

**Department of Social Sciences and International Studies**

**“Find One of Your Own Kind”:  
Auto-ethnography and my Aboriginal Women Ancestors**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
Curtin University**

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## **Declaration**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no materials previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

Signature: .....

Date: .....

## Abstract

This study is about the retelling of the stories of my great-great-grandmother, Melbin, my great-grandmother, Mary Latham (nee Oliver), my grandmother, Mary Dowling (nee Latham), and my mother, Veronica Dowling, as an analysis of the impact of *Wudjula*<sup>1</sup> (non-Indigenous) colonial dominance upon the lives of these Badimia (Indigenous Australian) women over time.

It is an exploration that enables the current generation of women in my family to discuss and analyse our constructions of identity as a decolonising process. This empowered those of us who remain to repair/restore crucial links with Badimia ancestral tribal lands and to generate a stronger account of our survival against colonial oppression. This project utilised auto-ethnographic methods to interrogate the exhibition of indigenous people as ethnographic subjects overseas, in particular, the experience of my ancestor, Melbin, and to recount her fragmented story. It involved a search for records of Melbin, a recount of her experiences and investigation of the black colonised female body as a comment on the nature of the relationship between race and gender in Australia.

Using the common thread of auto-ethnography meant that I could unite the different strands of family stories and contribute to a burgeoning body of literature by Aboriginal women in Australian research<sup>2</sup>. A tapestry of stories was created amongst women in my family as a strong foundation for a contemporary manifestation of a living, continuous Badimia account of survival. By investigating and using thematic narrative analysis of the material and ephemeral elements of family stories, I was able to explore and uncover rich, deep and revealing content that documented a counter-colonial history in Australia. Fundamentally, this project demonstrates that when Indigenous women's lives are documented and analysed the extent and impact of wudjula domination can be revealed. It can also be asserted that there is a trajectory that can be mapped when successive generations of women are exposed to racism, sexism and colonialism. This map acts as a statement about identity construction and the creation of Aboriginal women as objects of spectacle.

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<sup>2</sup> Huggins (1998), Reid-Gilbert (2000), Behrendt (2006), Moreton-Robinson (2000) Brady (2006)

## **Acknowledgements**

This journey would not have been possible without the generosity, support and love of my family. The close relationships I have within my immediate and extended female relatives is evident in the material presented within this document. In particular I wish to single out the important role each woman played within this research project. My grandmother, Mary Dowling (nee Latham), was 93 years old when she passed in 2011 having left this world sharing four very long interviews with me, her oldest grandchild. My grandmother's involvement almost immediately gave legitimacy to my work with other members of my large Badimia/Yamatji family. My mother, Veronica Mary Dowling, and my aunt, Barbara Ann Dowling, provided detailed, revealing interviews that will forever be singular memories for the rest of my life. It was their insights that pushed my research into unimaginable territory. I also wish to pay respect to my other two aunts, Patricia Rose Dowling (deceased) and Elizabeth Joy Dowling who, even though they declined to be interviewed, contributed immensely by providing consistent editorial advice and encouragement throughout the years of my research. I would also like to thank my dear friend, Naomi Green, for her unending support and advice during my research.

I wish to offer my whole hearted thanks to my twin sister, Julie Ann Dowling. My sister has always been a source of inspiration and help in every endeavour I have undertaken. Her work as one of Australia's most prominent Indigenous visual artists has always been a wonder and joy to me. I thank her for allowing me to interview her for this project and for permission to include her artworks for analysis. In addition, I wish to thank Ms Merrilyn Elkington and the late Mary Hirst, who provided miraculous contextual insight into the lives of my grandmother and great-grandmother.

On the academic and professional realm, I wish to give my profound thanks to Associate Professor Dr Phillip Moore who showed incredible faith in my abilities. I will be forever grateful for his encouragement and guidance. I'm indebted to Dr Julie Hoffman and Dr Donna Butorac for helping me get over the finishing line. You are both moorditj yorgas (good and strong women)!

I wish to extend my love and thanks to my three sons, James and Curtis Miller and Tyron Boundary. James, Curtis and Tyron are my hope for future generations of Noongar men and warriors. They fill me with great pride and anticipation of the good men they will become. I wish them happiness in this life.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the Badimia and Kalamaia nations both past and present for their tenacity, strength and wisdom. With every twist in the journey of this investigation, I have been greeted with generosity and interest in the work I was doing. I hope the words included in this document contribute to strengthening the story of our people. Most of all, I hope these words will forever celebrate my ancestor women whose blood courses through my being and continue to inspire my life's journey.

*“Mama’s lil babies love shortnin’, shortnin’. Mama’s lil babies love shortnin’ bread.”*

*James Whitcomb Riley*

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## Notes of Presentation

This document contains a variety of quotes and in text references from differing sources. The following notes are an index of how this various material can be identified by the reader.

In-text quotations	italics, non-bold
My poetry & prose	bold, arial, narrow, single-spaced, size 12 font
Direct quotes stand-alone	indented, non-bold, justified, italics, single spaced
Gosnells Oral History project quotes	single spaced, italics, size 12 font
Interviews with family & others	single spaced, bold

I have used footnotes to contain references to the scholarly and other literatures through this thesis. I have done so in order to provide the appropriate scholarly contexts and sources for my work while allowing the flow of my text not to be too disrupted by names, dates and page numbers.

## **List of Appendices – after bibliography**

- 1. Map of Mid-West/Murchison Region of Western Australia.**  
Boundaries of towns including Wubin, Paynes Find, Mount Magnet, Yalgoo, Mullewa, Dongara, Eneabba, Coorow, Three Springs, Morawa & Mingenew.
- 2. Map of significant suburbs in Perth metropolitan area.**  
Key suburbs for my family included Belmont, Armadale, Bassendean, Gosnells, Maddington, Karawara, Riverton, Redcliffe, Victoria Park & North Perth.
- 3. Painting by Julie Dowling 1997.** Portrait entitled “Melbin” (owned by Cruthers Collection).
- 4. Painting by Julie Dowling entitled “Sista Carol”** (Archibald Finalist painting 2000, Dowling private collection).
- 5. Photograph of original mudbrick ruins of Oliver brother’s homestead on Wydgee Station** (Photo taken by author 2009).
- 6. Samuel Winmar** (to left of donkey, with large moustache). Half-brother to Mary Oliver (my great grandmother). His mother was Melbin.
- 7. Unknown graves at Coodingnow station** (permission of Clinch Family).
- 8. Image of track leading to the path of the Beemara.** (Site not shown due to cultural sensitivity).
- 9. Group photograph of Shepard Dinah with Mary Galbraith** (to the left in white dress.) Shepherd Dinah is the oldest woman holding a digging stick (Wanna).
- 10. Photograph of Mary Latham (Nee Oliver)** taken by my grandmother Molly as a child. East Perth Train Station circa 1930s.
- 11. Ethical Clearance from Curtin Human Research Ethics Committee.**
- 12. Interview questions to Julie Dowling (Sample).**

## **Glossary of terms**

### **Mixed-race**

In the English-speaking world, many terms exist to describe people of various multiracial backgrounds, some of which are pejorative or no longer used. For example, Mulato and Mestizo (Spanish), Metis (French) and Mestico (Portugese). 'Multiracial' is also used, but in the context of my study 'mixed-race' is used by authors such as Reynolds (2005) & Perkins (2004). It is not used in a derogatory way but as a marker for Aboriginal people with European (or other) ancestry along with that of Indigenous.

### **Aboriginality**

The definition of Aboriginality has a long and contentious history in Australia. Different classification systems (many with significant personal and social consequences) have moved in and out of fashion. Even today, two very different definitions are concurrently in use. One, predominating in legislation, defines an Aboriginal as "a person who is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia"<sup>3</sup> The other, predominating in program administration but also used in some legislation and court judgements, defines an Aboriginal as someone "who is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia, identifies as an Aboriginal and is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal"<sup>4</sup>

### **Badimia**

Badimia is a language group of people whose regions span from Lake Moore, Ninghan Station, Paynes Find and Dalwallinu in the south, to Mount Magnet, Wynyangoo Station and Kirkalocka Station in the north. Today Badimia people are found scattered across the Murchison and Mid-West region, based in regional towns and communities including Mount Magnet, Geraldton, Yalgoo, Mullewa, Meekatharra, Wubin, Dalwallinu and Perth.

### **Yamatji**

Yamatji (or 'Yamaji' in the orthography of Wajarri) is a name commonly used by Aboriginal people in the Murchison and Gascoyne regions of Western Australia to refer to themselves, and sometimes also to Aboriginal people generally, when speaking English. The word comes from the Wajarri language where it has the meaning 'man' or 'human being'. It is usually used to mean 'Aboriginal person', but when being more specific the particular language group name will often be used, where this is known.

### **Wudjula**

Wudjula is a Noongar word used in the South-West of Western Australia to refer to a white person or person of European origin. It is probably an adaption of the word 'whitefella'.

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<sup>3</sup> Gardiner-Garden (2003:1)

<sup>4</sup>[https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/Publications\\_Archive/CIB/cib0203/03Cib10](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/CIB/cib0203/03Cib10)

# Chapter One

## Introduction

*Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – and our ability to tell our stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe.<sup>5</sup>*

### **The Research purpose**

The purpose of this research project is to provide a structure for Indigenous Australian families to document their experiences and knowledge of colonisation. This thesis planned to speak about power relations by presenting the voices of Indigenous women in relation to Aboriginality and oral history. Yarns, or spoken stories, within my large Badimia family revealed much about the impact of power relations between Aboriginal women and white<sup>6</sup> men in the newly colonised Murchison region of Western Australia<sup>7</sup> and the subsequent fall-out from such engagement. Through storytelling, the tale of a family's journey over generations, despite being fragmented or partial in content, can uncover the tactics and techniques used to transmit it along as Aboriginal knowledge. Indeed, these stories of colonisation can be given authority as survivor accounts and speak about the rapid, violent and adaptive spread of colonisation to the present day.

The participant group of my women family members agreed to undertake intensive semi-structured interviews to discuss their experiences and that of their women ancestors. These women discussed their contemporary experiences of Aboriginality<sup>8</sup>, their knowledge of their

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<sup>5</sup> Roy, A. (2003)

<sup>6</sup> 'White' meaning non-Aboriginal or of Anglo-European origins

<sup>7</sup> See *Appendix 1: Map of Western Australia*. Murchison region include boundaries of towns including Wubin, Paynes Find, Mount Magnet, Yalgoo, Mullewa, Dongara, Eneabba, Coorow, Three Springs, Morawa & Mingenev.

<sup>8</sup> See Glossary of Terms for more concise definition

mothers and grandmothers' lives, their views on their women ancestors as well as the discrimination they lived through. Together, we worked to formulate a deeper understanding of how the stories of our women ancestors survived and what such storytelling has done for our family today. Speaking together about our own truth was a liberating experience as Aboriginal women together. Every participant revealed an in-depth account of their experiences in contemporary Australia emphasised by stories of resistance, self-determination and in the spirit of decolonisation. These stories demonstrate the complex unity of a family of women inspired by those who had gone before.

For us all, the wisdom of our much loved and discussed ancestor, Melbin, my grandmother's grandmother, had been passed down to daughters for several generations. As spoken to her wealthy white pastoralist master and the father of her child, from Melbin's lips were uttered the chilling phrase "*Go find one of your own kind!*" Her words were spoken at a time when defiance by colonised Indigenous women was never recorded and yet this phrase survived through the generations describing her place in society during her time. She said these words soon after returning from England with my great-great-grandfather. He had paraded her as a symbol of his colonial conquest in the far reaches of the Swan Colony<sup>9</sup>. My great-great-grandmother's words stated strongly that she was not going to be his colonial trophy anymore.

It was Frantz Fanon who best described how the settler makes history and is "*conscious of making it.*"<sup>10</sup> He says the settler's position as storyteller is not to write of his plunder but to create a story that skims the surface of all he has violated and starved to create his world. I was raised by my single-parent mother, along with my twin sister, in a large Badimia/Yamatji matriarchy. I had little or no access to knowledge of the stories of my father's family or that of my maternal grandfather, who were both non-Aboriginal. I was raised with the stories of many strong Aboriginal women. These stories heavily influenced my sense of Aboriginality and womanhood. I have long felt that the story of my great-great-grandmother, Melbin, presents a challenging account of colonisation's impact upon successive generations of women in my family. It is Melbin's story that has always inspired me to investigate the stories of my women ancestors.

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<sup>9</sup> Swan colony refers to the first place of settlement in Western Australia located in and around the capital city of Perth

<sup>10</sup> Fanon, F. in Young, R. 1992:244

My perception of the roles between non-Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women as lived by successive generations in my family was mostly negative. It appeared to me that these Aboriginal women were used and discarded by their colonial ‘husbands’. The only exception was my grandmother, whose non-Aboriginal husband sacrificed, defended and sustained his wife and family despite ill health, broader public condemnation and racism. When my maternal grandfather died when I was six years old, my grandmother’s brother, Great-Uncle George Latham, became the only positive male influence in my childhood and adolescence. His influence was sporadic as he still worked on farms and lived in our ancestral country while we lived in urban Perth.<sup>11</sup> He, along with my grandmother and mother, instilled in me a comprehensive knowledge of the strong line of Badimia women in my family. I believe with this knowledge, I developed a strong sense of obligation to take advantage of the freedom’s they themselves were denied as young girls. With this freedom, I began a career in Aboriginal radio, then moved onto Noongar community development and finally, within the academy as a lecturer in Aboriginal studies at Edith Cowan University, University of Western Australia and Curtin University.

Throughout this journey, I have always believed there to be tensions concerning the reproduction of Indigenous people’s narratives. There is a transformation that occurs once a spoken story becomes written text. Throughout my university career, I have been puzzled by the attention given to positionality or the place of me as the interviewer as well as the narrator. There is more to this for me as an Aboriginal woman. When the story becomes a text, that is, a volume of several stories, I immediately become situated with these other storytellers.

All of this goes beyond what official colonial or state records possess about Aboriginal women’s lives. When one of my mother’s first cousins sat me down to explain that she believed she was not Aboriginal simply because official records (native welfare to be precise) stated that her father and others were deemed fit to live as white people, I was shocked. She stated to me that because these records told her that her father was not Aboriginal, then she could also say so as well. It was not so much how she misused this official judgement by the white assimilationist regime, but that she chose to ignore how it had overshadowed the existence of my grandmother and her siblings during the 1920s to 1950s. What perplexed me the most was how this cousin felt it was better to say she was not Aboriginal to escape scrutiny and harsh

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 2: *Map of Suburban Perth*. Key suburbs for my family included Belmont, Armadale, Bassendean, Gosnells, Maddington, Karawara, Riverton, Redcliffe, Victoria Park & North Perth

treatment even in contemporary society. I have often witnessed and experienced the strong opinions of family members expressing that certain members of our family had the right to identify as Aboriginal whereas others, including myself and my sister, did not have such liberty.

From the time I was a young child, I was strongly aware that the stories of my women ancestors were gifts given to me so that I could hand them onto my own children. As I grew older, I realised that these stories held many layers of meaning other than just about the times these women lived or as just known 'facts'. These stories were strongly linked to our varying notions of Aboriginality and whiteness. They were also exemplars of how Aboriginal women in the Mid-West region of Western Australia engaged with non-Aboriginal men and their society. It was also about the subsequent government policies that strongly impacted upon their lives. The research objectives were drawn from the tensions and thoughts I had about these stories and the discussions previously held with senior women in my family regarding what it means to be Aboriginal, what it means to be mixed-race, and what it means to be a contemporary woman as the descendent of strong Badimia women. The stories of my women ancestors reveal much about how colonial wudjula (non-Indigenous) society worked to compromise and shape Badimia identity into their goals of assimilation so as to make Aboriginal people disappear or become invisible. When writing up these objectives, I knew that these women's stories showed how these policies did not work and, more importantly, why they did not succeed as seen through five generations of women.

