

A still life composition of various natural elements including leaves, flowers, and berries on a textured fabric background. The background is a light-colored, textured fabric with a wavy pattern. In the foreground, there are several green leaves, some with small holes and golden-brown spots. A large, vibrant pink flower with a fuzzy, pom-pom-like center is prominent on the left. A long, thin, reddish-brown stem with a sharp point lies diagonally across the lower half. In the upper left, there are dark purple berries on a branch. A green, pear-shaped fruit is visible in the upper right. The overall scene is a collection of natural, organic forms.

# **Blak Women's Healing**

# Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge, honour, recognise and respect the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung, Bunurong/Boonwurrung and Wadawurrung (Wathaurung) people of the Kulin Nation on whose unceded land we live and work.

We pay respect to the deep knowledge embedded within the Aboriginal community and their ownership of Country.

We acknowledge that the land on which we meet is a place of age-old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal and that the Kulin people's living culture has a unique role in the life of this region.

# Moondani Balluk (VU)

Moondani Balluk means 'embrace people' in the Woiwurrung language of the Wurundjeri people. Moondani Balluk is a culturally safe and supportive place for Aboriginal students and staff at Victoria University.

The Indigenous research agenda led by Moondani Balluk is pursuing epistemic justice outcomes within a framework of decolonisation to create spaces that **privilege Blak lives, Blak experiences and Blak participation.**

The term 'Blak' was developed by Destiny Deacon as part of a symbolic but potent strategy of reclaiming colonialist language to create means of self-definition and expression' (Perkins & Williamson, 1994, p. 20).



Image acknowledgement: Paola Balla's Moondani Balluk design: 'embracing people'  
Find out about the meaning of the image [here](#).

# Who are we?



Rowie

My name is Rowena Price and I'm a Yorta Yorta/Palawa woman. Originally from Swan Hill, I have lived and worked in the Western suburbs of Melbourne since 2009. I'm a mum and a step mum to two amazing kids. Over the years, for various reasons, I had become completely disconnected from myself, Country, culture and community. Both my mental and physical health were in very bad shape. Within this project, I will be facilitating the Wayapa sessions.

Wayapa provided me with a holistic way of healing. It is both simple and yet quite complex in its teachings and message. Every time I deliver a workshop I am in awe of the learning I also receive from the participants. I absolutely love being part of the Wayapa family. I run Wayapa workshops through my business Eternal Earth Connections.

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Paola

My name is Paola Balla. I am a Wemba-Wemba and Gunditjmara woman. I grew up in Echuca and Kyabram. I come from the Day and Egan families. I work as an artist, curator, writer, teacher and public speaker. My art and research focuses on Aboriginal women's stories and resistance, centring Aboriginal women's voices and activism, sovereignty, matriarchy and Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing. My art engages with the impacts of racism and traumas in colony australia on Blak women's bodies. In this project I will be facilitating the bush-dyeing yarning workshops.

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# Who are we?



KJ

My name is Karen Jackson but everyone calls me KJ. I am Yorta Yorta – and so very proud of my Ancestors and Elders. I am also executive director of Moondani Balluk. For more than 20 years I have been involved in building relationships and communities with Aboriginal community members and service providers in the western suburbs of Melbourne. I lead and co-chair organisations and programs that create a culturally safe, fair and opportunity-based environment for our community that is embedded in relationships to land, culture, law and Elders.

I believe all Australians benefit if we respect and recognise Aboriginal People as Sovereign Peoples, understand terra nullius is a lie and we begin serious work towards a treaty and truth telling.

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LJ

My name is LJ Singh. I am I am a culturally responsive, social justice-oriented and trauma-informed Counsellor and Aboriginal Healing practitioner, dedicated to working with my community to better the overall trajectory of First Nations peoples. I am also a sessional lecturer at VU.

My practice methodology focuses on the Indigenous perspective, human services and healing. I believe in community advocacy, community engagement and prioritise human rights and social justice. I am passionate about creating change through holistic self determination and community led discussion and consultation.

I enjoy working within the community and believe that true authentic and honest change starts at a grassroots level. I wholeheartedly believe in sharing knowledge and holding historical knowledge and lived experience with the same value as academic knowledge.

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# Who are we?



Amy

My name is Amy Quayle. I am a researcher in the Institute for Health and Sport at VU and a non-Aboriginal person who lives and works on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung of the Kulin nation. My research has focused on understanding the impacts of colonial dispossession for Indigenous peoples but also for the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia, as well as how community arts and cultural practice can be used to support processes of healing for Aboriginal people and to challenge wilful ignorance of the ongoing history of dispossession.


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Chris

My name is Chris Sonn. I live and work on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Bunurong/Boonwurrung people of the Kulin nation. I am a researcher in the Institute for Health and Sport and Moondani Balluk. My research involves understanding and elevating the voices of individuals and groups who are marginalised or excluded through forms of symbolic violence such as racism and sexism. My research is informed by community and liberation psychology and uses qualitative and creative methodologies.

