywhere  
You will hear those sounds,  
if you care.<sup>1</sup>  
(Sue Jean Stanton)

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<sup>1</sup> Permission to reprint this poem by one of the authors has been sought from the periodical *Southerly*, which originally published this poem in 2011 (vol. 71, issue 2, p. 195).

I wrote the poem “Pinjarra” after one particular visit to Western Australia and when my Gurindji cousin David Cusack was living at Mandurah. He was a teacher at Mandurah Primary School. One day we decided to drive around that region surrounding Mandurah as he wanted me to see some of the beautiful trees and the general landscape of the area—away from town.

As we were driving through a particular area, wind softly blowing, grasses swaying, trees, even the lower-branched ones, standing like guards, or maybe signposts, or even memorials, watched us, stood aside for us. At first, I wanted to stop the car and take in the serene scene, but we were being beckoned further along that road. There was no other traffic or people with us in that area. As we drove further along the road, trees suddenly enveloped us, almost like forming joined arms around us, wanting to tell us something, to share a secret, give us a message—remind us.

My first feeling was sadness, it enveloped me. I felt tears come to my eyes and at first I could not understand why. And I did not understand that sudden sadness until after we drove away, and I questioned my cousin—asking what he knew about this place. He knew nothing. I could not get the location nor the feeling out of my mind or out of my heart. I visited the area again and I heard the sounds again, I felt the sadness again. I was ready for the messages. I wrote the words I felt in my heart—they were heavy, sad words. They told me I must not forget.

I researched some of the history of that region and it was only then that I knew that I had visited a killing ground—a place where many people suffered and died—a place where their voices remained—within the rocks, the soil, the water, the trees and in the breeze. The voices told me “Do not forget us—we are still here”. I have since conducted a lot of research on the area and what has been documented as the Pinjarra massacre, when approximately 100 Pindjarup/Bindjareb women, men and children were ambushed and murdered near the Murray River, WA—approximately 10 km south-east of Mandurah. Mundurah is located in the Peel district of WA—named after Thomas Peel, one of the leaders of the massacre, along with Governor James Stirling.

In the last few years I made contact with Professor Len Collard, Whadjuck/Balardong Nyungar TO and Nyungar historian, and shared with him and the Nyungar people, especially of the Nyungar boodjar (country) of the place and people massacred in the south-west of Western Australia, this poem I have written titled “Pinjarra”. It is a poem for Pindjarup/Bindjareb women, men and children: I will not forget them.

In recent times, high schools and universities, particularly those located in the Global South, have begun to respond to calls to decolonise education. This has involved seeking to overturn the ongoing domination of Eurocentric, Northern, scientific knowledge production and seeking to Indigenise<sup>2</sup> the curriculum (Connell 2007; Santos 2014; 2018). Poetry, in all its written, spoken and performance-based approaches, has emerged as a key creative form that enables Indigenous or First Nations voices to be heard. Poetry

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<sup>2</sup> We are writing within an Australian context where a capital “I” is generally used for the term Indigenous, so this is the approach taken in this article.

involves many of the features of oral knowledge production evident in Indigenous cultures and cosmologies, and echoes ancient forms of knowledge dissemination (Moreton 2006). Poetry also enables the subversion of conventional English language syntax and grammar (Hopfer 2002). As a result, poetry embodies a creative form that is particularly well-suited to decolonisation and the transformation of postcolonial curricula and societies.

In this article, we seek to investigate the deconstructive possibilities for the decolonisation of high school and university curricula evident in Australian First Nations' poetry. Inspired by the poetry of our Aboriginal Elder author, Auntie Sue Stanton, we begin with her poem, "Pinjarra", and her story behind writing the poem which illustrates the ways in which colonialism continues to whisper its deadly impact through the Australian landscape. We then carefully outline our various cultural and political standpoints as a transcultural team of First Nations and white settler researchers seeking to work together through poetry to decolonise education and create vibrant spaces for Indigenous Knowledges. We provide a brief overview of what decolonisation means to us in the Australian context drawing on the work of Smith (1999) and Andreotti and colleagues (2015). We demonstrate how First Nations poetry has been at the core of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander political protest movement for land rights, recognition, justice and Treaty since the British settlement/invasion, and how First Nations life stories and creativity shape contemporary Australian Indigenous poetry in new ways (Walker/Noonuccal 1964; Webley 2002; Whittaker 2020). Our Aboriginal authors reflect on the ways poetry has enabled processes of "*Wangelanginy* / Speaking ourselves back together again" in the words of Noongar author Kim Scott's (2002, 99) powerful poem. Having explored poetic pedagogical strategies we have used in university curricula, we outline the "*Wandiny*<sup>3</sup>—Listen with the Heart: Uniting Nations through Poetry" research that we are engaging with on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia, which is designed to decolonise Australian high school and university curricula. We then make a case for the ways in which poetry can act as a vehicle for decolonisation and for the preservation, revitalisation and ongoing growth of Indigenous Knowledges. We seek to demonstrate how our call-and-response (Sale 1992) methodology enables deep listening or listening with the heart (*dadirri*) (Ungunmerr-Bauman 2002) that promotes truth-telling and builds connections between First Nations and white settler communities in Australia.