These stories always began with that of my great-great-grandmother, Melbin, who was taken to England during a time when Aboriginal people were widely considered curiosities. As curiosities, Indigenous people were used to demonstrate the supposed dominance of the British Imperial exercise over colonised peoples even when these colonies were rapidly becoming abject failures. This knowledge enabled me to formulate the second objective in researching Melbin's experience through archival data and then cross referencing her life with those of other Indigenous women who shared similar stories. I aimed to formulate an analysis of how Melbin's story compared to the stories of other colonised women used as scientific, eroticised specimens for the Western appetite. This question also led me to formulate the last objective which refers to my query into how I, as Melbin's great-great-granddaughter, would digest such new new information especially regarding how Melbin's experiences caused her to reject white society and return to her people. According to wudjula official records, Melbin simply disappeared making me curious about what this silence meant.

I have witnessed Aboriginality being a contentious issue for several members of my family as I grew into adulthood. The influence of past assimilationist policies upon my family had not been discussed or contextualised widely; rather, these men and women passively accepted the dogma of these policies to the present day. The intense focus placed upon Aboriginal women throughout the assimilationist eras meant that women in my family endured psychological and emotional abuse, forcing them to discriminate against their own families and to perpetuate such ideologies in their children. It became seen to be better for their daughters and granddaughters to marry wudjula men because their lives would become easier and under less focus than if they married Aboriginal men. These objectives reflect the process of how these stories were built upon socially and personally constructed mythologies reflecting the times in which they lived. Each successive generation saw their views and beliefs about Aboriginality become reflected in these stories while other elements remained unchanged by colonial influence. Embedded in these objectives was the desire to write down oral traditions so that hidden stories could emerge making greater discussion on issues surrounding mixed-race identity and colonisation.

As my doctoral work progressed, I formulated a research project that incorporated my interest in Aboriginal decolonisation in the area of identity conceptualisation and barriers to Aboriginal community solidarity. I knew that personal accounts from within a family (my own family being no exception), would provide a rich source of information to those who work within Aboriginal studies, Indigenous communities and Aboriginal women's support services. In particular, I felt that such a focus would benefit a global account of the impact of colonialism on Indigenous women. By forming a close engagement with women in my family about their experience of colonialism, I hoped to build up our knowledge together of what the experience is like for those who think they must choose their racial/cultural positioning in western society.

I wanted to investigate in depth why women made certain choices, and how they renegotiated their personal lives, managed their families, developed life goals and conceptualised their identity. The doctoral program was a catalyst in helping me organise these thoughts into the following coherent objectives:

- To document and analyse how five generations of Indigenous women in one family engaged with colonialism in Australia to reveal the extent and impact of wudjula domination of Indigenous women.
- To investigate any connections between Melbin's story and that of other Indigenous women used as an eroticised, scientific 'other' for the Western gaze.
- To write a personal account of my own decolonising process including discussions of identity, sexism, racism, colonialism and the impact of creating the Aboriginal spectacle.

For this thesis, I was compelled to investigate the dynamics of identity from family discussions. Here I turned to Anderson<sup>12</sup> for his historical account of the construction of whiteness, who says that up until the 1880's in Australia, being British implied a lineage: after that, whiteness became a type suggesting a typical body or temperament, a cultural legacy and thought style; a virility or femininity; a head circumference and brain capacity; and a blood group. By taking such a statement further, this author asks the field why there has not been previous attempts to connect Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal histories together. The doomed race theory is an idea that took root in Australia in the early decades of the nineteenth century. McGregor<sup>13</sup> recounts how the idea was showing signs of withering, although still persisted until at least the 1950s. He states that, "*the expectation of extinction exerted a powerful influence over white Australians attitudes toward, and interactions with, the Aboriginals. Even as it declined, the doomed race theory cast a long shadow over the newly-emerging proposals for securing an Aboriginal future*". More importantly, and particularly relevant to my research, is the lack of critique of eugenics in Australia and its synchronicity with the history of Aboriginal anthropology.<sup>14</sup> Life writing in Australia is the best vehicle in our culture for sustained, probing and public examination of the process of moral judgement.

In summarising the issues of Aboriginal identity and whiteness, I turn to Frantz Fanon<sup>15</sup> who, by speaking about the injustice he had been meted out by white prejudice, stated that his oppression enabled him to make a remarkable discovery. He began to rediscover the "*lives of*

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<sup>12</sup> Anderson 2003:2

<sup>13</sup> McGregor 1997:ix

<sup>14</sup> Anderson 2003:4/5

<sup>15</sup> Fanon in Donald & Rattansi 1992:235

*the black man*” through antiquity. Fanon<sup>16</sup> says that black consciousness is not a “*potentiality of something*” nor a search for the universal black man. Having black consciousness is not about lacking in relation to whites but proclaims that being black “*is its own follower*”.

With regard to how Aboriginal people generally view official records about themselves since the time of conquest, Maxwell’s<sup>17</sup> analysis of the ‘dying race’ theory also answers for how indicative systematic forgetting was, even when Australian exhibitions eschewed live displays of Aboriginal people and how in general Aboriginal people were conspicuous by their absence from official versions of the colonies. It seems that such forgetting continues with the National Sorry Day Committee launching a campaign to stop the roll out of the new history curriculum for schools throughout Australia. This campaign was backed by the Independent Education Union made up of all Catholic and Independent school teachers who said the new curriculum should include more about Aboriginal people and the Stolen Generations. The Committee has said the apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008 by then Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and Federal Parliament was not properly covered in the curriculum, and references to Indigenous Australians were “*clumsily written*”. The Independent Education Union had concerns about the lack of prominence given to Indigenous history and not to give Australian kids a “*watered down version of our history*”.<sup>18</sup>

When such realities exist within the re-telling of Australian history to accurately include our stories as First Nations people in Australia, then I believe there must be more candid and personal connections between ourselves as Aboriginal people to strengthen our stories for our future generations. I argue that through auto-ethnography, family stories can become strong foundations for contemporary manifestations of a living, continuous Indigenous culture. By investigating and analysing the material and ephemeral elements of family stories, life writing can reveal deeper and enriching content for documenting a counter-colonial history in Australia.

Why, for example, is the history of ideas about nature so rarely combined with the history of racial thought, given that for most nineteenth-century intellectuals race and circumstance, blood and soil, were so frequently compounded? How is it that the development of the *White*

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<sup>16</sup> Donald & Rattansi 1992:236

<sup>17</sup> Maxwell 1999:134

<sup>18</sup> “Sorry Day Committee wins support to stop curriculum change”: Tell Kids the Truth, say teachers” National Indigenous Times 5/10/2011 page 6.

*Australia* policy, intimately connected with labour history, is rarely associated with the history of the scientists who sought to justify it? What makes a critique of eugenics in Australia so difficult to synchronise with the history of Aboriginal anthropology? According to Stoler<sup>19</sup>, on the frontier, the sexual unions that existed were founded on rape, concubinage, prostitutions, or church marriage derived from the hierarchies of rule. On any angle, they can also be viewed as provisional relations that were based on contested classifications that could alter an individual's fate (or that of their descendants) and the very structure of colonial society. Ultimately, inclusion and exclusion required regulating the sexual, conjugal and domestic life of both European colonials and their subjects. Within the imperial enterprise, colonial observers and participants appear to have had unlimited interest in the sexual interface of the colonial encounter. Stoler<sup>20</sup> claims that no subject is discussed more than sex in colonial literature. No subject was more frequently invoked to foster the racist stereotypes of European society and subsequently informed their treatment of Aboriginal women including those in my family.<sup>21</sup>

It was Charlotte Linde<sup>22</sup> who discussed this process of creating and maintaining a personal identity as being about the three characteristics of the self that are maintained through language. For the 'self' to exist, there should be a sense of continuity through time. Who a woman was as a little girl should relate to the person she has become as an adult. A second property of the self is also relevant to my research for it is how the self is created by narrative and is the ability to distinguish the self from others. Each person is unique and different but must relate to others. This universality of an individualised self can be and has been questioned from feminist and cultural perspectives. The third characteristic is about reflexivity. In narratives or stories, the self is treated as the other with moral evaluations of the self-taking place. Some of the deepest matters of human self-understanding including issues of justice and the human good, all lie at the heart of autobiography. It is one of the most complex modes of human expression. That is why the quest to capture a life in writing has become a dominant literary form in the West. Among the reading public there is a seemingly insatiable demand for intimacy, revelation, and disclosure. When questioning the processes and structures of identification, Ahmed<sup>23</sup> says that other important aspects come into view. In relation to power, race and gender, they can be

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<sup>19</sup> Stoler 2002:43

<sup>20</sup> Stoler 2002:45

<sup>21</sup> Stoler, 2002:43

<sup>22</sup> Linde, C (1993)

<sup>23</sup> Ahmed 1997:161

looked at as “*constructions-in progress*”. She says that this means that the individual is understood in terms of “*becoming*” rather than “*being*”.<sup>24</sup> The ways that I and my participants have contextualised our experiences into our lives is an important project as it brings to the fore the reality of a marginalised culture in Australia and speaking from the centre of our worldview.

What gave me the courage to proceed in this project came from an understanding that our constructions of our stories are not definitive. The very act of writing another’s life is inherently partial and therefore inadequate. It is also presumptuous and possibly offensive. The imperative should be to make something together, through narrative, of the experience (others’ as well as our own) with which we are entrusted. Such self-awareness, especially when the relationship is consensual, is a characteristic of the most ethnically responsible life writing.

As Couser<sup>25</sup> noted, it is a matter not just of responsibility but of responsiveness. The challenge is to enact or communicate this on the page. That is why all participants in this project were informed of the risks and benefits of taking part, and of their right to withdraw their involvement. Together we made the project about a general concern with what Aboriginal women in one family had to say about themselves and their women ancestors regarding social structures, and how eugenic-based policies/prejudice related to their family and community. In doing so, these women discussed colonisation and Aboriginality in their lives. That is why this thesis is not a simple presentation of data or a process of fitting what women have said into neat definable categories but rather a large interrelated body of knowledge. Official records were used very late in the research writing process. This was not only because they were difficult to obtain but there was avoidance of them simply because we felt they were written from a perspective separate from the reality in our family. Often their contents led to anger and feelings of powerlessness. Participants in this project wanted to begin their engagement with the subjects we discussed from a position of power and authority and not as observable subjects.

## **Significance**

In early anthropological texts, culture was identified with the products of a particular society. It was not just the material artefacts produced but also institutions including authority systems

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<sup>24</sup> Ahmed 1997:134

<sup>25</sup> Couser 2004:22

and patterns of inheritance. Beliefs, concepts, values and guidelines for behaviour all translated into an observable pattern. In this old definition, culture was the sum total of all these things while taking into account the intricate network of relationships between all these cultural products. In more recent models, culture can be understood to mean not the observable cultural phenomena themselves but the design or plan for living that is passed on from one generation to another. This design may be, and often is, altered from one generation to another as new influences are brought to bear on a society.

I argue that the loss of culture is a myth. What is important in what this thesis proposes is that the ‘connections’ between individuals, who are considered to be of the same culture, are what defines it. This is coupled with the characteristics of these ‘cultural’ groups that make them distinct. The most common approach to measuring culture is to focus on such categories to derive a binary representation of culture: if a person is a member of that group, however assessed, then they are considered to be ‘of that culture’. However, it is important to note here that while I speak of ‘Indigenous culture’ as if it were one homogenous culture, the reality is one of considerable diversity from different tribes and regions in Australia as well as many different languages.

Strong cultural attachment is associated with better health and a lower likelihood of engaging in risky social behaviours such as substance abuse and alcoholism. According to Trudgen<sup>26</sup> Indigenous Australians with intermediate levels of cultural attachment are most likely to have been arrested and incarcerated, compared to those with either strong or minimal attachment. This may show how isolation, confusion and feelings of loss of control and self-esteem often beset people trying to “*live between two cultures*”. This thesis aims to present women’s story of cultural attachment, but I have endeavoured to present it in a less abstract way. Rather, it aims to locate culture where it belongs: within people who pass it along – and those who change it, in big ways and small, as they are forever doing. Just as there can be no culture without the people who transmit it, so there can be no people without a culture of some form. It is the social air that people breathe, the glue that binds them to one another, the shared understandings that make it possible for them to communicate with one another and so to live together. What could it possibly mean, then, to say that people have lost their culture? Is this supposed to mean that they are now utterly devoid of any organised pattern of living at all? The organisational unity

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<sup>26</sup> Trudgen 2000:220

in a culture may be loose, especially if a society undergoes a time of rapid transition, but it is real. The story is real.

In my great-great-grandmother's time and that of my great-grandmother's time, Indigenous Australians had endured a highly destructive, centuries-long assault on their homelands, their societies, and their cultures in physical, spiritual, and emotional terms. Under the guise first of religion and then science, Euro-Australian invaders had stripped Indigenous communities in this continent of nearly all of their land and resources, and carried forward an all-out attack on their languages, religions, educational systems, family structures, and systems of governance. For centuries, missionaries, soldiers, and government officials led this assault. Humanitarian reformers, social and physical scientists, and artists lent their authority to these efforts as well. Rapid population decline followed, and sometimes preceded, Euro-Australian invaders, caused not only by warfare and capture for slavery, but by diseases which Europeans had brought to this country. The combination of violence and disease caused some tribal communities such as the Badimia nation to lose as much as ninety percent of their member populations. As wave after wave of disease hit and increasing levels of incarceration at times of early contact, Aboriginal communities lost a quarter to a third of their populations time and again. This type of population loss continued well into the twentieth century. It is a credit to my women ancestors that their story has survived at all.

I acknowledge that today our stories, written and spoken in our own ways, for our own purposes and as our own visions, are about creating a new literature that constructs an Australian national culture. This liberation remains an everyday challenge for Indigenous intellectuals and artists who give testimony to and restore the spirit and history of our people. Decolonisation of the research process does not mean a total rejection of everything Western; rather it concerns the placing of our knowledges at the centre. Thus, Indigenous methodologies, processes and approaches are dynamic and critical elements of a strategic research agenda. Haig-Brown and Archibald<sup>27</sup> state that "*the denial by the West of humanity to Indigenous peoples, the denial of citizenship and human rights, the denial of the right to self-determination – all these demonstrate palpably the enormous lack of respect which has marked the relations of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peoples*". Indigenous research aims to speak about this relationship and to bring about change. By creating space for Indigenous women within my

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<sup>27</sup> Haig-Brown & Archibald 1996:245

family to speak about power relations, we can gain a greater insight into everyday realities and to identify areas that can be changed or re-examined to address unequal power relations within Australian contemporary society.

As I have worked predominantly with members of my own family, I have established robust relationships over time with them as my participants. The collaborative process of research was built on mutual trust which sustained the research. However, this also meant that I made every effort to be conscious of being discreet when exposing complex and challenging matters within my family into the written format. Above all, I acted with accountability to my family and all participants by making my actions transparent in standards, processes and structures.

In support of this research project, I wish to argue that its significance also lies in the freedom expressed in how these stories were told. As a contribution to the field of social sciences, I maintain that narrative analysis of and by Badimia women or Aboriginal women generally is a highly valuable contribution. Not only are these stories being formulated for the first time in a written context, but they demonstrate a different way of how research can be conducted within Aboriginal families and their communities. Working together, by using auto-ethnographic methods, to build our own understandings of colonisation and its impact upon identity formation provides insight. I wish to point out that this fundamentally influenced the distinct ways that participants and I formulated knowledge together. The interviews were semi-structured but allowed me and a participant to ascertain what was important to women in our family. Generally these centred on topics such as the processes of passing on knowledge, identification as Aboriginal, the realities of hardship, discrimination, assimilation and the subsequent effects of these such as mental illness, violence, addiction and sexual abuse. These are also stories of a family moving to escape government surveillance and intervention. They are stories of relationships between elders and their grandchildren, of separation and reunions, of working life and life under welfare but above all, these are stories about women who once were enigmas prior to this research project. These focused areas of storytelling could easily be applied to other Aboriginal families in various contexts.

By having a member of a family conduct ‘yarns’ in a semi-structured way, the focus is no longer of creating an artificial environment for creating knowledge. Instead, the lack of a research hierarchy means that both interviewer and interviewee form a team of sorts searching through various subject matters for meaning. The journey I took with female members of my

family was motivated by making our knowledge stronger together. When asked about these processes, participants stated that they felt stronger as knowledge keepers because they were able to speak about their own life stories in relation to the women who went before them. Their stories became connected to other women's stories within the family and when official records were eventually uncovered, these documents were analysed and discussed as a family of knowledge keepers. It added to family cohesion and gave greater depth to our discussions together, especially when talking about oppression and survival as Badimia people.