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Guidestar is an organisation providing tailored supports to individuals, families, carers and organisations within the health and community services sectors.

We have partnered with Guidestar for this project with Community Psychologists Helen Kilmier and Ben Moberly part of our project reference group.

Guidestar's work is focused on supporting people to improve their quality of life and reach their personal goals and potential. Our services offer support for people with complex challenges such as dual disability, mental health concerns and trauma to participate in their chosen communities.

Guidestar is a B-Corporation which means we are certified as meeting the highest standards of social, environmental and community impact.

Given that we will be sharing stories and yarns in the workshops on your life experiences you may find that at times you become emotionally distressed or concerned about your history, identity and connection to Country. Should you feel the need to further discuss any distressing experience, you will be able to speak to a psychologist at Guidestar: Helen Killmier or Ben Moberley: (03) 9994 3345.

# What is the Blak Women's Healing Project?

Wayapa and Bush dyeing workshops  
with Aboriginal women

*Aboriginal women yarning, making and doing cultural practice together.*

The aim of this project is to create a culturally safe space to:

Yarn about culture,  
Country, identity,  
belonging and Aboriginal  
women's healing.

Learn about **Wayapa**, an  
earth connection practice  
based on Indigenous  
knowledge about taking care  
of Country, spirit, self.

Learn how to do **bush dyeing**  
and make healing cloths.

These activities, will provide opportunities to strengthen your connections with each other, culture and Country, and we hope, are healing practices that can be embedded into your everyday lives as daily acts of repair (Kruger, 2017 as cited in [Balla, 2022](#)).



# What is the Blak Women's Healing Project?

This project is funded by Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Indigenous Research Exchange.

Aboriginal women in the community who have experiences with the child protection and/or criminal justice systems and Aboriginal women in Dame Phyllis Frost will be invited to participate in a series of yarning and cultural practice workshops. Participants are also invited to participate in research yarning along the way.

1

**Wayapa and Bush Dyeing workshops** with and led by Aboriginal women.

**Research yarns** at the beginning, middle, end of workshop series.

2

Informed by the learnings from Aboriginal women shared through the workshops and research yarns, the project will also involve **developing resources that will be utilised in training of agency staff** who work with Aboriginal women about Aboriginal women's lives, social and emotional wellbeing, and healing.

## SNAPSHOT:

# CONNECTING ABORIGINAL WOMEN TO COUNTRY THROUGH LOCAL HEALING PRACTICES

This project follows a previous project '*Connecting Aboriginal Women to Country through local Healing practices*'. This project took place in 2020 (via Zoom during COVID restrictions) with a small group of Aboriginal women from Melbourne's west.

Informed by Indigenous knowledge and Aboriginal-led inquiry, we sought to explore and document the 'healing work' that is done in the space created through Aboriginal self-determined cultural workshops: Wayapa and Bush dyeing.

Through this project, we saw how the Aboriginal women involved **grew strength in relationship** over the weeks of being together which involved:

**Creating a safe space together  
in challenging times**

**Dialogues of vulnerability  
and identity**

**Dialogues about Country,  
place and culture**

You can read more about this project and research in our recently published article:

["Don't let anybody ever put you down culturally...it's not good": Creating spaces for Blak women's healing](#)

# What is Wayapa?

"Wayapa was created to change thinking around how we view the idea of what it means to be well with a focus on Indigenous thinking that includes learning how to develop a relationship with our environment through the concept of ancient earth mindfulness" (Wayapa).

Rowie is a trained Wayapa practitioner. Wayapa provided Rowie a means to decolonise and recentre Aboriginal knowledge traditions and practices in community.

*"Wayapa **centres itself around the oldest teachings of respect for and caring for Country.** Across my many heritages, and with religious lenses removed, my ancestors carried out these practises in alignment with the lands from which they were born/grew".*

*"Given the massive holes in my Ancestry histories, stories and culture, Wayapa and the modality provided me a platform and structure of something that I felt valid in sharing. **A baseline almost that I could grow as my cultural knowledge grew**".*

*"It provided **an opportunity to sit in circle with other women. It's a deliberate, reclamation of story.** Whilst they might not be directly from my ancestors, they share commonality. The more I sit in them the greater the echoes of my own become".*

# What is Bush Dyeing?

Bush-dyeing involves walking and being in local landscape and environments to collect bush materials and artefacts for use in workshops where the women make woven cultural pieces or art and cloth pieces for hanging or wearing and yarn with other Aboriginal women. Bush dyeing provides an opportunity for people to re-root themselves to culture and Country (Tunstall, 2015).