Working on decolonisation requires a high level of reflexivity, self-critique, generosity and openness. It also involves carefully interrogating our own entangled histories, geographies, cultural knowledge and standpoints, as feminist scientist Sandra Harding (2004) and Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata (2007) have argued. We are a team of First Nations Australian and transcultural Australian and South African writers, who have been inspired by the work of the transcultural South African Poetry Project (ZAPP) team (Byrne 2014; Genis 2019; Newfield and Bozalek 2018; Newfield and

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<sup>3</sup> Kabi Kabi word for gathering together.

d'Abdon 2015; Newfield and Maungedzo 2006). The ZAPP project prompted Catherine to bring together a team of First Nations and non-Indigenous colleagues from diverse disciplines and from other Australian universities to begin working on an Indigenous Australian poetry project. Catherine is an Irish-Australian woman who has a transcultural family and has used her research on doctoral education, academic identities and university history to explore her responsibilities as a settler-invader scholar. Shelley is a Jewish South African creative-writing author of 45 books and an immigrant to Australia who grew up during the apartheid era in a family of black and white people. Her scholarly work in Education and Creative Writing explores the impacts of colonisation and transgenerational trauma. Paul is a British-Italian former Zimbabwean immigrant to Australia, whose novels and critical work explore postcolonial Africa and creative writing as a decolonial discourse. Kathryn is an Alyawarre (Northern Territory) First Nations Aboriginal woman and an education researcher, who specialises in First Nations knowledges, inclusive education and critical race theories. Tracey is a Ngugi/Wakka Wakka (Southeast Queensland) senior First Nations Aboriginal woman who researches Indigenous women, decolonisation of patriarchal white institutional power and Indigenous Knowledge systems. Maria is a Kalkadoon-Thaniquith/Bwngcolman First Nations Aboriginal (Queensland) woman and social market researcher, who uses marketing tools and techniques to bring about social justice and behaviour change. Aunty Sue Stanton is a Kungarakan Traditional Owner-Custodian from Batchelor in the Northern Territory, who is an Elder Executive Advisor in Academic and Cultural Leadership and poet.

Our writing process has been to form small teams to work on sections of this article where we have expertise to offer. We then wove these sections together in order to generate our arguments about the role of poetry as a powerful vehicle for decolonisation, Indigenous Knowledges and truth-telling. We have used a polyvocal approach, where different creative and scholarly voices are deliberately juxtaposed in order to build momentum for our argument. In some sections, we felt it was important to privilege the First Nations voices among us in order to recognise the sovereignty of First Nations peoples on the lands that we inhabit. This was the case for the section inspired by the Australian First Nations poem, “Wangelanginy” (“speaking ourselves back together again”) by Kim Scott (2002). We have also modelled our call-and-response methodology in this piece by beginning the article with a poem by one of our authors, Aunty Sue Stanton. Her beautiful and haunting poem, “Pinjarra”, and her story of writing this poem provides us with a provocative and powerful call to care about the shocking impact of colonisation in Australia, which continues to echo through the land, if we listen hard enough. We provide some of the authors’ responses to “Pinjarra” in the sections on “speaking ourselves back together again” (Scott 2002) and poetry as truth-telling.

## Decolonisation in the Australian Context

The need to decolonise education has gained increasing momentum around the globe in recent years. Decolonial theory refers to a range of positions that argue that colonial operations of power remain present in the contemporary world despite formal independence being achieved in former colonies and that ongoing efforts need to be made to challenge and overcome these forms of power (Smith 1999). Postcolonial/decolonial theories take as their central premise the argument that “colonialism did not end with the end of historical colonialism based on foreign territorial occupation. Only its form changed” (Santos 2018, 109). As a result, there can be “no global social justice without global cognitive justice” (Santos 2014, 42). Cognitive justice involves the full and equal recognition of all of the world’s knowledge systems, languages and cultural practices, not only Northern science. This is a particularly urgent issue given that it is becoming very clear that Eurocentric Northern science may have contributed to some of the challenging global environmental conditions that we are now experiencing (Cutter 2008), such as the unprecedented bushfires of the 2019 Australian summer. Decolonisation does not only refer to postcolonial societies—countries and peoples that had once been colonies. Importantly, it includes European countries (the former colonial powers), who need to examine their own cultural beliefs and practices, acknowledging the ways in which they have been unconsciously shaped by structural inequalities between cultures, classes, genders and so on inherent in European Enlightenment thinking (Smith 1999).

As Andreotti and colleagues (2015, 21) argue, decolonisation, one of the major “responses to the violences of modernity”, is a complex term that encompasses a whole spectrum of different definitions and approaches. They propose a social cartography of decolonisation that incorporates a range of philosophies, desires, contradictions and tensions. They chart the spectrum of decolonial approaches as ranging from “soft-reform, radical reform and beyond reform spaces” (Andreotti et al. 2015, 25). While the soft reform space proposes that “everyone can win once we all know the rules” and emphasises “dialogue, consensus and entrepreneurship”, the radical reform space argues that “the game is rigged so if we want to win we need to change the rules” and involves “antagonistic conflict”. The beyond reform space suggests that the “game is harmful and makes us immature but we’re stuck playing” and focuses on “agonistic conflict”, while alternative spaces argue that “playing the game does not make sense” (Andreotti et al. 2015, 25). Our work on decolonisation in this article sits across the radical reform and beyond reform spaces and has a “high investment in liminality, self-implication and pluriversality” (Andreotti et al. 2015, 25).