Furthermore, it was not just the material obtained from archives that proved to be a valuable contribution to women's stories but the journey of finding these documents also proved to be highly valued. Many documents only surfaced after my grandmother was awarded damage money by the WA State government's Redress program whereby her native welfare and other documents were sent to her personally. This large body of documents had never been viewed by her or her family. These documents did not just give account of her life alone but also that of her husband and her children and grandchildren including myself. With these written accounts from an official perspective, we were able to see first-hand the hardship and discrimination women in my family had experienced. The value of this consolidation of knowledge is immeasurable to our family and to me personally. The transformation of my female family members since these stories have been retold and researched has given us a passion for these stories. We are all compelled to dispel the silences surrounding the existence of Aboriginal resistance and settler violence in our family's traditional country. It has prompted us into further investigation into what actually occurred for our women ancestors and this journey is envisioned to continue into the future.

Such debate generates a comparative evaluation of oppression and oppressors. It enables a direct reflection on the nature of the Australian character and national identity. Such a focus moves away from making the experiences and interpretations of us as Aboriginal people subordinate. It moves away from us being told by non-Aboriginal people how to understand our lived experiences. The struggle has been about making a world in our own image and presenting it to non-Indigenous Australians and this quest must continue. The views of each generation of women placed within historical and social contexts provide a chilling countenance because they reveal much about the social and political attitudes they struggled against in their lives and continue to struggle with.

Along with many post-colonial writers internationally, we as descendants are re-making these stories and are writing, often for the first time, about the impact of racism upon our “mixed-race”<sup>28</sup> families and the communities in which we are accepted. Reynolds<sup>29</sup> expressed the sentiment held by those in colonial power towards the miscegenation between white men and Aboriginal women. He states clearly that “*Racial mixture was, therefore, undesirable at best and positively dangerous at worst, threatening the strength and imperative purity of superior races. Mixed-descent people themselves were seen as, at the very least, unfortunate victims of implacable biological laws and probably dangerous misfits and malcontents. They were threatening not only as individuals but even more so as members of an ill-starred group who were unwelcome wherever they turned*”. How then are the stories of mixed-race peoples to be received? This author makes direct connection with his analysis to that of Aboriginal life writing. This holds particular relevance to my research project when establishing a narrative with stories of my women ancestors. Reynolds<sup>30</sup> believes that by analysing the influence of international ideologies regarding ‘mixed-race’, we are allowed to connect and to make a more encompassing way of studying explanations of what this strange project in human displacement might mean. More importantly, it would help us to make meaning of mixed-race as a boundary.

## **Background**

The writing of life history belongs to the qualitative and phenomenology end of the sociological ontology. It is not micro-historical or ‘soft’ but on the contrary, life history research feeds the realist and constructionist approaches. The realist has been interested in great historical processes such as social mobility, generations and the experiences of social classes and professions. The constructionist tends to focus on the presentations of ideals, identities and narrative configurations. Within sociology, life stories were taken as approaches that were contextually bound constructions not separate from fiction. By the late 1990s, as a backlash against the overtly post-modernist and textual interpretations, life story discussions began to be about narratives, texts and reality<sup>31</sup>. This form of life writing continues today and indicates further changes are needed in post-colonial studies.

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<sup>28</sup> Mixed-race is a terminology widely used within anthropological and sociological studies. See Glossary of Terms attached.

<sup>29</sup> Reynolds 2005:8

<sup>30</sup> Reynolds 2005:4/5

<sup>31</sup> Jolly 2001

Haebich<sup>32</sup>, created major work that provides greater detail of how Aboriginal families in Western Australia were the subject of systemic state removal and incarceration. This book reveals the dark heart of Western Australia's history and shows that *"since the earliest times of European colonisation, Aboriginal people experienced the trauma of loss and separation, as their children were abducted, enslaved, institutionalised and culturally remodelled"*. As we chip away at the problem of how these stories can be brought forward, mainly with the tools of white history, the words, perceptions and reactions of black women in past times are largely being denied to us. Oral histories work to help redress this imbalance somewhat, especially over the more recent times, but detailed knowledge of fundamental nineteenth-century developments in this area have largely been lost long ago. We build perceptions of Aboriginal women's place and roles in their traditional societies (prior to white arrival) using the tools of anthropology. As indigenous researchers, this is with the understanding that the discipline too is simply one culture's interpretive guide to another. Again I turn to Frantz Fanon<sup>33</sup> who provides a poignant observation that the settler *"constantly refers to the history of his mother country. He clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother country"*. Sociological life writing is used to capture the essence of nations or generations. An enduring theme has been women's and men's narrative styles, known as the debate about autonomy versus relational selves. One of the first feminist writers in this style was Carol Steedman et al.<sup>34</sup> who used her family memoirs for a critical discussion of prevailing theories about class and gender identity. Some twenty years later, Brewster<sup>35</sup> argues that there is no separation between women as public members of society and women in their more private realm as thinkers. Indigenous women's writing prompted a decade or more of white women's writing. Indigenous women's writing emphasises the importance of the practice of listening, and recognising and respecting the political and cultural imperatives and agendas of Indigenous people. Their discussions are about cross-racial, anti-racist and social justice issues. Added to this are 'mixed-race' autobiographies also problematising the issues of colour. As 'mixed-race' becomes a more speakable reality, the ability to take positions within the black community that claim a colour other than black is now widespread. Writers of mixed-race are marking out a territory in which colour is defined by neither black nor white. It is a life as lived.

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<sup>32</sup> Haebich 2000:23

<sup>33</sup> Fanon, F. in Young, R. 1992:244

<sup>34</sup> Steedman et al 1985:23

<sup>35</sup> Brewster 2005:1

### **Approach to the research**

The methodology used in this thesis project is predominantly that of Auto-ethnography (AE). AE is a way of conducting research that enables Indigenous peoples (and other subordinate peoples) to present their reality in ways previously used by dominant cultures when writing about them. AE is not about representing the self but is about Indigenous people working together to present values and ideas to their communities as well as to those who have colonised them. These texts can be used for discovery and invention so that a process of learning the ideas and lives of subordinate peoples are made meaningful and worthy of analysis.

### **How auto-ethnography was used in my thesis**

As a researcher using AE, I played the role of boundary-crosser with a dual identity. This meant that I could explore new ways of writing about social life and the many ways people create a sense of self. In this thesis, I endeavoured to describe the multiple and shifting identities of myself and the women who took part. Such discussions contextualised us as women in not only an anti-colonial counter-discourse but also provided us ways that destabilise structures of 'otherness'. I could write in the first person using short stories, poetry, personal essays, and journal entries. I have also presented the emotion, embodiment, spirituality, self-consciousness, dialogue and concrete action of the women in this project. These are stories affected by our shared history as a family, the social structures and culture we have maintained as well as relational and institutional experiences as Aboriginal women. Auto-ethnography as applied in this project has been therapeutic for all who participated in enabling the creation of written accounts to make our truth together. We have asked the reader to engage with our stories on an emotional, moral, intellectual and aesthetic way. In the interplay between our own personal biographies, status and power, my interactions with participants and the written work was about encouraging the complex interplay between our culture and self as politically and ethically sound.

To begin, I personally approached current female members and others from my family about my research project. Those who agreed to participate had close association with the women's stories passed down in my family. Through a constant involvement through written correspondence, telephone calls and person to person negotiation, several semi-structured interviews were organised and then conducted with written consent. Key participants such as my grandmother, my mother, and my aunt Barbara generously gave more than one interview

sitting. For example, my grandmother gave four interviews for this project over a two year period.

Along with my own auto-ethnographic notes, interview transcripts were presented to participants for scrutiny. All data was analysed and written into a comprehensive document for the participant's editorial advice. When analysing these narratives together we treated them as actually constituting the social reality of the narrator. We viewed them as the telling and retelling of family stories and were particularly concerned with coherence and resonance. We did not seek to find similarities across stories and were not interested in finding conceptual themes but we valued the depth and texture of the lived experience.

### **Positioning**

When it came time to consider what doctoral proposition I was to use for my research, I was strongly influenced by a personal experience the day after my great-uncle George's funeral. The ensuing tense discussions within my extended family about our Aboriginal identity prompted me to consider some important questions relevant to my life, to my family, and to my community. O'Regan<sup>36</sup> describes such tensions as an indicator of a group or family's insecurity in their identity. She has observed that groups become more inward looking and defensive about the symbols of their identity when boundary maintenance happens as a result of severe external pressure. I surmised that whatever security our ancestors had at the point of first contact with dominant white culture had become severely compromised over time. I aimed to discuss and analyse the influence of past assimilationist policies that remain unexamined by female members of my family, making Aboriginality a contentious issue. Making sense of the phenomenon of 'mixed-race' in Australia, Perkins<sup>37</sup> believes that many Australians still believed that race is purely indicated by colour and that those Aboriginal people who are darker are viewed as 'genuine' in their claims of an Aboriginal identity. More importantly, that many Aboriginal people are "*plagued by relatively well-meaning strangers who try to give the exact degree of their Aboriginal blood.*"<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> O'Regan 1999:195

<sup>37</sup> Perkins 2004:179

<sup>38</sup> Perkins 2004:179

I was strongly influenced by *Woman native other* by Minh-ha<sup>39</sup> who argues for honouring women storytellers in recounting stories of racial oppression and survival. She provides inspiration to me by stating that,

*“The world’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently, they transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. It destroys, brings into life, nurtures. Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission.”*

For direct words from Aboriginal women writers themselves speaking about their strength as women, the anthology by Kerry Reed-Gilbert<sup>40</sup> gives great insight into the power of writing down life stories. Auntie Ruby Langford-Ginibi simply says that it is because Aboriginal people came from an oral tradition. She says *“...it is we who have always had to conform to the standards of those invaders, learn the Queen’s English, so us mob can write our stories, so you mob can comprehend what we are on about. And our writings are our histories too! We are all telling our stories, and saying the same things, about our dispossession in the hope that people will understand us better. We have always been disadvantaged because we have to rely on white editors, who tend to anglicise our text too much always, correcting the way we talk and using the proper English, though now they are bringing into the schools our Koori<sup>41</sup> English. It’s the way we talk, it’s our voice, and, I might add, it’s as relevant as any other spoken English.”* Younger urban Aboriginal writers such as Anita Heiss provide a deeper context to my own positioning as an urban-raised Aboriginal woman. Heiss<sup>42</sup> notes that *“...this mental struggle for survival is almost as harsh as it would be for the same urban blacks to assume a life in a traditional setting. We would have to be both mentally and physically strong to take on the lifestyle and cultures of our brothers and sisters in what is often termed a traditional way of life. And to the whites in the city, and the blacks in the bush, we urban Kooris often feel compelled to explain our own identity, when all we want to be is who we are, who we were raised to be. We undoubtedly are, for the most part, a square peg in a white man’s round hole.*

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<sup>39</sup> Minh-ha 1989:121

<sup>40</sup> Langford, R in Reed-Gilbert 2000: 17-18

<sup>41</sup> Koori is the name of Aboriginal tribes found in the south-Western region of Australia in the states of New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT.

<sup>42</sup> Heiss in Reed-Gilbert 2000:37

*Many pieces of my own writing have stemmed from being one of those Aboriginal square pegs.”*

I coupled these readings with a body of Western Australian Aboriginal history texts. In doing so I learnt how there were once blatant programs to crush racial consciousness and to eradicate the Aboriginal population by consecutive British colonial and Australian governments. These legislated acts controlled every aspect of the lives of Badimia/Yamatji girls and women because they, as human beings, had become categorised scientifically and socially as breeding stock with the potential to 'breed out the black' and to ensure a White Australia. Each successive generation of women in my family had life stories that reflected the change in such policies since the Central -West was colonised. Their stories speak much about how 'mixed-race' girls were cruelly monitored and their dreams crushed. This was orchestrated by harsh eugenic-inspired government policies that closely controlled all aspects of their lives.

## **Results and outcomes**

There were several outcomes from the research I have undertaken. In summary, these findings related to identity formation, active decolonisation and Aboriginal women's empowerment through storytelling/narratives. By demonstrating how my family was able to achieve the creation of a comprehensive story, we envisioned that other Aboriginal families could work together to rebuild their stories of survival. Indeed, such stories assist in building Aboriginal identity and can be used as a statement of self-determination by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia.

## **Narrative Analysis**

The evidence I have presented here was measured against narrative analysis as outlined by Reissman<sup>43</sup> which emphasised the importance of the interdependence between me as a writer and each participant as subject which has seen us present together a combined story created with extended interviews and privileged access.

Reissman states simply that “nature and the world do not tell stories, individuals do.<sup>44</sup>” She believes that interpretation is an inevitable part of analysis of narratives because they are simply representations. Indeed “human agency and imagination determine what gets included

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<sup>43</sup> Reissman, C.K. (1993) *Narrative Analysis*, Sage Publications, California, pp1-24

<sup>44</sup> Reissman 1993:2

and excluded, how events are plotted, and what they are supposed to mean.<sup>45</sup>” Reissman says narrative analysis is about looking at how “individuals construct events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives.”<sup>46</sup> It is this element that I am most intrigued by and drove me to look at how I could apply her framework of analysis and structure to the transcripts of interviews. These interviews were semi-structured but allowed me and a participant to ascertain what was important to women in our family. Generally these yarns centred on topics such as the processes of passing on knowledge, identification as being Aboriginal, the realities of hardship, discrimination, assimilation and the subsequent effects of these such as mental illness, violence, addiction and sexual abuse. These are also stories of a family moving to escape government surveillance and intervention. They are stories of relationships between elders and their grandchildren, of separation and reunions, of working life and life under welfare but above all, these are stories about women who once were enigmas prior to this research project. These focused areas of storytelling could easily be applied to other Aboriginal families in various contexts.

As Reissman asserts that individuals construct “different narratives about the same event.”<sup>47</sup> She says that sometimes there are marked disparities between the ordering of telling and the ordering of things that occur. For example, when even talking about something as straightforward as a horse race, there is always capacity for stories to be told in many different ways. When people tell stories, they are “malleable”. This means they can be shaped for different contexts and functions. When we look at the connection between how people gave their stories and how I, as the researcher, then have shared them in a different context must be taken notice of. Contexts are different for each story and it is possible that these stories can be passed on in many more contexts and in many different ways. These stories were about making family and social life more ordered than it actually is. Words are valued in our families because they are aspects of social life. Words defend our stance and we take them as our truth. For many families, the importance of continuity in our stories brings healing, of pulling families together and of pride at our survival. The use of narrative analysis on the stories of my family storytellers is about connecting family stories and what they can do for our family life. These stories are about holding people together not pushing them apart.

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<sup>45</sup> Reissman 1993:2

<sup>46</sup> Reissman 1993:2

<sup>47</sup> Reissman 1993:64

Reissman goes further stating that the “narrative turn”<sup>48</sup> within social sciences is no longer the area of literary study. Today it embraces history and questions whose history must be asserted. Particularly for first nations peoples across the globe, the things these stories tell can be lost irretrievably. There is a precariousness to the life stories of first nations peoples because they speak of our traditions surviving within colonial states. Stories can grow family connection for us as first nations peoples. As narrators, we must ask how are we doing this? How do we tell this story? How do we maintain the story when we write it? What happens to the story when it becomes decontextualized?

## **Outcomes**

This research project revealed how social environments directly impact upon identity formation and maintenance. With the expression of our Aboriginality through stories of survival, we express everyday acts of courage for mixed-race people in Australia. By speaking about racism together, we created racial consciousness and solidarity for us as family. This project uncovered stories of how entire families can become isolated due to institutionalised assimilation. Our stories detail some of the subtleties of the ways mixed-race Badimia women have adapted and survived over generations of colonialism. Fundamentally, such stories provide other Aboriginal families a way of working together to discuss racism and the ways story can actively circumvent the non-Aboriginal account of Australian history as a means of decolonisation.