Paola Balla completed her PhD by creative project and exegesis:

*Disrupting Artistic Terra Nullius: The ways that First Nations women in art and community speak Blak to the colony and patriarchy.*

**"Bush dyeing and creating spaces of healing are methods of both cultural and artistic practice; of deep listening to the women and family who walk with me, and of deep listening to Country and Ancestors".**

"Bush dyeing is a slow lesson about the healing process; it is supported by collective knowledge and processes, but is also intimately personal, even though the context and historical traumas that cause the wounds are political. Some marks appear as animal, spirit, or both; different people see different things and share their ways of seeing with me. It's like looking for spirit faces in gum trees along Dungala, Campaspe and Kolety Rivers, the way my grandmother taught me".

You can find out more about her research and practice [here](#).



# Bush dyeing and connecting to Country

Tony Birch described Balla's practice in the following way:

"Collecting eucalyptus and other plants for her artistic work is also an act of labour and knowledge gathering and sharing for Balla. Privileging ecological sustainability and respect for Country, Balla gathers only a small selection of material from around each plant and gives thanks not only to the ancestors of Country but to the plants that provide her with the material for her work. Walking on Country prior to the making of work is not simply an exercise in foraging or 'gleaning' for Balla. She is **'learning through doing', walking on Country, patiently observing, learning and talking, all of these being aspects of 'yarning methodology', of being with Country'**" (Birch, 2021, p. 151).

Tony Birch on a bush dyed cloth he was gifted by Paola,

"The smells of the dyed cloth act as an immediate memory trigger, transporting me to the banks of the Birrarung (Yarra) River. The varied scents are also elusive, multi-layered and beyond description. What is remarkable about the tea towel...is that **both the smells and physical appearance of the cloth conjure endless layers of storytelling: narratives that speak of both love and violence, dispossession and rejuvenation, and, most of all, the courage of the Aboriginal women Balla celebrates and commemorates through the intense labour of her art practice'**" (Birch, 2021, p. 151).

# Changing Policy and Practice

An additional aim of this project is to challenge normal policy and practice and ways of responding to Aboriginal women, their children and their families.

Through research yarning workshops, women will be invited to share stories about their lives including their experiences of the criminal justice system and/or child protection system, Aboriginal women's social and emotional wellbeing and healing, and participating in the cultural practice and yarning workshops.

The stories you share through these yarning sessions will, with your permission, be used to inform the development of a training program for service delivery staff.



## Aim

to increase front line workers understandings of:

the intergenerational and ongoing legacy of colonisation and how it plays out in Aboriginal womens' lives

&

the ways in which Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing and healing can be supported through cultural reclamation and renewal activities.

**What do you want people working in the criminal justice and/or child protection systems to know about the lives of Aboriginal people and women in particular?**

**What do agency workers need to know to be culturally safe?**

**How might engagement in yarning about culture, Country, identity and belonging and making and doing cultural practice support Aboriginal women's social and emotional wellbeing?**

**How do Aboriginal women understand and engage in healing work?**

# Yarning and Storytelling

"Yarning is a relational Aboriginal practice for knowledge sharing and communication"

(Murrup-Stewart, Whyman, Jobson, & Adams, 2021, p. 1835).

Yarning "provides an opportunity for participants to take the research topic and respond as they see fit"

(Walker et al., 2014, p. 1218)

## **Stories have and give power**

Dr Karen Martin (Noonuccal woman with Bidjara ancestry)

Stories are our law.

Stories give identity as they connect us and fulfil our sense of belonging.

Stories are grounding, defining, comforting and embracing.

Stories vary in their purpose and content and so Stories can be political and yet equally healing.

They can be shared verbally, physically or visually.

Their meanings and messages teach, admonish, tease, celebrate, entertain, provoke and challenge.

(Martin, 2001, p. 45).



# Journaling

As part of this project, you will each be provided with a journal where you can write your reflections before, during or after the cultural practices and yarnning sessions. You may wish to share your journal reflections as part of the yarnning sessions, however this is entirely up to you. Below we have noted some possible prompts for your journal writing/reflections though please feel free to use the journal however you wish.

## **Connection with identity, culture, and Country**

As part of this project, we are interested in hearing from Aboriginal women about their connection with identity, culture, and Country and how this impacts their social and emotional wellbeing. What does Aboriginal identity, culture and Country mean to you and how does it support your wellbeing? In what ways has this connection to identity, culture and Country been undermined? In what ways can it be supported?

## **Your Daily Acts of Repair**

Through this project, we hope to introduce you to simple practices that can be embedded in your life as daily acts of repair. It might be useful to reflect on the daily acts of repair you already engage in as well as any that you learn about through the projects that you want to start doing.

## **Your Experience of and Reflections on Wayapa and Bush Dyeing**

Through this project you will have the opportunity to participate in Wayapa and Bush Dyeing workshops. It might be useful to reflect on what it was like to participate in these workshops? How did you feel? What did you learn? What did you most enjoy? Do engaging in these practices support wellbeing? You might also want to take notes about what these processes involved so that you can continue the practice after the project finishes.

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