Writing in the Australian context, Deborah Bird Rose (2004, 214) suggests that decolonisation involves “the unmaking of regimes of violence that promote the disconnection of moral accountability from time and place”. So too, Australian Aboriginal poet Peter Minter (2013, 158) characterises decolonisation as “essentially attempts at ... reimagining and re-presenting place and space from an historically alert

and ethically revived sensibility”. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land was never ceded, and no Treaty was originally signed with any First Nations groups in Australia (although work on treaties is currently under way in various states, such as Victoria). Despite the overturning of *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one) with the Mabo decision in 1992 in Australia, the introduction of Native Title legislation in 1993 and mounting evidence that First Nations peoples carefully cultivated, farmed and managed the land prior to British invasion (Gammage 2011; Pascoe 2018), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignties remain an unfinished business. While there have been royal commissions into the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families (the Stolen Generation) and into a range of legal and justice issues (such as Aboriginal Deaths in Custody), there has never been a truth and reconciliation commission (unlike in South Africa and Timor Leste) to address the many wrongs that continue to be perpetrated by the Australian state against First Nations peoples.

In 2017, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Referendum Convention, held near Uluru in Central Australia, issued the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, which called for the establishment of a First Nations voice in the Constitution and in Parliament, and a *Makarrata* (the coming together after a struggle) Commission to “supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history” (2017, 1). The conservative Liberal/National Coalition government dismissed these proposals with disinterest and, some might say, contempt.

## Australian First Nations Poetry

First Nations peoples around the globe have used rhythms of sounds and words to form the basis of oral information transmission for thousands of years. The use of text patterns and repetitions tied to geographical landmarks and land forms the underpinning of the oldest education system in the world (Moreton 2006). In modern times, poetry, in written, spoken and song form, enables the centring of First Nations voices. First Nations performance poetry gains its power through the spoken word, which creates a visceral, felt impact on the audience. Slam poetry provides contemporary platforms for First Nations voices in Australia. The cadence and movement of performance poetry are akin to histories of oral communication and storytelling. The Australian Poetry Slam has showcased works from First Nations poets Steven Oliver (2014) and Melanie Mununggurr-Williams (2018).

Poetry also converges into rap in Baker Boy’s (2017) artistic performances (<https://youtu.be/dxjFNvwZUhA>). Danzal Baker and, before him, the band Yothu Yindi were the first Australian Indigenous artists to have mainstream success in lyricising their Yolngu Matha language. Baker sees hip-hop as a means of reuniting First Nations youth with their heritages, cultures, histories and geographies (Israel 2017). Slam, rap, hip-hop and all forms of performance poetry build upon visual literacy, including body language and movement, which invites audiences to “read” stories and experiences

through dance. The enactment of story in dance is being promoted by Torres Strait Islander group Move It Mob Style. An example of their art, including witness poetic devices of repetition, rhythm, refrain and personification can be seen at <https://youtu.be/YF58MptSiOw>. Through poetry, English language structures are subverted and replaced with First Nations' rhythmic, ceremonial syntax, circular notions of deep time and "a singing and dancing spirit" (Hopfer 2002, 55).

First Nations literatures often meld narrative voices together in collective dialogue (Pascal 2004). Colonial/Western narratives typically offer a succession of individual voices, whereas First Nations narratives provide pluralistic perspectives of being and belonging (for example, Kim Scott's "True Country" [2000]) (Phillips and Bunda 2018). Values of connection to family and Country pervade First Nations literature as self-esteem and self-concept stem from collective belonging rather than individualism, as perpetuated by Western cultures (Bodkin-Andrews and Craven 2013; Kickett-Tucker 2009).

### "Speaking Ourselves Back Together Again"

Kim Scott (2002, 99), Aboriginal poet and novelist, writes in his poem "Wangelanginy" that poetry enables an opportunity of "Speaking ourselves back together again". In this section, our First Nations authors, Kathryn, Tracey and Maria respond with poetry and reflections on the ways Kim Scott's and Auntie Sue Stanton's poetry provides to "speak ourselves back together again".