For my family and me, this thesis project was a political act that involved asserting our story of identity as Badimia women. It uncovered how official policy and white social stigmatism framed the lives of generations of women in my family. By investigating and retelling our story together, we raised our racial consciousness and placed ourselves as active agents in our own representation of the self and of the other. Our Aboriginality was no longer the site where colonial power had the most control. Our homes were no longer sites where whiteness was manufactured and we were not cordoned off from the world of our ancestors. The Badimia world was where our women ancestors found their strength and now it is their stories of survival that empower us in the present.

Another major finding was how active decolonisation can be framed through the reconstruction of women’s stories and their retelling. My women family members uncovered that we retained fundamental Badimia values and protocols despite every effort being made to wipe out our

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<sup>48</sup> Reissman 1993:4

cultural affiliations. Through this research process, we became instilled with pride and connection to our spoken heritage. We revealed that such stories have a profound impact upon those listening today, especially younger generations in our family. The role of the storyteller was recreated and this meant that women in my family were free to make such stories a part of their own interpretation of Aboriginality. This research revealed how such stories could be owned by a family and that family have the ability and potential to contextualise these stories within the broader socio-political times they occurred. In essence, we reconstructed and reinforced Badimia knowledge together.

Through this journey, as women, we gained a deeper concept of what it meant to be members of the Badimia nation. Our relationships together became strengthened based on our mutual need for our knowledge to survive and prosper. Our shared story nurtures and sustains those who took part in the research process but now reaches out to our extended family. Personally, something else has been added. I have learnt ways of transmitting these stories. It is not just the tone I speak these stories but also what I select to tell that is important both verbally and in the written word. What is important in these stories was taught to me by my grandmother, my mother and my aunts.

These significant findings point to how important this thesis has become to my family as Badimia people. It will assist us as members of the Badimia claim group within the National Native Title<sup>49</sup> process in asserting our connection to traditional country. Thus, the process of decolonisation and knowledge reconnection is a valuable process for any Aboriginal family affected by colonisation. It also adds to any study of contemporary experiences including early colonial encounters, dispossession, assimilation policies (stolen generations), manufacture of whiteness and as a contribution to debates surrounding the so-called 'black arm band' account of Australian history.

Finally, the fundamental outcome of this research centres around Aboriginal women's empowerment. Where Aboriginal women were often the fodder for colonial conquest in Australia and indeed, in many other international contexts, the documentation and recount of sexual exchanges and their miscegenetic product captures the antagonistic, violent power relationship of sexual and cultural diffusion from one society upon another. This study revealed

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<sup>49</sup> National Native Title legislation was passed in 1993 to comply with federal court decisions recognising the land title ownership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia

the design and reality of colonialism's passionate economic and political traffic. With closer analysis and investigation into both theory and experience regarding racism and sexism, this research project gave greater understanding of how racism and sexism are infused with powerful socio-sexual components. These stories hold great significance for Aboriginal women's empowerment today as it manifests into a collective of black women's narrative when we face contemporary realities of racism and disenfranchisement.

By knowing the story of Melbin and my 'granny' Mary Latham (nee Oliver), I have documented how their journeys had an intense psychological impact upon their women descendants. The nature of such evidence within any Aboriginal family in Australia, although predominantly emotional and sensitive in quality, centres on trying to comprehend events of the past to make sense to the present within each participant's own lives. Together, participants in other contexts (and within my own family) can apply specialised analytical skills to talk about how our women ancestors were depicted and treated. Aboriginal women can become active agents in challenging the hatred/aggression directed towards collective women ancestors in the realm of sexuality, upon the bodies of the women they chose and finally, to project the shadow-selves<sup>50</sup> of white colonial men that was repressed from 'official' historical accounts. When Aboriginal women tell these stories about women in their families, they bring to light this treatment to raise racial consciousness and to repair the damage of generations of blatant programs to eradicate our people's knowledge and lived reality.

### **Study site and stakeholders**

The key participants of this research project included my late maternal grandmother Mary Dowling (nee Latham), my mother Veronica Dowling, my maternal aunt Barbara Dowling, and my twin sister Julie Dowling who undertook audio interviews and approved their transcripts to me. On the periphery and in consultation, additional members of my family were approached to discuss elements of this work including my maternal late great uncle George Latham and my two maternal aunts, Patricia Hills (nee Dowling) and Elizabeth Dowling. I have also interviewed two non-family members who personally knew my maternal great-grandmother Mary Latham (nee Oliver) and spoke of the social context of the orphanage where my grandmother Mary Dowling (nee Latham) was taken as a child. These two women were the late Mrs Mary Hirst and Mrs Marilyn Elkington, who are both non-Aboriginal women.

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<sup>50</sup> "Shadow selves" refers to a clandestine reality of many white colonial men who lived a life removed from the moral gaze of the state or even their white female counterparts.

The research location was centred at the residences of my family members in southern suburbs of Perth. Mrs Mary Hirst was interviewed in the town of Three Springs at her home. The family members I interviewed centred their stories on central-west towns and locations of Western Australia, namely Coorow, Latham, Mount Magnet, and Three Springs as well as the pastoral properties of Thundalarra, Ninghan, Wydgee, Coodingnow, and Warridar stations where my women ancestors and family members worked and lived. All of these locations are found within traditional Badimia country as part of Yamatji country.

## **Overview**

The organisation of this thesis begins with an overview of how auto-ethnography and other Indigenist research methodologies were applied to the research project. Chapter four presents the story of my twin sister Julie and myself as the current generation of adult women in our family. Chapter five reaches back to the life of Melbin, our great-great-grandmother and the first person in our family to engage with non-Aboriginal people and the first to form a union with a non-Aboriginal colonialist. In order of matriarchal descent, the next chapter (chapter six) presents the story of my great-grandmother, Mary Latham (nee Oliver). Following this, chapter seven is about the life of my late grandmother, Mary Dowling (nee Latham) and chapter eight is written about my own mother, Veronica Dowling. A conclusion providing an overview also finalised the thesis discussing the various findings and significance of such. When reading the chapters of each woman, it is important to consider that they represent the collaboration of three generations of women – my grandmother, my mother and her sisters (my aunts), my twin sister and myself.

Each chapter within this thesis document is about the problems faced by each generation of women in my family. It is about my own journey too and those interviewed worked with me to make meaning of what actually happened to us all. The main body chapters are about the relationships these women formed while struggling under harsh and discriminatory government policies and social stigmatism. Their stories and our stories serve to negotiate membership in one or more cultures. The life stories are about the self – the self as expressed and shared with another. Each of my family members who took part described who we are as Badimia women and how we got that way.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

This chapter provides a survey of literature with specific connection to the study of the lives of five generations of Badimia women within my maternal family. The emphasis of this review has been to develop a conceptual framework to guide this research journey in retelling and passing on of these life stories in my family. The ontological positioning I took was following the Constructivist tradition, whereby I investigated the many assumptions of what is real in the current debate over social organisation regarding Aboriginal people, especially in relation to oral to written story. I have also sought to discuss my choice of the inductive interactive transactional co-creation of Aboriginal knowledge as an epistemological framework.

Constructivist epistemology informs auto-ethnography as a conceptual and theoretical framework. Auto-ethnography finds its origins in constructivist epistemology, which is a branch of philosophy of science that maintains that meaning of the natural world is a mental construction. The tenets of the constructivist's world is dependent on human minds in that all knowledge is always a human and social construction. Constructivism opposes the belief that knowledge is objective but that truth about the natural world cannot be mediated by scientific approximation. In essence that there is no one valid methodology but a diversity that can be useful.

The origins of constructivism are found in psychology, education, and social science, first explored by Jean Piaget<sup>51</sup> in 1967 with reference to Kant, Gurns and Marx who first suggested that ambitions to expand power of ideas could inform the reality of people's lives. Thus, representations of physical and biological reality, including race, sexuality, and gender, as well as "tables, chairs, and atoms are socially constructed."<sup>52</sup> A more specific version of this methodology is social constructivism which contends that knowledge can be categorised and reality actively created by social relationship and interactions. These interactions also influence and change the way in which we organise scientific analysis. With direct relevance to this research project, the social activity of participants presupposes simply us as human beings sharing forms of life. It is more a case of us (as a family) sharing social construction, utilising resources to make meaning and significance together regarding the social structures and the institutions we belong to.

Within constructivism in sociology, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman are considered significant writers. In their work entitled *The social construction of reality*, these authors assert that "social order is not part of the "nature of things," and it cannot be derived from the "laws of nature." Social order exists *only* as a product of human activity."<sup>53</sup> Moreover, with direct relevance to this research project, these authors discuss the process of such transmission using the analogy of each generation passing on knowledge as truth.

*The objectivity of the institutional world "thickens" and "hardens", not only for the children, but (by a mirror effect) for the parents as well. The "There we go again" now becomes "This is how these things are done." A world so regarded attains a firmness in consciousness; it becomes real in an ever more massive way and it can no longer be changed so readily. For the children, especially in the early phases of their socialisation into it, it becomes the world.*<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, the research undertaken for this thesis is not meant to be about one voice and not for just personal release and discovery. This was an ensemble piece to show a world solidified within my family that is persistently that of a Badimia construction of reality that has and is consistently challenged by institutions imposed by the dominant culture.

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<sup>51</sup> Berger, P. and Luckman, T. 1966:59

<sup>52</sup>National Science Foundation. Award Abstract #8751190, [Constructionism: A New Opportunity for Elementary Science Education](http://nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber+8751190).

<sup>53</sup> Berger, P. and Luckman, T. (1966) [The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge](#), Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, pp. 51-55, 59-61

<sup>54</sup> Berger, P. and Luckman, T. 1966:59

The literature surveyed begins with a broad but focussed discussion on identity development as a background context for the review process. I then provided insight into international and national writing regarding Indigenous women's perspective in writing and artistic expression as well as selected research into the survival of Indigenous women's stories as a specific group. I chose literature relating to the experience of indigenous writers in Africa and South America because these countries have lengthy relations with indigenous and minority communities. It is within these countries that the enforcement of western assimilationist or racist theories upon these populations has occurred. However, precedence is given to literature about the Aboriginal Australia community experience of enforced assimilation into mainstream society.

The Aboriginal people taking part in this research are identified as non-white and culturally different and all have experienced internal and external conflict regarding their Aboriginality. The majority of literature identifies the continued marginalisation and discrimination of Aboriginal people from the Australian colonial era to the present. I have emphasised literature that investigates the debates surrounding Indigenous oral history versus Western historical writing. This has also included investigation into the surge of Indigenous men and women's writing as a means for decolonisation and as a counter to colonial history. The vast majority of writing asserts that assimilation has had a profound effect upon Aboriginal peoples' identity formation and highlights the particular difficulties experienced by fair-skinned Aboriginal people. Through this context, the lived experience of Aboriginal women in my family can be appreciated as a different way of seeing with their own political, social and economic boundaries. As there are few contemporary personalised accounts of consecutive generations of Aboriginal women's experiences within a family, this literature provides background for and attests to the views of participants in this project.

This review argues that in an analysis of the perpetuation of Aboriginal women's oral history, particularly between generations in one family, empirical and historical research cannot fully encapsulate the overall context of the lives of those under investigation. Such approaches cannot get into individual experiences and I have made the following assumptions about the importance of understanding the overall influence of social, economic and political forces impacting upon the identity formation and participation of Aboriginal women in their communities: that fair-skinned Aboriginal women are marginalised in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities due to prejudice; that Aboriginal women continue to shoulder assimilationist notions to the detriment of their families and themselves; that silences continue

to exist in the Australian colonial account about Aboriginal women due to racism; and that recent accounts ignore Aboriginal women's demand for authentic self-determination in Australian society. This review goes further by investigating Aboriginality, as it related to Aboriginal women, and the notion that decolonisation can be emancipatory for Aboriginal people.

## **Background literature**

There is a large and diverse body of literature in this field of inquiry. When we discuss how indigenous people (and women) develop stories of survival and their relationship to the dominant culture in colonial and contemporary contexts in Australia and overseas, it opens a broader discourse of meaning-making surrounding how identity is constructed. This is a good point to start at as it describes its principle connection to culture. Wagner<sup>55</sup> describes identity as evoking connection between human beings as a capacity for social order. He asserts that such a discourse forms part of "the tradition of cultural analysis that reaches back to Gottfried Herder."<sup>56</sup> Such elements have been used in cultural anthropology and sociology which emphasise the enquiry into social norms in societies. Culture, in this context, refers to norms, values, beliefs and forms of behaviour whereby human beings know the cultural features of their own societies, at least to action them, which in turn is conceptualised as the community in which they belong. This sense of belonging, from a cultural perspective, is known as a 'collective identity' forming the most significant connection between people as social beings.

Wagner goes further by asserting that such an operation is not just about living in close proximity with people, but also with those people who propose to see the past as something shared, which leaves the individual convinced to accept such representations for their own "orientation in the social world."<sup>57</sup> Such an orientation is given account by Indigenous Australian writer Gillian Cowlishaw.<sup>58</sup> She states that when Aboriginal people are kept excluded from the dominant discourse on Aboriginal issues, such communities construct their own identities by way of understanding cultural dynamics.

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<sup>55</sup> Wagner in Friese 2002

<sup>56</sup> Gottfried Herder is considered the original theorist who asserted that language and the use of it proved that humans had thought. In essence that human beings were defined as such by their use of language and the interpretation of it.

<sup>57</sup> Wagner in Friese 2002:51

<sup>58</sup> Cowlishaw in Beckett 1988:87

These identities can in turn be used for rescuing them from popular misconceptions that they have lost their culture. It is a profoundly political act, for it provides the concentrated landscape where both material and spiritual foundations for strictly defined political organisation can spring. Yet this formation comes from a historically unstable region called “Aboriginal identity” as a source of anxiety for my people. More than any other ethnic or social grouping in Australia, Aboriginal identity comes from no predictable or stable foundation and because of its contested position, Aboriginality (what Aboriginal people perceive of themselves at the community level) is made up of opposing elements of “*the romantic and the grotesque, the deprived and the despised, the noble and the savage*”.<sup>59</sup> In Cowlishaw’s significant analysis of Aboriginal identity entitled *Blackfellas whitefellas and the hidden injuries of race* (2004) such injuries permeate the ‘body and soul’ of Aboriginal people today in the form of stigma. Stigma that is associated with proclaiming Aboriginality is a source of shame and social dishonour. This is a demanding management so that it can be kept clandestine and is revealed strategically or as part of the lived contemporary reality. More relevant to this thesis, the author asserts that where there is disruption to collective identity, it means that memories or stories of forebears become ways that descendants can locate themselves within a social geography and can be a source of deficient knowledge, and a desperate act of clawing at any scraps of information about the past to fill in “blanks in families’ collective memories.”<sup>60</sup> This dynamic of weaving the threads of an Aboriginal identity is a key element of the conceptual framework for this research thesis as it describes the scope of my inquiry. However, this is not just a patchwork of stories placed together in a haphazard manner. They follow from an emergent tradition of documenting stories by colonised indigenous women worldwide.

I have covered larger issues of how indigenous people (and women specifically) relate to the dominant culture in colonial and contemporary contexts in Australia and overseas. International perspectives about the treatment of equivalent minorities in other plural societies have revealed a connection with Indigenous Australian women. In a comparative study of African and Australian aboriginal women writers, Wisker<sup>61</sup> describes how these aboriginal writers in both countries use autobiography as the primary method for testifying against colonisation and silencing. They use writing not only for the establishment of their own individual identity but as an expression of the identity and experiences of a people, a

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<sup>59</sup> Cowlishaw 2004:8

<sup>60</sup> Cowlishaw 2004:209

<sup>61</sup> Wisker (1999)

community for whom the individual speaks. Both Aboriginal and African women consistently emphasise their right to claim self in relation to land while recognising identity as being formed and situated to cultural, geographical and historical contexts. They explore and express themselves through autobiography to recover a version of their past lives. Both of these groups of women writers have lived and come from continents that have been impacted by hundreds of years of conflict, assault and domination of different kinds. These historical experiences have taken toll and definitely left their mark on indigenous families and communities. The development of indigenous women's writing has revealed the effects of colonisation in both continents in a myriad of forms. The worst of these, as described by Fanon<sup>62</sup> is that of psychological oppression where feelings of inferiority and dependency have been created in both aboriginal men and women. Such feelings have deeply affected the political and economic behaviour of colonised peoples throughout the world. There is no desire or confidence to be productive or creative; rather there is a dependence on ruling elites from dominant cultures for material, intellectual and emotional expression. The literature from indigenous women challenges this form of oppression and express how world indigenous peoples struggle for self-determination and for the right to be indigenous on their own terms.

Minorities in Africa and South America share similar experiences with Indigenous women in Australia. Indigenous women generally do not see a place for themselves in the dominant society without violation of their values or identities. Several authors including Pratt<sup>63</sup>, Behar<sup>64</sup> and Goduka et al.<sup>65</sup> write about how the significance of telling our stories as indigenous women is increasing in the academy and in indigenous communities. These efforts, however, are made difficult by our education which is so immersed in Eurocentric and male-defined traditions that permits and preserves the colonial mindset and method of telling or writing stories. Brewster<sup>66</sup> states that such testimonies take place as a performance after a historical gap and are dependent on a "*shared space of dialogue*" where non-Indigenous Australians are the listeners. The delay in recounting these stories is evidence that there is unwillingness for this to occur.

Aboriginal women are now writing for themselves and their communities without partnership and cultural translation. Huggins<sup>67</sup> says such writers have the benefit of telling their history in

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<sup>62</sup> Fanon in Bulhan 1985

<sup>63</sup> Pratt 1992

<sup>64</sup> Behar 1996

<sup>65</sup> Goduka et al. 2006

<sup>66</sup> Brewster 2005

<sup>67</sup> Huggins 1987

direct forms while exceeding and transcending cultural borders. However, despite these aspirations, according to several authors including Breyley<sup>68</sup> and Brady<sup>69</sup>, many (certainly not all), indigenous and other marginalised communities believe that oral storytelling is misjudged and undervalued because of the importance placed on reading and writing. This perception reflects the struggle to rebuild the self-worth and self-esteem that indigenous peoples lost through the dispossession of their land, the destruction of their spirituality and faith and ethnic identities tied to their land. Reading and writing, using the language of the coloniser, have weakened our ability to think culturally, spiritually and creatively, while the printed word has constrained the minds and imaginations of indigenous peoples whose thinking and speaking are grounded in the oral tradition.

In essence, the issues presented today by indigenous writers, educators and others, regarding the access and successes in presenting life narratives are as follows:

- There are challenges in retaining and celebrating indigenous oral cultural traditions
- The importance of family and community to the writing and creative dynamic
- Minority communities hold influence over creative and historical representations of themselves revealing an anti-colonial critique
- Minority communities view writing as a site for their emancipation from oppression
- Minority writers and others want to decolonise minds and imaginations while they create works rooted in oral tradition and outside of colonial discourses

In order to develop a conceptual framework about this field, I have referred to Smith<sup>70</sup> who asks why revising history has been a significant part of decolonisation. She suggests that the intersection of indigenous approaches to the past, of the modernist history project itself and of the resistance strategies which have been employed, traps Aboriginal people in the project of modernity. She argues that there can be no 'post-modern' for us as indigenous peoples until we have settled some business of the modern. Smith acknowledges that these representations show that we may head in inconsistent directions; we fail to understand or use multiple discourses or use our abilities in varied styles. What we are dealing with is 'unfinished business', that we believe we are still being colonised, and that we continue to seek justice.

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<sup>68</sup> Breyley 2005

<sup>69</sup> Brady 2006

<sup>70</sup> Smith 1999:34-35

*Coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonisation. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things. Transforming our colonized views of our own history (as written by the West), however, requires a theory or approach which helps us to engage with, understand and then act upon history. ...Telling our stories from the past, reclaiming the past, giving testimony to the injustices of the past are all strategies which are commonly employed by indigenous people struggling for justice.*<sup>71</sup>

Internationally indigenous accounts of history are rarely accepted and their versions viewed as peculiar. Behar<sup>72</sup> writes about her intellectual debt to the Chicano critique of anthropology which first held the mirror and questioned the way that Chicano people were represented by outsiders. These writers used creative writing such as poetry and prose to offer their own, more complex and injured accounts of colonisation which made the striking question of who has the authority to speak for whom. It was this first critique from South American writers such as Americo Paredes who brought home the brutal role that Anglo-anthropologists played in making the unreality of ‘the natives’ and manufactured a mockery of the societies they were describing to the world. For indigenous peoples, the need to tell our stories continues to remain powerfully urgent as a strong form of resistance. It is this impetus that drives the necessity for my research inquiry.

I was particularly drawn to the notion presented by Pat Dudgeon<sup>73</sup>, a leading Western Australian Indigenous academic whose family is from Broome. Dudgeon spoke in her contribution to a book discussing Indigenous identity following the tradition of *Living black* written by Kevin Gilbert in 1977. She raises concerns about how Aboriginal people seem to disempower each other by guarding the borders of what is labelled the Aboriginal way. Bitterness, disagreement and jealousy are ever present even though Aboriginal people continue to speak of unity and supporting each other. Disagreement is not inevitably damaging. It can be formative. However, it does reveal how much colonisation has impacted upon us and how we continue to disempower each other. I posed questions about the convergence of the colonised versus the Aboriginal voice to women in my family. I have privileged individual women’s narratives that speak about their understandings of colonisation within our family about their own lives, the lives of their mothers, and the lives of their women ancestors as told

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<sup>71</sup> Smith (1999:34-35)

<sup>72</sup> Behar (1996:162)

<sup>73</sup> Pat Dudgeon in Oxenham et al. 1999

through oral history. I am also influenced by Kim Scott's co-written book with his elder Hazel Brown<sup>74</sup> where his search for meaning to his own Indigenous heritage revealed to him that the only way he could grasp it was to lay "*words upon a page*". He writes that it was his Kayang<sup>75</sup> who was able to show him another way to understand the considerably nurturing 'something' that stood before him as a dispossessed Noongar man. This initial review provided a range of information to frame my research and the interview questions posed to women in my family.

### **White history and Aboriginal women's storytelling**

Storytelling (or telling a 'yarn'<sup>76</sup>) was and continues to play a vital role in Aboriginal communities. When working through the multilayered, multifaceted storylines of Aboriginal philosophies and world views; Aboriginal ways of teaching, learning, healing and conducting research; discussion about Dreamtime or eulogistic legends; human rights; development, identity, oral tradition and history; Aboriginal spirituality and belief systems; environmental sustainability and architecture to name a few themes, we are always made aware of the spiritual and emotional wellbeing of us as first nation peoples. The beauty, the creativity, the abundance of ideas, the extensive intellectual ability, the depth of soul and the all-encompassing spirituality and richness of our cultures is all embedded in our stories. When colonialism arrived in Australia, imperialists quickly became aware of the potency of these stories. Our storytelling became disempowered and torn apart the day that imperialists began recording our stories by writing them down. Stories started to change and become 'passive' collections of words and phrases, sentences and paragraphs, pages of misunderstood code, divergent imagery, trivialised actors made into superficial characterisations. Aboriginal cultural truths, historical teachings, spiritual depth, and our ways of passing on knowledge (oral narratives) were viewed as "*superstitious garbage*" with no place in a 'civilised' world.<sup>77</sup>

Between 1500 and 1800, the sphere of culture in its many forms of collection were accumulated and legitimised by European travellers throughout the globe. The planet became appropriated into an ideological construct. Nature became incorporated into a rationalising system which directly fed into the character of urban mass society in Europe pushed by bourgeois hegemonic forces. As a totalising extreme, this ethnocentric collection process wrote landscape as uninhabited, unpossessed, unhistoricised, and unoccupied. The European colonial authority

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<sup>74</sup>Scott & Brown 2005

<sup>75</sup>Noongar word for aunt or a woman of seniority within a Noongar family

<sup>76</sup>A 'yarn' is a frequently used term by Noongar people to mean talking in conversation with someone.

<sup>77</sup>Breyley 2005

and legitimacy was uncontested and this vision appealed to European readers. Dehumanising language underwrote dehumanising treatment of Aboriginal men and, with particular relevance to this project, Aboriginal women.

White men misinterpreted and forcibly adapted Aboriginal women for their own desires and whims. Our women ancestors were stolen, raped, owned, forced into servitude, abandoned, and dehumanised on stations while around them genocide wiped out Aboriginal people in large numbers. The powerful discourse surrounding Aboriginal women was that we were ‘stud gins’, ‘black velvet’, and ‘lubras’ fit to be mustered, hunted down, captured and kept for sexual and domestic work on Wudjula cattle stations. Girls were forced into prostitution or pregnancy, both in remote stations and in wealthy urban townhouses. The constant plague of starvation, exposure and Western disease resulted in the birth-rate falling and alienation from their own kin, especially during the destructive process of mass child removal into adoption or Mission upbringing.<sup>78</sup>

Colonial education itself was extremely damaging because it actively sought to deny Aboriginal children their right to natural development and maternal love. Education was an instrument for internal colonialism where Aboriginal people were socialised into accepting an inferior status without power or wealth.<sup>79</sup> Up until the 1960s, Aboriginal women’s vulnerability to State power meant that they had to endure the most extreme measures of colonial control and surveillance. Such a history forced upon Aboriginal women and their families has meant that, today, there is still little understanding of the depth of damage done by colonisation by non-Aboriginal Australia or the consequent trauma and feelings of alienation by Aboriginal people.<sup>80</sup>

Today, while still placed in opposition to this unwarranted and misleading history, Aboriginal women are writing their lives, and those of family and community so as to describe and pass on the meaning of their everyday experiences. There is no worse assault on our dignity, as first nations peoples, than to be labelled in association to that which we are not, to have to justify our existence, or to ask for forgiveness for who and what we are. Several writers such as Reid-

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<sup>78</sup> Wisker 1999

<sup>79</sup> Valadian 1991

<sup>80</sup> Welch 1998

Gilbert<sup>81</sup>, Brewster<sup>82</sup> and Brady<sup>83</sup> provide detailed accounts of how important it is for them as Aboriginal women to give account of their experiences and stories of oppression. Gossman<sup>84</sup> says such accounts by women (and men) in “urban”, rather than “traditional” perspectives and settings shakes up the pervasive and dominant cultural construct that the scope of Aboriginal people’s existence was primarily ragged, remote, ritualised and invisible. Aboriginal women’s life stories and family oral histories of colonial experiences was much about the cross-cultural currents of lives lived within and through non-Aboriginal models and constructions in direct and indirect pathways. These books were written by women whose narratives challenged the romanticism of stagnant stereotypes of Aboriginal people. These writers, according to Behrendt<sup>85</sup> were not necessarily descended from the “traditional owners” and may have no right to speak for their country, but they do have distinct post-invasion experiences and have particular socio-economic problems that often point to the legacy of the degree of caste that non-Aboriginal people have endowed them with. As Reid-Gilbert<sup>86</sup> asks “*we want to know when will the punishments end?*”

Regarding social justice and the creation of stories by Aboriginal people today, Kinnane<sup>87</sup> makes clear the role of the Aboriginal writer today:

*The hard, inflexible boundaries that are laid down by narrow definitions of race, nationalism and religion are shadowed by the boundaries that we create as we try to make sense of the world. The stories that we create in our lives are not neatly divided and separated by these demarcations. The shadow lines of story that we create as we go about our daily lives connect us in ways that we can't even fathom, until they are made clear to us through the inability of the rigid boundaries that circumscribe us, to contain, describe and give sense to our lives. ...Within the sheer, sharp light of this land, such lines were ruled around us to describe our race, around settlements to contain us, around prohibited areas to segregate us, and through our families to engineer us.*

## **How auto-ethnography embraces Aboriginal storytelling**

The struggle to rebuild the self-worth and self-esteem of Aboriginal people in Australia, who have lost through the dispossession of our land and devastation of spirituality and identities, is tied to our reconnection to ancestral lands. Yet, the legal recognition of Aboriginal rights to

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<sup>81</sup> Reid-Gilbert 2000

<sup>82</sup> Brewster 2005

<sup>83</sup> Brady 2008

<sup>84</sup> Gossman 1998

<sup>85</sup> Behrendt 2006

<sup>86</sup> Reid-Gilbert 2000:19

<sup>87</sup> Kinnane 2003:378

land in Australia, based on prior occupation, has only been recognised since 1992.<sup>88</sup> Even urban-based land claims, such as that of the Noongar Nation in Perth, have shown that widespread dispossession and displacement was never a complete process. With over 110 major family groups identified as making up the Noongar nation, participants attended six regional working party meetings for their claim against the WA state government during the 1990s. They commented that such a process of coming together to map their genealogical information and envisioning their desired future was a positive purpose rather than their more common meetings at family funerals<sup>89</sup>. However, in a cruel irony, the people who were least directly affected by colonisation seem to have the greatest chance of having their land ownership recognised, while the most dispossessed Aboriginal peoples tend to receive the smallest gains from the process of claiming native title. Furthermore, over the past 10 years, successive legislative interventions and judicial decisions have further limited the content and scope of native title, frustrating Aboriginal aspirations. Particularly in 1998, the *Native Title Act* was amended in favour of non-Aboriginal interests and delivered the then deputy prime minister's promise of "*bucket loads of extinguishment*".<sup>90</sup> In the midst of Australia's own ecological destruction and continuing imperial adventurism exemplified in the Native Title process, Aboriginal people tell their stories of survival and connection to ancestral lands to heal.

Crocker<sup>91</sup> notes that a specific methodology is now used by Aboriginal women writers which draws upon Dreamtime beliefs, values and styles to support and sustain their personal narratives. Despite over two hundred years of genocidal and assimilationist policies, Dreamtime values remain the living, surviving force for new measures of literary action. 'Dreamtime Narrative methodology' positions instructive worth on both the preserved and contemporary experiences of Aboriginal people for both the Aboriginal and Anglo-Australian reader. By transforming oral history into pieces of writing, the Dreamtime Narrative is a bridge of words that connect past, present and future. However, there is some value in undertaking to represent ourselves as Indigenous peoples in ways that engage with the coloniser's own terms.

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<sup>88</sup> Langton et al. 2006:5

<sup>89</sup> Bradfield in Langton et al. 2006:216

<sup>90</sup> Brough 1997

<sup>91</sup> Crocker 2003

Pratt<sup>92</sup> argues that auto-ethnographic texts made by minorities, with their “*appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror*”, enable these groups a point of entry into “*metropolitan literate culture*”. She argues that these widespread expressions are significant in unscrambling the history created by colonial oppression and indigenous resistance from the places where they happened. These places are referred to as “contact zones” where the coloniser and the colonised are understood in interaction with each other through their proximity and their exchanges. Such places of engagement reveal the patterns and intellect with its extremely unequal relations of power. By writing the stories of women in my family and my relationship to them, I have not just formed a specific relationship with a set of people in a particular time and place, I deliberately assumed a vulnerable position, as discussed by Behar<sup>93</sup>. This vulnerability is the very essence of many indigenous research projects as outlined by Smith<sup>94</sup> with particular relevance here, the specific use of remembering as an important response to pain. When a family or community talk through their history of painful events, there are frequent silences and intervals in oral histories about what happened after specific events. Much like my own family, a great deal of Aboriginal families and communities were ripped asunder with children removed and extended families moved away over large tracks of territory. Individuals and family units manifest this destruction upon themselves, turning families against themselves so that suffering continues long after the initial trauma occurred. Such trauma may have happened over several generations entrenching violence and abuse without family members comprehending why they must endure such harm or where it came from. Even though remembering is painful because it is about how colonisation dehumanized our own cultural practices, any Indigenous family and/or community can heal and be transformed. Such critical plans of action simply means that, in remembering, they can acknowledge what they have deliberately or involuntarily forgotten. With particular relevance to this auto-ethnographic project, what happens when the researcher shares the same/similar memories and is required to remember such trans-generational trauma alongside her family who are participants? This is where the process of identification as Aboriginal may ascribe direct demonstrations of continued oppression or survival from it.