#### **Kathryn**

I know my bush, I love my bush  
I know other people's bush too  
Some that I know intimately some  
Just on the surface  
Those moments of disorientation as a child  
That make me realise that I know more  
More than I thought I did.  
Getting lost, in the Nullarbour  
a panic set in, my eye  
looks for detail, for subtle differences  
heightened senses means I listen  
I remember, I could die here I tell myself  
But then I stop and I really look  
And I orient myself and I really listen  
And I talk out loud to that old country  
And I feel it inside, and I know  
And I steer the old Bedford truck  
Back to the camp and jump out  
And I am surprised because nobody knows



Nobody can tell the harrowing experience I just had  
I could of got lost Dad  
Yeah but you didn't  
(Gilbey 2020)

In response to Dr Sue Stanton's poem the layers of truth and truth-telling struck me, through her words she highlights the colonial violence but also the capacity to hear and listen. Our truths and these moments are layered and I wanted to celebrate the reality of wise old Aboriginal women who know how to feel on a deeper level. Sometimes we don't celebrate our differences but get stuck in this place of needing affirmation through sameness; my heart breaks when she says I will remember them and I just wanted to say I see you old lady, as you talk to the trees.

## Tracey

A heart full of love and spirit sown  
Contends with unspeakable violence grown  
Return to eunoia, for country, for people  
Speak the words—First Nations, undeniable, seen, known  
(Bunda 2020)

I take the poetic technique of quatrain to respond to Aboriginal poets and authors, Auntie Sue Stanton and Kim Scott, whose wisdoms are savoured in the framing of our collective writing. Sue asks us to listen to the sounds of country, to the spirit voices that lie within, if we care. In the constant of white noise modernity, colonisation vibrates out a monotonous bass/base rhythm to beat down on our First Nations' skin, a relentless dull throb, throb, throb penetrating deep into our bones, taking an enormous conviction to stay focused, and more to find relief. Oh, we hear the sounds of colonisation, we know them well. Oh, we know the sounds of colonisation, we hear them well. Travelling in the genes and across generations, it is a relentless pathogen. Am I calling back to colonisation with this response? Am I staging antagonistic conflict because the "colonialist" game has got me stuck? How do I see and hear and speak myself back together again as Kim Scott desires? Perhaps this is not the question to ask. Perhaps it is best to boomerang back to the first note of the colonialist riff and ask why can't the uninitiated settler invader hear and feel their own sound making? Let the coloniser occupy the liminal space and transition to a score of melodic sounds for the colonised ear to hear. For once let us hear the sounds of peace. Speak the words—First Nations, Undeniable, Seen, Known.

## Maria

### Bricolage Murri Self

The next generation trying to fit in  
some detached from their skin.  
The social script that makes them feel like  
an interloper, an imposter within.  
Unable to escape wicked fault lines from the past.

Resist, reject, ignore, discard.  
Young Aboriginal hero,  
weave the loose threads that you have collected over time  
into self-stories that self-define  
(Raciti 2020)

My response poem focuses on the unfolding of the “colonial project” for Aboriginal people over time, with its toxicity percolating through generations. The poem accentuates the plight of many Aboriginal youths in the 21st-century experiencing intersectionality, fluid intercultural identity and their challenge to find their place in the world. We grow into our Aboriginality and that growth is often punctuated by disapproval of self and the cloaking of many of our identities to placate the fragility of some, to feed the romanticism of others and to steel us to face the ignorance of many. The advice for our young, Aboriginal heroes is to dismiss the social script imposed upon them by others and to unapologetically forge their own path.

The last sentence of Auntie Sue Jean Stanton’s “Pinjarra” poem, “You will hear those sounds, if you care”, is where my thoughts linger. The shadow side of speaking our stories is the sense of being heard. It is by, with and through the listeners that the transformative, poetic power also resides. The intertwining of a poem’s enchanted beholder and the poet’s narrative is where sideways and seismic shifts perch. Deep, respectful listening or listening with intent by those outside of the frame—being those either consciously or unconsciously curating limited or negative narratives about Aboriginal people—is my pain point. This non-listening speaks volumes, it shouts of the epistemology of ignorance and, in effect, of a passive-aggressive disallowing of Aboriginal truths. So, while speaking ourselves back together again gives voice to our Aboriginal experiences, healing through powerful poetic moments needs listeners who hear the sounds.

Through poetry, speaking to ourselves and an audience of listeners who care has immeasurable value. Leveraging our speaking to new, open and willing listeners will enable Aboriginal truths to fully unfold, be retold and begin to be encoded into the ways of knowing and being of Australian society. There is no doubt that such a paradigm shift poses a significant challenge as the colonial project has quietened at best and extinguished at worst many dimensions of Aboriginal cultures. But despite colonial projects’ best efforts, Aboriginal resilience remains. Indeed, for me, resistance and decolonisation are the manifestation of a fortified and emboldened Aboriginal resilience. Resilience inculcates hope and with hope dreams of the improbable can become the possible. For me, Aboriginal hope has not abated. As our ethnic mosaic incrementally shifts from generation to generation, the 21st-century is a canvas for change with opportunity for those who speak and those who listen.

## Poetic Pedagogies in Schools and Universities

Poetry evokes meaning through an oral, performative discourse and therefore offers a range of generative possibilities for the decolonisation of high school and university curricula, offering a way to address the issues of the “null curriculum” (Gobby and

Walker 2017) in Australian classrooms, the relative silence around First Nations' experiences and history, and the reluctance of non-Indigenous teachers in schools and university classrooms to allow non-Indigenous students opportunities to engage with Indigenous ways of being and knowing for fear of "doing things wrong".