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<sup>92</sup> Pratt 1992:7

<sup>93</sup> Behar 1996

<sup>94</sup> Smith 1999

## **Authentic Aboriginality versus transculturation**

Aboriginality in Australia can be described as a construction that is made and redefined even today by the coloniser (including the state) to manipulate Aboriginal people and to dominate our expressions of identity. In a direct challenge to other scholars, Dodson<sup>95</sup> states that when we discuss Aboriginality, we are entering a “*historical landscape, full of absolute and timeless truths, which have been set in place by self-professed experts and authorities all too ready to tell us, and the world, the meaning of Aboriginality*”.<sup>96</sup> I wanted to yarn with members of my family about the notion outlined by Dodson that being Aboriginal was a colonial trap in the past and how Aboriginality is now being reclaimed as the key to this trap through the “*liberating power of remembrance*”.<sup>97</sup> For this reason, the construction of Aboriginality in our families and the use and practice of Aboriginal English between members in families is an important contextualising factor for this thesis.

There is a great deal of criticism revolved around the politics of authenticity of Aboriginality in recent decades. Grossman<sup>98</sup> observed how the bestselling book *My place* by Sally Morgan was viewed as an account of Aboriginality “*lost and found*”. Because she used the structures of Western autobiography and her childhood identity was “*white*”, Morgan’s claim to Aboriginality was widely questioned. The reason given for the book’s success and its influence was explored and her ‘was once a white person’ narrative was claimed to promote fantasies in the liberal non-Aboriginal readership related to a suggestion that perhaps they too were Aboriginal if they only looked far back enough. Furthermore, in many public spheres, in particular the media, outside experts and so-called ‘authorities’ are often called upon to verify, comment upon and give judgements about the credibility of Aboriginal claims to cultural beliefs, values, ways of knowing and historical accounts. Vigorous debates ensue and questions of who is a ‘real’ Aboriginal person and what constitutes a ‘real’ Aboriginal leader and which person shows ‘real cultural values’ are frequent topics of conversation and political debate in Australia. The assessment of characteristics of authenticity is designed to break up and limit those who speak for, or in support of, Aboriginal issues. Such scrutiny effectively silences and renders invisible large groups within Aboriginal society like women, urbanised communities, and those whose ancestry or ‘caste’ make them “*too white*”.

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<sup>95</sup> Dodson 1994:4

<sup>96</sup> Dodson 1994:4

<sup>97</sup> Dodson 1994:11

<sup>98</sup> Grossman 1998

However, within the world of first nations, such as Aboriginal Australians, the term ‘authentic’ has two divergent meanings as outlined by Smith<sup>99</sup>. Firstly, the term is used to demonstrate the extreme dehumanisation inflicted by colonisation; and secondly, it shakes up Aboriginal awareness of the push for decolonisation.

*...it does appeal to an idealized past when there was no colonizer, to our strengths in surviving thus far, to our language as an uninterrupted link to our histories, to the ownership of our lands, to our abilities to create and control our own life and death, to a sense of balance among ourselves and with the environment, to our authentic selves as a people.*

To the dominant culture, the ‘authentic’ is used as criterion to determine who is really Aboriginal, who is worth saving, who is still guiltless and free from Western impurities. Biology as related to race becomes the foundation of their argument because the cultural idea is difficult to manage. The view of authenticity is based on the belief that Aboriginal cultures are not permitted to change, recreate themselves and claim to be Aboriginal. Only the West has the privilege of claiming to be complicated, contradictory and internally different. Authors such as Reid-Gilbert<sup>100</sup> affirm that Kooris in cities are urged to explain their Aboriginality when they only wish to live as they were raised. She believes that her writing is centred on this position of not fitting into categories constructed by ‘the white man’. In contrast, Oxenham<sup>101</sup> expresses her pain that Aboriginal people can also question who has the right to speak, preventing each other from ‘climbing up’. The pressure to gain constant endorsement from ‘the community’ means that the many levels and dimensions of community cannot be expressed. She calls for a redefinition of what Aboriginal community means so that everyone can have the right to speak.

However, these debates divert from the fundamental quest that is occurring for Aboriginal people in their homes. Apart from dealing with fundamental issues such as over-crowding and dysfunction, as Scott & Brown<sup>102</sup> assert, there are no facilities for Aboriginal people, let alone individual Aboriginal nations, to consolidate the knowledge passed down from their ancestors and how this is represented in historical archives. These authors believe that these representations are used by “*recent arrivals*” for their own intentions.

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<sup>99</sup> Smith 1999:73

<sup>100</sup> Reid-Gilbert 2000

<sup>101</sup> Oxenham 1999

<sup>102</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:19

*There's a whole generation that has to be educated about us and our histories. We not only have to educate non-Aboriginal people, but we have to educate our own people who were the stolen generations who were placed into the training homes to be trained in servitude. These kids never had access to their family's or their cultural knowledge, and were taught to not speak their lingo, and become like white people, forced to assimilate.*

Pratt<sup>103</sup> explained this phenomenon as what ethnographers label “*transculturation*” where marginalised groups take and formulate what was written about them in the material inherited by a dominant culture. While Aboriginal people cannot easily control what this material might be, we can determine to different degrees how we can absorb it into our own sense of Aboriginality and what we can use it for. Pratt sees transculturation as a definite behaviour of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in a ‘contact zone’. This is corroborated by Scott & Brown<sup>104</sup> who write about how those descended from the same people, such as Noongar or Koori or Badimia, are looking back, searching previous generations to comprehend what had happened to them, trying to capture the feelings they have in common with their ancestors, and how they differed from them. The entire exercise is about defining who we are and what we might become as Aboriginal people. In a closer analysis of these investigations, Breyley<sup>105</sup> observes that Aboriginal people from the second generation or the children of stolen generation survivors (similar to the children of Holocaust survivors) share their parent’s anger at what happened to them. The imagining of ancestral communities challenges Australian nationalist discourses, especially about the dominant culture and masculine non-Aboriginal voices. The feelings of displacement both geographically and historically become a continuing theme which affects Aboriginal people nationally, community-wide, and within our families particularly. The lives of second generation or even third generation Aboriginal people are cross-cultural and fragmented. The modes are mixed, especially when connections are disrupted. This is all particularly relevant to the discussion of Aboriginality between women in my family. The desire for several people in my family and community is to humbly strengthen our past in ways that create momentum into a more positive future. This is not just about survival as a people but about continuing our struggle for freedom.

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<sup>103</sup> Pratt 1992

<sup>104</sup> Scott & Brown 2005

<sup>105</sup> Breyley 2005

## The fear of identifying

When Aboriginal people use colonial historical records, what is revealed is the depth of inhumanity and brutality enacted upon our ancestors. What is even more disturbing is reading records of family members who lived through these times and are still alive to speak about it. Such material shows how any outward expression of pride in Aboriginality was quickly suppressed by using racism, be it large government institutions or small country towns, and this treatment was supported by state law. There were many who sought to escape from such oppression and the adoption of something that vaguely resembled freedom. In hindsight, many first nation peoples view such behaviour as repulsive and this denial is perceived as a betrayal of culture and community. However, going past the rhetoric, the collusion with colonial authorities and/or the open denial of one's Aboriginal heritage and family created a reality that many families are still coming to terms with. Writers such as Morgan<sup>106</sup>, Scott & Brown<sup>107</sup>, Oxenham<sup>108</sup>, and Kinnane<sup>109</sup> all represent the struggles of Aboriginal families and individuals who decided to drop out of the war waged against Aboriginal people up until the 1970s. The current struggle is about how the descendants of these beleaguered people reconcile this decision. Scott<sup>110</sup> writes that the world is still overwhelmingly hostile to the idea that these descendants wish to maintain connection with an Indigenous heritage and a sense of kin with their ancestors. He uses the example of the Cocanarup massacre in 1880 near Ravensthorpe in the south-west of WA, where he ancestors are from. He poses the question of how discussion about such an event could happen in a family when different members identify with either the offenders or with the victims. With a particular emphasis on the history of Perth as a city, Kinnane<sup>111</sup> says that those who have survived such eras of oppression often quietly watch the 'new psyche' of the city taking form in front of them. He says that even though these individuals' presences become vague, less blatant than when these places were theirs, they still dominate it and flow into it. Hazel Brown<sup>112</sup> yarns with her nephew about how small-minded 'white' people in country towns would force people to leave their people "*just because you got coloured blood in you*". The fundamental message of such times was that if you wanted to succeed in the 'white man's world', you could not affiliate with Aboriginal people. She says that many were turned against "*their own kind*". Many people that she personally knew were

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<sup>106</sup> Morgan 1987

<sup>107</sup> Scott & Brown 2005

<sup>108</sup> Oxenham et al. 1999

<sup>109</sup> Kinnane 2003

<sup>110</sup> Scott 2005

<sup>111</sup> Kinnane 2003

<sup>112</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:176

made to be ashamed to admit that they had Aboriginal ancestry. Scott<sup>113</sup> goes further by stating that the Indigenous experience in Australia should encompass both pride and shame in being Aboriginal and even include complicity in colonial processes.

When discussing the impact of the 1905 Act, Darlene Oxenham<sup>114</sup> accounts for the shame experienced by parents and grandparents in being Aboriginal. She says that “*we’re still living through this*” and that living through government policy which could take your children away from you meant that “*you don’t walk away from that unscathed*”. She questions how Aboriginal people now tell these stories as if they never, not once, ever worried about their Aboriginality. This author says that many today construct stories that they were always proud of being Aboriginal and that this is “*really dangerous and unforgiving*”. Without an open and honest discussion, says this author, we are not going to “*grow in our Aboriginality*”. Other participants in this book about Aboriginality (“warts n’all”) ventured the same sentiments on the advancement of dialogue about identity. Dudgeon<sup>115</sup> believes that it is idealistic to think that any Indigenous society can be genuinely heterogeneous in nature. What needs to be emphasised is that Aboriginal people in Australia must practice the acceptance of diversity amongst us. This is not to say that we cannot engage in public debates and that we should not set boundaries about who or what is Aboriginal but that a dialogue must begin. Darren Garvey<sup>116</sup> also points out that such discussion cannot be about establishing an “*end point*” on what is Aboriginal identity. It can only ever be like a flowing river of “*thought and dialogue*” and that we can only ever grab a “*snapshot*” of what is a continuously changing dynamic. For this reason, Scott & Brown<sup>117</sup> say that the collective identity of Aboriginal people cannot be “*frozen in nostalgia*”. We cannot find any legitimacy in the counterfeit recycling of clothes, objects and traditions demanded from us as tourist fodder. Scott explains that “*we are what we do, especially what we do to change what we are: our identity resides in action and in struggle...*”

## Summary

According to Rigney<sup>118</sup>, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today struggle between an imperialist/colonial tradition on one side and a resistance tradition on the other. Aboriginal people were not just affected by the colonial period of “*the sword and the gun*”, but also by the

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<sup>113</sup> Scott 2005

<sup>114</sup> Oxenham et al. 1999:53

<sup>115</sup> Dudgeon in Oxenham et al. 1999:39

<sup>116</sup> Garvey in Oxenham et al. 1999:160

<sup>117</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:207

<sup>118</sup> Rigney et al. 1998

hegemonic colonialism of “*the chalk and the blackboard*”. This colonialism still exists in Australia today. Deeper questions about power and knowledge need to be asked in Australia. Australia needs a discourse which asks who is constructing Aboriginality on whose behalf and in what contexts. Writing is like the beginning of a collective journey for Aboriginal people today. It is akin to the gradual bringing together of hearts and minds as a way to contribute to an Aboriginal and increasingly wider sense of community. It is also about action and struggle to continue a heritage from before colonisation that is transplanted and shaped into something new from those roots. That is why writing the stories of Aboriginal lives has grown in impetus. When such notions are measured against the women participants in this research, we are provided with a basis for understanding how oral history survives through generations. There are successes and obstacles to this transmission that are measurable and worthy of documentation. One of the key obstacles faced by these women are institutionalised racism akin to that experienced by indigenous women worldwide. It is valuable to give account of these in this study. A large majority of authors state the belief that the dominant culture supports processes that either assimilate indigenous people into the dominant culture or to marginalise or exclude indigenous people from achieving the knowledge needed to bring about self-determination and decolonisation. This reality forms the focus of inquiry as the basis for my conceptual framework as it is about the limitations on knowledge production for our people. These can be documented and analysed through life stories providing a process whereby stories can be written down for our own purposes as first nations peoples.

Aboriginal people still need to revisit, digest and comprehend their colonised past. This is about finding justice as well as grappling with continued oppression, particularly that which relates to our psyche as colonised peoples. As Kevin Gilbert<sup>119</sup> wrote over twenty years ago, it is an Aboriginal person who must build something that is meaningful in today’s context. The development of a radical pedagogy about what it is to be Aboriginal can only ever be devised by Aboriginal people themselves without the overarching tutelage of non-Aboriginal people. In his inspiring words he says “*we know that a white Australian will never do it!*”

Aboriginal people still believe that oral histories and storytelling is the best mechanism for the learning of Aboriginality. Colonisation changed the very nature of passing on Indigenous knowledge systems through stories and such transmission is still widely undervalued by the

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<sup>119</sup> Gilbert 1977:3-4

dominant culture. Even though writing is perceived by Aboriginal people as somewhat limiting, there are many Aboriginal people putting their oral traditions of transmitting and recalling the past into literature. The aim is to connect these stories to the present to bring about Aboriginal wellbeing. As writers, Aboriginal people are making a new dynamic which Behar<sup>120</sup> believes is an effort to map an “intermediate space” that cannot quite be defined yet. She says that being a ‘vulnerable’ writer crosses borders between “*passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life*”.

Aboriginal people still have to contend with the pressure to be ‘authentic’ to non-Aboriginal people. This continued tool of oppression means that particular sections of the Aboriginal community, such as fair-skinned, women or urbanised ‘blacks’, are excluded as inauthentic. There is also a strong discourse present about those people who have decided to deny any Aboriginal heritage out of fear of being marginalised because they have seen the stigmatisation of previous generations and fear the same will occur to them in the present. There are others who wish to use the coloniser’s archives about them and their ancestors to inform a new sense of Aboriginality and to bring about healing for their families by taking what they can from these often racist accounts for their own purposes. This concept of revitalising or reclaiming the story of ancestors provides a basis for my conceptual framework with regard to research methods. Scaffolding stories with women participants through writing down oral histories of women ancestors and utilising historical and official government records all work to represent our own sense of Aboriginality.

It is important to study Aboriginal women’s storytelling today through written narratives because it is a field that remains a key area where Aboriginal people can play active agents in their own self-determination and decolonisation. When asking women in my family about the strategies in navigating their lives through oppression, we gained deeper insight into how internalised colonialism, negative stereotypes and institutionalised racism impede Aboriginal rights in a personal way. These women, as research participants, provide valuable insight into the lived experience of a racist history in Australia and points to how its focus has changed over time towards Aboriginal people. It explains how while Australians view their colonial history by excluding the Aboriginal experience providing a deeper insight into the dominant culture and explores some of the assumptions being made about Aboriginal culture. There are

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<sup>120</sup> Behar 1996:174

next to no contemporary Australian writers addressing the lived experience of several generations of Aboriginal women within one family through personal narratives. Such life narratives provide a depth of understanding previously not presented in literature in this field. The personal accounts of Aboriginal women provide a wealth of knowledge about the ways oral tradition engages with Aboriginal people and their communities. Examining such experiences and stories is needed. Writing these stories is not only about preservation. In investigating these women's reality, we gain understanding of existing opportunities for other families wanting to consolidate their silenced histories.

These stories are about the importance of land in our lives. They draw on our spiritual, intellectual and political inspirations while making us vulnerable when we remember how our ancestors navigated their lives. It is their lives that inspire us today as women. More importantly, we can make literary accounts more Indigenous by allowing Aboriginal people to speak about their experiences of themselves and their ancestors. This knowledge builds understanding and a deeper respect for our struggles and aspirations.