A decolonised educational approach allows for a space in which marginal voices are positioned centrally. Colonial power relations are shifted in literature classrooms when Indigenous voices and perspectives are foregrounded. This demonstration of respect towards Indigenous students is vital for engagement in learning (Donovan 2015). Using poetry that is heard, lived, felt, and enacted, the approach asks students to respond to Indigenous poetry creatively rather than critically or analytically. The shift is towards an egalitarian, biographical experience of student participation through the writing of poetry, thus inhabiting a discourse that evokes new knowledge, new perceptions, and enables the "subjectness" of each writer/student to come into being in relationship to the text or work being heard/read/experienced.

In the higher education sector, pre-service teachers were introduced to a First Nations performer who shared her experiences of her own education, of racism, of her daughters being bullied, here and now in Queensland, through a performance poem. In response, here is an example of a poem written by a university student, Ashwita Venkatesh, using a paraphrased line from Gert Biesta, as well as a line from the "Closing the Gap" document (<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/>) as "found poetry".

Learn something, for a reason, from someone!  
Behind a desk in a classroom?  
Or by the trees, watching the fish school?  
How do we teach our children?  
Equality in education they say!  
But halve the gap for Indigenous children,  
So what does that say about equality?  
Are they not a united part of society?  
Learn something, for a reason, from someone.  
Is that someone you?  
Halve the gap for Indigenous children.  
Where is the equality?  
(Venkatesh 2020; used with permission)

In both secondary and tertiary contexts, therefore, decolonisation is the aim of the content and pedagogy, and it underpins the approach to this research project, in which we acknowledge the pervasive intrusion of colonial paradigms in the way we think, speak and act, and then seek to use poetry to challenge this hegemonic discourse. Such a decolonial approach to "studying" poetry, "throws syntax out" and "subverts", liberating and transporting participants as both listeners and makers in "collaborative storying", an extended storying approach used by Bishop and Berryman (2006) in their work with Māori school students and teachers in the Aotearoa/New Zealand context.

The aim, then, is that Indigenous poets “transport their readers into engagement with new experience through their talent, their passion and play, their originality in language and structure” (Webley 2002, 64). And participants respond creatively.

### *Wandiny* (Gathering Together)—Listen with the Heart: Uniting Nations through Poetry: A Future Event

These histories and poetic pedagogies form the basis of our plan to hold a creative gathering on Kabi Kabi land (in the Sunshine Coast) for First Nations Aboriginal poets and Elders, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics, university students, schoolteachers and school learners. We have called this creative gathering “*Wandiny*—Listen with the Heart: Uniting Nations through Poetry”. *Wandiny* is a Kabi Kabi word meaning “gathering together” that our Project Reference Group of Kabi Kabi in the Sunshine Coast, Wakka Wakka in Ipswich and Koa in Winton Aboriginal Elders and First Nations school teachers have given us permission to use.

The aims of this creative poetry project are to:

1. build understanding of the significance of Country, history, place and culture and connection on Kabi Kabi land;
2. support the flourishing of Indigenous poetry and languages on Kabi Kabi land;
3. build cultural and knowledge exchanges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities on Kabi Kabi land.

It is hoped that a significant potential outcome of the project will be to build links between Kabi Kabi and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and university and school staff and students. The stories of Elders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander poets will be presented as a “call” for sharing knowledge about Country to prioritise *dadirri* (Ungunmerr-Bauman 2002) or deep listening. A “response” from the transgenerational, Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience in the form of poetry writing will be gathered. This process is at once methodology for ceremony (Wilson 2008) but re-inscribes the African “call-and-response” approach (Sale 1992) within Kabi Kabi knowledge frames. We are not seeking to appropriate African approaches here, but, as Indian scholar Ananta Giri suggests, we seek to cross borders as

an act of creation rather than one of violation ... . Border crossing yields what W.E.B. Du Bois calls “double vision”—it expands our field of vision without being expansionist; it includes without consuming; it appreciates without appropriating and it seeks to temper politics with ethics. (Giri 2002, 104)

This project blends the African call-and-response theory of art with the *dadirri* or deep listening/listening with the heart (Ungunmerr-Bauman 2002) approaches of Aboriginal Knowledge production. We use the term *dadirri* with the permission of the Miriam-Rose Foundation. *Dadirri* means “deep listening, building community, be whole again,

peace, silent awareness, be still and wait” (Ungunmerr-Baumann 2002). This (creative) ceremony on Country takes account of multiple cultural differences that acknowledge and make space for other voices (e.g. Aboriginal peoples who are not Kabi Kabi, Torres Strait Islander peoples, international Indigenous nations and black peoples). In this article, we have sought to model our planned approach in the *Wandiny* event to poetic call-and-response methodologies and *dadirri* in our responses to Aunty Sue Stanton’s poem, “Pinjarra”.

This project, therefore, is designed to be interactive, process-oriented, and innovative (Sale 1992). Such methods are propelled by audience improvisation and contribute to art being collectively meaningful to community (Sale 1992). The project addresses the following research questions:

1. What value can poetry provide as a vehicle for sharing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, stories, histories and languages about Country?
2. What can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander poetry regarding Country tell us about poetry as a vehicle for strengthening/reinforcing cultural identity?

The ceremony of poetry, reinvigorated as a contemporary creative tradition of Aboriginal communities, will respectfully be incorporated within the Kabi Kabi traditions of being called to Country. Elder knowledge is pivotal to leading and advising the project and the participating community/communities and individuals. Practices for being on Country will determine what can be considered as ethical conduct for being on Country and the nature and shape of relationships that evolve.

The project will also build upon the strategies used in ZAPP (the South African Poetry Project) and related research (Byrne 2014; Newfield and Maungedzo 2006; Newfield and d’Abdon 2015; Newfield and Bozalek 2018). The ZAPP project design was formed around the establishment of a transcultural project team of researchers, poets, schoolteachers and school students who sought to create spaces in the high school curriculum for poetry writing. Learning from the difficulties experienced in South Africa in generating time in the over-crowded school curriculum for poetry writing, our project team has decided upon the format of a community-based creative gathering that will produce academic and creative-writing articles and a poetry anthology.

The *Wandiny* approach is based upon First Nations knowledge approaches that foreground the agency of Country, the power of Story and the iterative, intergenerational and intercultural features of Indigenous Knowledge production (Manathunga et al. forthcoming; Moreton 2006; Phillips and Bunda 2018; Williams et al. 2018). We begin with a fundamental insistence that the lands we work on have agency within the project (Rose 1996; Styres et al. 2013). Aboriginal Knowledge systems are the conduit through which people are tied to Country. This approach does not limit the use of land to contemporary understanding of place-based learning, or pedagogy of place, but involves emotion, intelligence, and spiritual elements. One of the themes the *Wandiny* will

explore will be “Country as Home”. Similar to the Australian Aboriginal conception of Country, Styres, Haig-Brown, and Blimkie (2013) consider the land as sentient. Rose (1996, 7) explains:

People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person; they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, grieve for country and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with consciousness and action, and a will towards life.

Second, the project builds upon the transformative power of Telling Stories, which is central to First Nations knowledge systems and cosmologies (Dion 2009; Moreton 2016; Phillips and Bunda 2018). Speaking the truth of our lives is a moment of embodying the power of old cultures and sharing this with a contemporary audience. A (re)storying, narrative methodology will be adopted that builds on the approach developed by Phillips and Bunda (2018) combining First Nations storying approaches (Arbon 2008; Donovan 2015; King 2005; Pascal 2004) with Connelly and Clandinin’s work (1990). As Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 2) argue, “people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of the experience.” Phillips and Bunda (2018) and Donovan (2015) emphasise the profound significance of storying to Indigenous cultures around the globe, illustrating how Aboriginal stories are “embodied acts of intertextualised, transgenerational law and life spoken across and through time and place” (Phillips and Bunda 2018, 8). Collaborative storying (Bishop and Berryman 2006) will form an important part of our facilitation of “response” poetry during the *Wandiny*. Martiniello (2002, 93) emphasises how her poetry is “[s]tory without end”—“I am his [my father’s] story, and his father’s story, and many others besides; as I am my own, and my children’s and my grandchildren’s. This is Dreaming. It is Tjukurrpa.”

The research design foregrounds First Nations approaches to knowledge production that are iterative, intergenerational and intercultural. The act of speaking and re-speaking a truth and the (re)telling of untold stories acts as a gift to the next seven generations (Dion 2009; Pawu-Kurlpurne et al. 2008). The reiteration of stories and the acts of speaking, listening, hearing and remembering are central to First Nations’ knowledge creation (Dion 2009; Moreton 2016; Phillips and Bunda 2018). Knowledge production in First Nations cultures is always intergenerational and multidirectional across time and space. Knowledge builds across and between generations and interweaves the past, present and future into an intergenerational “infinite present” (Moreton 2006, 276). Intergenerational learning occurs iteratively and both ways across generations and disciplines, where First Nations and transcultural knowledges become living, community-based, and future-oriented.

Approaches to First Nations’ knowledge production have always been changing and dynamic and open to shared possibilities. It is estimated that there were over 400 (maybe

700) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, approximately 260 distinct language groups and 500 dialects prior to invasion. Australian First Nations peoples also had important trading and knowledge exchange links with peoples from Southeast Asia. It is also likely that some of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander poets, Elders and Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience members may have intercultural, hybrid personal backgrounds that transcend normative cultural groupings. Intercultural or transcultural knowledge construction is not an externally imposed agenda for First Nations and transcultural peoples but rather an everyday way of being and knowing (Casinader and Manathunga 2019).