In the next six chapters, I present the individual historical accounts and personal narratives of five women in my family, identified as Melbin (my great-great-grandmother), Granny (my great-grandmother), Nana (my grandmother), Mum (my mother), Julie (my twin sister), and myself. These oral accounts and their historical reconstructions are present to gain an appreciation of Aboriginal women's contribution to history and aid in gaining a deeper understanding and value of the experience of each participant. Collectively, these chapters attempt to demonstrate how empirical and statistical approaches cannot fully describe individual experiences and are about individual Aboriginal women's journeys in Western Australian history.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

#### “Find One of Your Own Kind!”

Her words speak of resistance  
They tell of her defiance against his ways.  
“Go Find One of Your Own Kind!”  
This is all that remains of her life.  
This phrase is my legacy.  
No money, no land  
but her demanding request beckons me.

She rejected him and his people.  
She took the power from him.  
Having these words spoke by my Grandmother to me  
over, over and over again.  
I rejoice in their strength.  
They have survived.  
They inspire our survival too.

I will find one of my own kind too.  
Those denied me by the colour of my skin.  
Bred out of me.  
Forced into obscurity and silence for far too long.<sup>121</sup>

#### Chapter overview

This research constructs and celebrates the survival of women in my family through colonial experiences. As an Indigenous researcher, it seeks to bring about a greater understanding of my own journey to decolonise and strengthen my identity. This chapter is about how I built

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<sup>121</sup> Poem written by Author May 2010

and gave an account of life stories with the assistance of living female relatives in my maternal family. My experiences and observations along with those of my female relatives enabled me to reconstruct and retell the life stories of our deceased women ancestors, Mary Latham (nee Oliver) and her mother Melbin.

### **Research paradigm**

Despite being an active member of my maternal Badimia family with knowledge about the stories of my women ancestors, I have approached this research as a personal journey of discovery of new knowledge. I have adopted an ontological position whereby I have used a constructivist approach to investigate assumptions about what is real in the current debate over social organisation for Aboriginal people in relation to oral history and its literary recording. I have used inductive, interactive transactional co-creation of Aboriginal knowledge as an epistemological framework which has influenced my conceptual framework and research methodology.

Along with a reaffirmation of cultural knowledge passed down through oral tradition from female members of my family and community, I was able to develop and use my own interpretation of this oral tradition to gain a greater comprehension of the lived experiences of my ancestors, my female family members and of my own journey as a Badimia woman. This knowledge and experience enabled my research to manifest a written record of Badimia women's historical trajectory from first contact with non-Aboriginal people to the present day.

I found that throughout this research project I was influenced by several major methodologies. The research was directed predominantly by auto-ethnographic (AE) research methodologies. I also followed Aboriginal Terms of Reference (ATR)<sup>122</sup>, Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory<sup>123</sup> and various emergent Indigenist<sup>124</sup> research methodologies. Therefore, it is best to describe how each of these influenced my research.

### **Auto-ethnographic (AE) methods**

I have used auto-ethnographic methods of inquiry to place myself as the primary participant/subject of my research as part of the process of writing personal stories and

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<sup>122</sup> Kickett 1999

<sup>123</sup> Brady 1992, Huggins 1991, 1998, Moreton-Robinson 2000 Smith 1999

<sup>124</sup> Lester-Irabinna Rigney, (997:629-636) Nakata 1998, Smith 1999, Martin 2008, Moreton-Robinson 2000

ethnographic narratives of women's stories within my maternal family. I approached every engagement with participants in a responsive, reflective, participatory, and holistic way. The model of research proved a framework of AE which included direct (and participant) observation of behaviour, unearthing of beliefs and perceptions, and the recording of life history (such as kinship structures and education), in-depth interviewing and the interpretation/analysis of data. Rather than a portrait of the other (person, group or culture), as researcher I constructed a portrait of the self, myself as part of my family, myself as part of a group of women and as part of the stories they tell or retell. More importantly, I was able to use theories of auto-ethnography to explore how meanings and identity are created through language, stories, and behaviour, and to conceptualise how we know what we know in my maternal family. In essence, it is about how the world, my family and I are socially constructed. This is about telling my story and those of other people. In telling these stories, I was changed by them. As I listened to and wrote these stories down I had to change to make sense of my own and other people's experiences in new and different ways.

When I went into the field, such perception provided me with a model for ethical and collaborative research. This research was grounded with established relationships of respect for each other and the development of cooperation in giving women participants an empowered voice. I aimed to ensure that participants could reflect upon, own and communicate their varied experiences as family members, mothers, daughters, granddaughters, great-granddaughters, grandmothers, aunts, wives, sisters, community members and as human beings. I believe that there was a strong understanding and desire, amongst us all, for the research process to be one of regaining or strengthening control over the participants' lives and the story of their ancestors, as Indigenous women and as descendants of indigenous women.

### **Why use auto-ethnography?**

It was Jean-Paul Sartre<sup>125</sup> who said that interpretative studies are either about history or biography. These approaches are always situated within historical moments that are framed by a person's life experiences. There are new forms of methods both within critical and indigenous research that work to counter or intervene in how research positions indigenous peoples. Research has become a 'war of position' whereby indigenous people apply resistive praxis to highlight how systemic and structural power continues to deny them access to the

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<sup>125</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre 1981:19

right of self-determination in all aspects of society. Such transformational ideas suggests a politics of freedom in research for indigenous people. Individuals and groups can have their dreams, desires and aspirations liberated from previously being left out of the society that ideologically, economically and politically forces them to the periphery.

Indigenous writers such as Kapa<sup>126</sup> and Manning<sup>127</sup> write about the need for indigenous people to “*co-construct*” our connection to country and our sense of individuality as being important when we claim human rights to traditional land and water. This means a movement towards changing the way we represent ourselves in research to challenge the injustice we experience and, more importantly, our own conceptions of ourselves as indigenous peoples. It is about asking why we do the things we do and how events and interactions shape our present culture and way of life. Indeed, our knowledge as indigenous people is actually shaped by a journey of coming to know ourselves along with the possibility to do good in all that we do as a people. Finding a “voice” is something that Linda Tuhiwai Smith<sup>128</sup> says is a major issue for indigenous researchers. Indeed, the way to create that voice is to express our “*concerns, fears, desires, aspirations, needs and questions*” especially when they relate to our research. When we become researchers, as indigenous people, it is not simply about the researched. The very activity of research becomes transformed. The way we frame our questions, how people take part in research, the way we define problems and on what terms people participate are all different in indigenous research.

According to Whitiui<sup>129</sup>, the truth of our stories is much more than merely about talking about being Badimia, “native,” or indigenous. It is actually a journey of connecting or reconnecting with cultural “sites, spaces, and struggles”<sup>130</sup> which also express the fluidity of time experienced by indigenous people. Indigenous AE is therefore about getting back our voice, our view of the world and our presence in the world within the research agenda.

The research methodology of AE has been around for at least thirty years. It emerged from anthropological notions of cultural studies where the true “insider” began to gain traction, emerging with writers such as Hayano<sup>131</sup> whose paper positioned AE as different from what

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<sup>126</sup> Kapa 2009

<sup>127</sup> Manning 2009

<sup>128</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith 1999:93

<sup>129</sup> Whitiui 2014

<sup>130</sup> Whitiui 2014:481

<sup>131</sup> Hayano 1979

anthropologists (i.e., people who gain ‘familiarity’ with those who are “native”) or sociologists (i.e., having been socialised within a particular group of “natives”) have done. Such roles steadily licensed the non-indigenous researcher in an insider-outsider position<sup>132</sup>. When Ellis and Bochner<sup>133</sup> applied AE, they ventured, as summarised by Whitiui<sup>134</sup>, that the approach went further into stating that the “*personal story matters*” and that it was “*autobiographical in nature*”. This meant that research focused outwardly on the “*social and cultural aspects of one’s personal experiences*” and in doing so, enabled the researcher to focus “inward exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by various experiences and therefore may express certain emotions” in the research writing itself. This research was ultimately reflective in that it moved back and forth “*displaying layer of consciousness using first person*”. This meant that AE created the researcher as a “*dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought and language*”.<sup>135</sup>

Within this tradition, AE is usually signified as a qualitative research method where the researcher uses interviews and participant observation to achieve a richer appreciation of a cultural group. AE concentrates on the writer’s particular understanding instead of philosophies and traditions of others. Other than anthropology and sociology, we can now see AE widely applied (sometimes provocatively) in novels, journalism, literary criticism, communication studies and performance studies. It has also been applied in academic arenas such as psychology, consumerism, management studies, nursing and counselling. All these disciplines see benefit in this form of application. It was Geertz<sup>136</sup> who first referred to AE as a “blurred genre” which intersects and is also obliged to our favourite storytellers, poets and musicians.

The search to find truth in our lives and cultures as indigenous people requires a careful judgement of any given situation or by using methodologies that are merely suggestive of linking procedures that are then restructured as a form of cultural and social principles. Overlapping stories compose our culture and our lives. Within each story is the quest to find our own genuine expression which cannot be limited to a single story from someone we do not know or can really relate to. We must have connection with the storytellers. It is this connection that AE makes explicit by using our own positionality, experience and involvement as part of the research.

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<sup>132</sup> Hayano 1979

<sup>133</sup> Ellis and Bochner 2006

<sup>134</sup> Whitiui 2014:461

<sup>135</sup> Whitiui 2014:461

<sup>136</sup> Geertz 1983

Butz and Besio<sup>137</sup> says AE provides more for indigenous writers. Referring to Pratt<sup>138</sup>, this methodology involves collaboration with and adoption of the languages of the “conqueror”.<sup>139</sup> The mechanics of AE is about increasing the visibility of a writer’s life directly, thus making the self-located within social, cultural and political experiences. This addresses the issue of the how the other can be reclaimed but it fails to specifically address what it means to be indigenous or to give explanation of what it means to be indigenous from within. As indigenous researchers, we must be consistently conscious and sensitive to how we represent our research subjects and that in representing them we are enacting and establishing a power relationship which, as Foucault espoused<sup>140</sup>, can impact upon or intervene in the “*possible or actual future or present actions*” of participants. As a critically postcolonial research practice, AE should be “*storytelling [that] can change the world*”.<sup>141</sup> In the exploration of self, as acknowledged by Sparkes<sup>142</sup>, the constant process of experimentation and breaking down of often firm and rigid boundaries within research provide the opportunities for indigenous writers to give account and articulate meaning as to why our world is politically, socially, and culturally different to the rest of humanity. The process of discovery, exploration, co-construction, and narration of notions of self relates to valuing relationships with the people and the environment. In essence, indigenous AE strengthens and clarifies how we, as indigenous peoples, want to live and ultimately speak about the self to create new knowledge. This creates meaning and possibility to inform how being Badimia, “native” or Indigenous is different. Moreover, this is not about how this knowledge was obtained through how one engages or has not engaged in a particular community, way of life or experiences. It is about the individual’s ability to uncover, connect, synthesise, explain, think and present ways of how the self is represented.

It is consistently the role of indigenous researchers when seeking to undertake research that it must benefit our people and our communities. What is valued is the time taken to understand the elements of morals, language, traditions, boundaries, protocols, ethics, space, place and heritage that is specific to being indigenous from a particular community. When this process happens through AE, there is a readjustment and reordering of what is most important to being

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<sup>137</sup> Butz and Besio 2004

<sup>138</sup> Pratt 1992

<sup>139</sup> Pratt 1992, 7

<sup>140</sup> Foucault 2000, 340

<sup>141</sup> Wade Davis in Chadwick 2003

<sup>142</sup> Sparkes 2003

indigenous. As outlined by Bishop<sup>143</sup> and Smith<sup>144</sup>, the process is about engaging at a higher level of cultural and critical consciousness in your role as an indigenous researcher. Furthermore, by choosing to locate the self within different and particular cultural settings becomes a very valuable reflection when beginning the use of an indigenous auto-ethnographic method of inquiry.

Whitinui<sup>145</sup> writes that indigenous AE encompasses both indigenous and Western ways of perception but also shows elements of not reflecting either of them.<sup>146</sup> To assert what constitutes indigenous knowledge is still viewed with association to the western academic standpoints as well as to colonial and postcolonial paradigms. Such lineage, as argued by Smith<sup>147</sup>, see it invariably framed by the indigenous colonial experience. Indigenous peoples must, in reply, lay claim to our own agendas and to continue on our own path of thinking culturally, perpetuating knowledge and knowing.

Writing about the Western standpoint, Guba and Lincoln<sup>148</sup> explained how “competing paradigms” were the site where scientists of the quantitative variety steadily inclined to favour impartiality towards the experiences of people in research. The belief was to remain and act as unbiased decision makers and policy makers when called. However, on many levels, a writer’s “voice” becomes a marker of “rigor” and science conquers to remain the dominant discourse. Through persistence and an increasing level of critical engagement with the academy, new discourses (i.e. Indigenous) have emerged to voice and validate those from within our own communities. New discourses have emerged that give voice and validity to those formerly overlooked. Indeed, Indigenous peoples now demand greater access to different forms of inquiry that are affiliated to our way of being, doing and knowing. Oral histories, poetry, motifs, visual art, performance, speech writing are all ways that our norms, nuances and essence of language are used to tell our unique stories.<sup>149</sup>

AE is located within the social sciences research agenda where the self is challenged across and within an extensive collection of disciplines including psychology, philosophy, sociology,

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<sup>143</sup> Bishop 2005

<sup>144</sup> Smith 1997

<sup>145</sup> Whitinui 2014

<sup>146</sup> Whitinui 2014:472

<sup>147</sup> Smith 1999, 1–19

<sup>148</sup> Guba and Lincoln 1994

<sup>149</sup> Butler 1994

anthropology, political science, history and economics. Indigenous AE as an inquiry method is specifically about us as indigenous peoples making sense of who we are, therefore requiring the approach to be interdisciplinary. Our lives need this approach because as indigenous peoples we overlap or traverse numerous fields. It could be argued that each of these disciplines represent in itself a “cultural response” and consequently, informs within limited who we are as Badimia in Australian society. Yet our place within mainstream research remains a problem because of how we are seen by others in the research arena. Of particular concern is the significant problems associated with undertaking research for, about, and with our own people. Many research fields still view us, as indigenous people, as unable to recognise Badimia or indigenous people as “self-determining” of what knowledge means for us as a distinct people<sup>150</sup>.

When defining indigenous AE we must acknowledge that it is about considering epistemological perspectives that equally draw together what Whitiui<sup>151</sup> outlines as “*self (auto), ethno (nation), and graphy (writing)*”. Indigenous auto-ethnographers also must consider their level of connectedness to time, place, space and culture as a way of “*(re)claiming, (re)storing, (re)writing, and (re)patriating our own lived realities*”.<sup>152</sup> Simply telling our stories is not enough as storytellers for we must demonstrate how the stories of our people have been lived as realistic and profound examples.

When we represent our lives within the research agenda, as indigenous writers, we tell our own stories so that our people can be self-determining and can view their future positively. The real challenges lie within ourselves as we comprehend the many experiences of colonisation and actively work to rebuild our perceptions of what it means to be indigenous: our culture and our specific identities. In every sense, indigenous AE is a resistance discourse profoundly involved with tackling indigenous people’s oppression from specific cultural and political standpoints. Such a discourse is meant to motivate our people to be decisive in self-determination to build collective and cultural capacity. The stories constructed through indigenous AE remind us of an unfathomable comprehension for the various experiences and lived knowledge of indigenous peoples. Our aim is to use this methodology to continue to build unique possibilities for us as living beings that require us to safeguard our way of life as Badimia, “native’ or

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<sup>150</sup> Smith 1999

<sup>151</sup> Whitiui 2014:467

<sup>152</sup> Whitiui 2014:467

Indigenous. This process is about self-determination and decolonisation in the research process which is inspiring and emancipatory.