## Poetry as Truth-Telling

Engaging in practices of *dadirri* through call-and-response poetry may be able to promote truth-telling with the long-term aim of working through trauma caused by ongoing injustice (Aitkinson 2000). It is vital for the future of the Australian nation that truth-telling about our histories since the British invasion and treaty-making that addresses the sovereign rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are fully enacted. Our *Wandiny* approach to poetry gatherings is designed to contribute to the process of “*Makarrata ... the coming together after a struggle*” that was called for in the 2017 *Uluru Statement from the Heart* but has yet to be addressed. If Australia is to move forward as a vibrant and inclusive culture, then it must urgently redress this history of colonisation and move towards a strong relationship between First Nations peoples and other Australians based upon justice, self-determination and full recognition of the special place First Nations people occupy in our nation. We offer our First Nations authors’ responses to the idea of poetry as truth-telling first as a gesture that recognises the sovereignties Kathryn, Tracey and Maria have in Australia.

### Kathryn

I was in Adelaide in my mother’s lounge room when I heard Romaine Moreton’s poem “Don’t Let It Make You Over” put to music and spoken on ABC radio as “Doin Time”. It was one of those moments for me, that I will remember, like when Lady Di died or the Berlin Wall came down. Because when she said

If you were doin’ time like a  
Fine wine, brother,  
You would make a beautiful bouquet.

I thought immediately of my big cousin in Townsville Prison and his fun-loving nature, his playfulness and I thought, my brother you are doin’ time like a fine wine because you are a beautiful bouquet, no matter how long they lock you up for, you come out, you. And I was grateful for those spoken words that made me smile and think of him. But the weight of lengthy prison sentences incommensurate to the crimes, the sheer injustice of incarceration rates and child removals of Aboriginal people weighed there, in the background, in the foreground. Those three short sentences spoke of hope and freedom as they did of racial inequality in this country.

There is an immediacy that comes from being present; it is felt and visceral, this is why we want to have gatherings on old country, with traditional owners informing the conversations, with poets who come to share, what they have known and experienced. Because, as Aboriginal people, when we tell our truths, when we are heard, the world changes just a little bit. Surrounded by negative narratives, despair, hopelessness, a constant needing to be saved or changed, the power of the spoken and written word, to show another reality, one born in strength and knowledge. Dr Sue and her poem “Pinjarra” speaks truth to a hidden reality of shockingly brutal colonial violence. But it also shows a layer of knowledge and skill, those that can listen to country, that talk to the trees and the wind, those that can hear, what they are being told and those that through poetry communicate that to the next generations and the generations after that. So that truth is known and talked about here, because if not us then who will speak our truths to power, to a society that actively works to deny our truths, to hide them, to cover up? So we say Always was always will be Aboriginal land and we are here and we have survived, and unlike this contribution we do it concisely with a minimum of words and mountain full of strength through poetry.

### **Tracey**

A call for truth-telling. A nation needs to respond if there is to be healing—to allow a speaking ourselves back together again, for all peoples. The truth of the impacts of colonisation are hard to hold in the ear of the settler invader yet, in the absence of deep listening, where do these truths reside? In the cracks and crevices of purposefully forgotten histories, in the complicated folding of carefully constructed images of a sunburnt country, a land for the young and free? The bodies and countries of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples hold the evidence of coloniser crimes, secrets and violences. This is what Sue Stanton heard in her poem “Pinjarra”. In holding these violences, there is consequential un-wellness, de-stabilisation, a fracturing for the whole of the nation. A call for truth-telling? Respond by telling the truth—that our lands were not terra nullius, that we were not “discovered”, that our sovereignties exist. These truths speak us back together again and cannot be spoken by us alone for true healing will come when settler invaders speak, know and embody these truths.

### **Maria**

The call-and-response poetic conversation for me reminds me of one of my Mother’s sayings: “you’re telling the story; I’m just turning the pages.” We would sit outside, and with a cigarette in her hand, she would let me talk (and talk and talk), asking me enough questions to keep my soliloquy going but in ways that I knew she was listening. She didn’t offer solutions, just let me figure it out for myself through my chatter.

Today, in a society bathed in the blue light of screens, we are alone together. People I encounter don’t feel heard, their experiences filtered out, talked over or talked at but not talked to. Giving a poetic form to truth-telling, and knowing it has been heard, helps the poet’s healing journey. The listener receives with their heart the poet’s pain, then the roles are reversed, and a state of singularity transpires. The “rules” of language do not apply and through raw expression words try to give shape to unheard or unresolved experiences. The poetic conversation of a call-and-response method nurtures an intense,



human connection—Speak, I hear you—among those with similar or dissimilar experiences. Such empathetic synchronicity releases untruths.

For the non-Indigenous team members in particular, writing response poetry was an attempt to decolonise their perspectives by acknowledging the colonial histories that continue to reverberate through the landscape and demonstrating their willingness to listen to and grapple with these terrible whisperings of time. In the following two poems, Shelley and Catherine respond to “Pinjarra”:

### **After the Rain**

Sometimes, after the rain, the lake  
Nearby  
Turns blood red  
They say, the stain of the tea-tree leaves  
Blown in, soaked in saline waters  
Mixing with iron oxide of the earth  
Surprised that they kept the name Murdering Creek  
That Creek  
That leads into the lake  
Blood’s iron oxide flows, a red reminder.  
There are no plaques to mention the massacre—  
But the wind through the pines whispers  
In a language too soft to understand  
I feel the weight of red  
The heavy echo in my heart  
I’m listening  
Don’t die, don’t disappear  
(Davidow 2012/2020)

### **Whisperings of the Beach**

Slowly, I walk up the beach.  
I put my feet  
into the other footprints  
tracking  
along the sand.

My hair is  
whipped around by the wind.  
My face  
feels the sting  
of blowing sand.

The wind howls with the horror  
of agonising concern,  
of heart-freezing fear.

Despair sighs just below  
the level of sound.

The cries of the children  
echo through my heart.  
My breath catches  
As history's terrible record  
Breaks through the shadows of Time.

What terrors took place  
on this beach  
as colonialism's  
fracturing force  
stole across Aboriginal land?

What shocking histories  
Lie beneath shifting layers of sand?  
Whose blood was spilled here?  
Were men, women and children  
forced into foaming seas?

I open my ears  
to listen  
to the whisperings  
of the beach  
because, I care.  
(Manathunga 2020)

## Decolonisation through Poetry: Building First Nations' Voices and Promoting Truth-Telling

We suggest in this article that poetry offers generative possibilities for the decolonisation of high school and university curricula. Poetry offers opportunities for First Nations voices to be heard above the throbbing, relentless white noise of colonisation that continues to reverberate in postcolonial countries such as Australia, as Tracey emphasises. Poetry captures the diversity of First Nations' lives and the challenges of intersectionality, fluid intercultural identities and cultural location, which are experienced by many Aboriginal young people, as Maria outlines. Poetry has also played a significant role in Australian and global First Nations resistance movements, which have always fought against colonisation and which are gaining strength and momentum through spoken words, prayers, chants, songs and stories (Walker/Noonuccal 1964; Webley 2002; Whittaker 2020). Spoken-word stories of strength and survival honour ancient cultural traditions as well as the ongoing cultural dynamism of Indigenous Knowledges, and they speak back to power (Moreton 2006). Australian First Nations poetry, slam, rap and hip-hop provide evocative, powerful ways to voice the truth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' grief, anger,

resistance and strength. Building upon the poetic pedagogies we have used in high school and at university, inspiration from the ZAPP team in South Africa and in close collaboration with Kabi Kabi, Wakka Wakka and Koa Aboriginal Elders and First Nations schoolteachers, we have developed the *Wandiny* approach. This brings together First Nations poets, Elders, university staff and students and schoolteachers and school learners in a creative poetry gathering. Our *Wandiny* approach to poetry call-and-response is designed to open up spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander poets and Elders to “speak themselves back together again” (Scott 2002).

We also believe that our *Wandiny* approach will illustrate how poetry is a powerful vehicle for First Nations knowledges. Writing in Australian and a number of global contexts, scholars have foregrounded the importance of poetry as a significant vehicle for the retrieval, revitalisation and ongoing growth of Indigenous Knowledges (e.g. Byrne 2014; Genis 2019; Martiniello 2002; Newfield and Bozalek 2018; Newfield and Maungedzo 2006). Genis (2019, 60) proposes the use of “a pedagogy of poetic memory, or epipoetics” in history classrooms, which incorporates “the dynamic interplay of language (including indigenous poetry), the body (both physical and psychological remembering of the past) and the socio-cultural and physical environments in memory construction”. Poetry facilitates Indigenous approaches to knowledge production, which emphasise the agency of Country, the power of story-telling and the iterative, intergenerational and intercultural nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges (Manathunga et al. forthcoming; Moreton 2006; Phillips and Bunda 2018; Williams et al. 2018).

We have also argued that poetry gatherings such as our planned *Wandiny* will promote truth-telling, which is urgently needed if Australia is to move beyond the pain and injustices of colonisation. Aunty Sue Stanton’s poem “Pinjarra” and her story of how she came to write this poem illustrates how the histories of terrible massacres, which often remain unacknowledged, echo through the whisperings of the Australian landscape and must be remembered. Through the processes that will be used in our *Wandiny*, these shocking truths will be retold to settler Australians who have learned to engage in *dadirri* or listening deeply with their hearts, as Shelley’s and Catherine’s response poetry has sought to demonstrate.

We also suggest that adopting this *Wandiny* approach to poetry gatherings will help to build dialogue, knowledge-sharing and connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The poetry gatherings will be used to explore urgent and challenging topics such as the significance of Country, history, culture, connection, land rights, recognition, justice and Treaty, which are crucial to the Australian nation’s sustainable and harmonious future. Creative poetry gatherings are a timely decolonial strategy to address the need for Australian truth-telling and treaty-making, given that there has never been a truth and reconciliation commission and that Aboriginal sovereignty has never been ceded. These *Wandiny* could contribute to the process of “*Makarrata* ... the coming together after a struggle” that was called for in the 2017

*Uluru Statement from the Heart*, which “captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination” (*Uluru Statement from the Heart* 2017). Our team of First Nations and settler Australians hope that the *Wandiny* gatherings will mark new beginnings, galvanising hopes, inspiring and imagining what might be. *Wandiny*, whatever their intent—to soothe, release, disrupt and inspire—bridge what was, what is and what could be.

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