In addition, it is important to note that there is much diversity within identity, people and culture for indigenous peoples within Australia and globally. We construct experiences in diverse ways and the ways we hold on to and within culture as activists is about challenging the dominant culture and opposing that which constrains our power to be indigenous on our terms. Through the process of comprehending and describing our own cultural engagements and as a form of cultural and critical awareness, AE is about indigenous people being active agents in freeing our lives from the domineering forces of objectification. It was Charles Royal<sup>153</sup> who said that being indigenous should be viewed as a gift because within it lies opportunities revive and re-focus our cultures amongst ourselves without solely resting upon the knowledge manufactured about us which is without our own reference points. Such a journey through indigenous AE becomes essential as it fosters rare forums to contemplate our own knowledge systems and to enable our people to rectify our individual and community cultural capabilities.<sup>154</sup>

The functionality of AE within this research journey, as with all indigenous auto-ethnographic projects, was a process of self-reflection within a holistic construct. My female family relatives and I constructed an ongoing dialogue that involved our mutual commitment to share, listen, learn, and develop collaborative understandings. This brought about several cultural insights, reflections, and learnings born as sites of cultural awakening and meeting to assist with healing and reparation from poverty, suffering and personal trials. Indigenous AE is then a process of capturing wellness that asks us to remember who we are, where we come from, and for us to work together actively to assist in the wellbeing of our families and communities.

Predominantly, indigenous AE is used by several indigenous writers as an instrument to defy misunderstandings of indigenous peoples within historic, social, and political identities. Many of these writers<sup>155</sup>, whilst informed by several indigenous and critical discourses<sup>156</sup>, reason that newer forms of dialogue with indigenous peoples should be accommodated for their unique reality to the world. This is why indigenous research methodologies are important ways for indigenous researchers to engage in scaffolding their research. However, these conventional

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<sup>153</sup> Charles Royal 2009:a

<sup>154</sup> Royal 2009a

<sup>155</sup> Battiste 2005; Martinez 2008; Meyer 2005; Smith 1999; Wilson 2009

<sup>156</sup> Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith 2008

methods are not always compatible when delving deep into an indigenous person's individual life. A person's particular opinions or understandings warrant depth of analysis other than the researcher's basic need to gather information with comparative relations of cause and effect. This is about appreciating the person's cultural and social heart expressed in how they view their existence and why.

Fundamentally it is about building indigenous resilience and to document how an individual copes, manages, and bounces back from dispossession, death, trauma, assimilation, and genocide. For indigenous people in particular, this methodology focuses on how the individual relates to issues of self, loss of identity and culture surrounded by a world primarily obsessed with financial wealth and social control. When participants reveal their inner self to impart their own expression of wisdom, it is not an easily acceptable construct to comprehend and follow within academic analysis. Despite this, the opportunities to articulate the self in an original, inspiring and personally nourishing way can bring about revealing knowledge that assists to enlighten hidden understandings.

Auto-ethnographers are focused on bringing to light their total interaction with a research setting by making their every thought and emotion visible to the reader. As Ellingson and Ellis<sup>157</sup> observe, auto-ethnographers are on a social constructionist project that rejects deep-rooted binary oppositions between the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and produce, self and others, art and science, and the personal and the political. There is a rejection of the concept of social research as objective and neutral knowledge produced by scientific methods and is a critical "*response to the alienating effects of both researchers and audiences of impersonal, passionless, abstract claims of truth generated by such research practices and clothed in exclusionary scientific discourse*".<sup>158</sup> In essence, many researchers doing this kind of work attempt to fully realise the idea of reflexivity by which they become aware of his/her role in and relationship to their research.

Yet, auto-ethnography is still broad and ambiguous as a category which encompasses a wide variety of styles. In recent years, auto-ethnographers have begun to make a distinction of two types of manifestations of their research methodology<sup>159</sup> whereby auto-ethnography can be analytical or, conversely, evocative. Analytical auto-ethnography focuses on developing

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<sup>157</sup> Ellingson & Ellis 2008:450-459

<sup>158</sup> Ellingson & Ellis 2008:450

<sup>159</sup> Ellingson & Ellis 2008:445

theoretical explanations of broader social phenomena, whereas auto-ethnographers using an evocative focus tend to use narrative presentations that open up conversations and evoke emotional responses. The auto-ethnographer, according to Bochner and Ellis<sup>160</sup> is “*a communicator and a storyteller*”. They work to depict people struggling to overcome adversity and show people in “*the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles*”. To them, auto-ethnography is “*ethical practice*” and “*gifts*” that build a story by which people find meaning and through this meaning are able to validate that experience of creation.

The overall critique of auto-ethnography comes from traditional social scientists who view qualitative researchers as more like “*journalists or soft scientists*”<sup>161</sup> with their work being full of personal bias or as only offering exploratory rather than reliable objective results. Early criticisms of auto-ethnography, as observed by Maréchal<sup>162</sup>, centred on it being too “*biased, navel-gazing, self-absorbed, or emotionally incontinent, and for hijacking traditional ethnographic purposes and scholarly contributions*”. Ellis<sup>163</sup> noted that there are five factors to consider when reviewing auto-ethnographic or narrative papers. These include both analysis of evaluative and constructive validity techniques posing questions such as a) Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life? b) Does the piece succeed aesthetically or is it satisfyingly complex? c) How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? d) Does this piece affect me emotionally and/or intellectually generating new questions or move me to action? e) Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience? Fundamentally, this means that the validity of this methodology emphasises what happens to the readers as well as the research participants and researchers. Ellis<sup>164</sup> says validity can only be judged by the reader’s feelings and that the experience described is...

“Lifelike, believable, and possible. You also can judge validity by whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers- or even your own.”

This is concerned with narrative truth. This means that we do not measure if a story is accurate but, as Ellis suggests, we judge it on the usefulness of the story.

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<sup>160</sup> Ellis, Carolyn & Bochner, Arthur P. 2006:111

<sup>161</sup> Ellis 2004:253

<sup>162</sup> Maréchal, G. 2010:45

<sup>163</sup> Ellis 2004:253-254

<sup>164</sup> Ellis, 2004:124

Regarding the benefits and concerns of auto-ethnography, I turn to Denzin<sup>165</sup> who says an important criterion for this methodology is that your work must have the possibility to change the world and make it a better place. He also states that good personal narratives should contribute to positive social change, move us to action, and even provide insights into problems often overlooked in culture – issues such as race, identity, sexuality, child abuse and the like. Firstly, auto-ethnographers should make sense of their own individual experience. What they write is political in nature because they engage readers in important political issues to ask them to consider things and do things differently. In essence, such narratives build cultural understanding where cross-cultural bonds can be built. Secondly, self-narratives, such as those in auto-ethnography, cannot remain purely academic but become an existential project. They reflect the desire to take hold of meanings, as noted by Sparkes<sup>166</sup> as a sort of “poetic social science” and should not be judged in the same way using the same traditional criteria as other qualitative research investigations. Such boundaries of research and their maintenance are socially constructed. In recent years, the use of auto-ethnographic methods has increased but the knowledge of how to provide feedback and to evaluate these accounts has not developed to meet its proliferation. This raises significant issues with those wishing to utilise this method in the academy.

### **Auto-ethnography as an Indigenous/native researcher**

If I was to select the best applicable definition of auto-ethnography, I believe Mary Louise Pratt best describes my journey as an indigenous researcher to use this form of research. Pratt<sup>167</sup> contextualises ethnography compared to auto-ethnography in the following way: “*If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, auto-ethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations*”. Such a definition clearly expresses how subordinate peoples can present themselves in ways that their dominants have misrepresented them. Therefore, auto-ethnography is not self-representation, but a collaboration of mixed ideas and values from both the dominant and subordinate cultures. They are meant to address the speaker’s own community as well as the conquerors and, in various ways, auto-ethnography can be used for discovery and invention. It is a process of learning the ideas and lives of others so that their lives are meaningful and worthy of study.

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<sup>165</sup> Denzin, 2000:256

<sup>166</sup> Sparkes 2000:223

<sup>167</sup> Pratt 1992:7

One of the main characteristics of auto-ethnographic perspectives is that the researcher is a boundary-crosser and his/her role can be characterised as a dual identity. Its history can be said to be associated with late nineteenth-century ideas central to early African American thought, as articulated by W.E.B Dubois as “*double consciousness*.”<sup>168</sup> The echoes of these sentiments hold currency in anthropology, post-colonial studies, and literary criticism, but it is in auto-ethnography that new openings and new ways of writing are made about social life and the multiple creation of selfhood is manifest. This form of research may best be described as one that stresses multiple and shifting contextualised identities.

In my reading of auto-ethnography, I have gained an understanding of it as not necessarily a tool for me to participate in an anti-colonial counter-discourse but rather as providing ways in which I can knowingly and unknowingly destabilise imperialist structures of “otherness”. Auto-ethnography allows me to ignore the ethnographic conventions of anthropology, which calls upon me as a writer, sooner or later, to establish some professional authority via generalising, abstracting, and depersonalising narrative voices, and the theoretical justification of worthy research. This research method enables me to move forward and backward, outward and inward, blurs the distinction between the personal and cultural, sometimes on the far side of easy recognition.

This research was written in the first-person voice using short stories, poetry, personal essays, journal entries, and social science prose. In these texts, I have presented dialogue, emotion, concrete action, embodiment, spirituality and self-consciousness as relational and institutional stories affected by our history, social structure, and culture as Aboriginal women. Through these dialectic forms of writing, feeling, thought, language, and action are all revealed. When beginning the process of writing, I was acutely aware that this form of research required great self-knowledge and a well-developed reflexive self. Indeed, auto-ethnography is a therapeutic power creating a form of writing that makes the researcher’s own experience a topic of investigation in its own right rather than writing from “nowhere to nobody”.<sup>169</sup> Readers of auto-ethnography are asked to feel the truth of the stories being told and to almost become part of the story, engaging with the emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetical nature of the writing. In all, auto-ethnography provides a methodology that encourages the researcher to include their culture and self as a sound political and ethical approach considering how complex the

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<sup>168</sup> Du Bois 1996:5

<sup>169</sup> Porter 1997:1

interplay between our own personal biography, status and power, interactions with participants and the written word may be.

What makes auto-ethnography unique for me as an indigenous researcher is the ability for this methodology to make Indigenous women, whose lives generally were formerly the subjects of ethnography, to become the authors of our own reality. Kim Scott refers to this as a call to action by stating that, “*disconnected, dispossessed, we become visible only when our eyes are opened to history. Acknowledging our people - wanting recognition and welcome - we call out.*”<sup>170</sup> It also describes auto-ethnographic texts as a way in which colonised peoples can describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Mary Louise Pratt links the concept of auto-ethnography to relations between the colonised and the coloniser by stating that such texts are not supposed to be authentic representations but rather selective collaborations with an appropriation of the coloniser’s idioms mixed with Indigenous idioms to create self-representations that veto “*metropolitan modes of understanding*”.<sup>171</sup>

With regard to my own journey, this does not mean that all ‘native writers’ are conditioned from birth to write about oppression and exclusion in insightful ways nor to have some moral right over such work. The important point is that being Indigenous does not necessarily qualify you to conduct research but rather the connection is always there between the researcher’s position in society and history and the kind of research agenda and understanding such personal background shapes. I assert that in my research, I am well-placed within my community and family of women to write about our mutual experiences. However, additional pay is given to my positioning as mixed-race and as a fair-skinned Aboriginal woman which had problematised the issue of colour. The ability to take positions within the Aboriginal community that claim a colour other than black was important to present. This is not to say that I support divisive individualism in favour of a transcendent Badimia identity as an Indigenous background. I believe such accounts should remain heroic and build a sense of the mythical acting as a mouthpiece of our collectivity.

AE can be understood as a process where the (Indigenous) researcher chooses to make explicit their own positioning, involvements and experiences as a vital part of ethnographic research by being self-reflexive. When conceptualising AE, there are instances where members of

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<sup>170</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:206

<sup>171</sup> Pratt 1992:94

colonised groups aim to represent themselves to their colonisers in ways that engage with colonisers' terms while also remaining loyal to their own self-understandings. I am aware that while there are intellectual debates about how to understand us as the 'other', my people continue to live in the most appalling conditions which have been perpetuated since invasion in this country. I believe that not only was my research shaped by my positioning in a marginalised community, but also it has developed my sensitivity in both conscious and subconscious ways to comprehend the practices of exclusion bestowed upon my people and to perhaps write in ways to challenge the status quo. As the celebrated native Hawaiian writer and historian Epeli Hau'ofa stated, "...we must construct our pasts and present them in our own way. We cannot continue to rely heavily on others to do it for us because autonomy cannot be attained through dependence".<sup>172</sup> It is also about rupturing those barriers that have silenced us and positioned us in such unequal social relations as Aboriginal people.

### **Memory in auto-ethnography**

I was strongly aware that auto-ethnography in my research utilised a kind of recollection which is more than just remembering. It is remembering but from a fresh perspective, providing an opportunity for me to write my family history by giving a different outcome. I was able to recapture the original self (the gumnut so to speak) and to reinvent myself as the mature self and my culture from the ground up. In this context, the art of memory served to protect myself and my family against homogenising tendencies of the dominant culture. Auto-ethnography became a powerful tool of cultural criticism, of drawing attention to the linguistic and fictive nature of women's stories, of using myself as narrator as an inscribed figure within the text, whose manipulation called attention to authority structures we all were dealing with as Indigenous women, both historically and in the contemporary world. This research enabled us to reorder historical events as representative and as true, and which projected a vision of life and society in need of transformation.

In the dominant culture, life and time are biographically ordered. We live in a biographical era, where there are different life scripts to relate to. Auto-ethnography invokes a layering of history and memory with the authenticity of experiences functioning as a receding horizon of truth where memory and testimony are articulated as methods of salvage. Another way of expressing this is that every cultural formation occurs in the encounter between the strategies of power

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<sup>172</sup> Hau'ofa in Motzafi-Haller 1997:198

and resistance. Memory is decisive for the recognition and acknowledgement in identity formation as it relates history to identity and vice versa. That is why questions of how and what we remember are important in this research. Memory in my family is a collective construction and was communicated and handed down in oral tradition and storytelling. My choice in auto-ethnography enabled this collective memory to continue into individual memory where the boundaries between the private and public in everyday life had become obscure. Remembering functioned for the women in my research as opportunities to actively resist the power imbalances they and their women ancestors lived through and to discuss the need for such realities to be challenged in contemporary settings.

### **Authenticity within auto-ethnography**

As auto-ethnography has predominantly a testimonial or confessional character it becomes a site of authenticity and veracity. Even though the stories of women in my family fulfilled and continued to perform a number of cultural functions, they also offered the authentic voice of a minority group to a reading audience composed primarily of non-Aboriginal people. I was strongly aware that my writing would be seen not as me telling my story as an individual but as conveying the story of a people. Much has been written<sup>173</sup> about who has the right to speak and on behalf of whom. Who represents whose life, and how, are also central topics of concern in the current age of bureaucratisation. The voice of the Auto-ethnographer as the insider is assumed to be 'truer' than that of the outsider in much current debate. The native voice is privileged as more 'authentic' than that of the outsider. This means that if life history is seen as portraying or illustrating culture or some aspect of it, it must be truthful and come from a 'typical' individual. As a fair-skinned Aboriginal woman, this was a problematic notion. However, I claimed authenticity of voice and a rightful place in the chain of personal testimony written to pass on experience to future generations, and although didactic, my story and the stories of women in my family pinpointed how personal lives are embedded in collective identity. All stories I recorded relate experiences of exile which heightened their awareness of the multiple natures of their identities as Badimia women. This multiple nature recognised our differences in social position, location and as gendered female. It is more than anthropology because there was a blurring of boundaries and a blending of voices together as one family. All of us stressed our intimate links with our ancestors as agents of traditional oral culture.

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<sup>173</sup> Russell 1999; Reed-Denahay 1997; Bums-McGrath 2000

This did not mean that I did not come to the conclusion that in writing about self that I was a timeless, finished product of my background but rather a fragment was recorded of an evolving process in my life as a Badimia woman. These life history texts need not be factual in order to be true and these oppositions are not necessarily contradictions. It highlights that neither history nor identity is a fixed entity; they are under continual revision. My ethnicity is thoroughly deconstructed into a plethora of fantasies, memories and histories.

### **Aboriginal women's story in auto-ethnography**

Auto-ethnography as an empowerment process was conducted with a concern for the role of women and community in this research. Since the early 1870s, Badimia women were subjected to colonial oppression of which we are only beginning to hear and read about. However, after wide consultations with community members, I was able to identify a common perception that history about Aboriginal people in Badimia country was still unknown or unrecorded and devalued. The final thesis was designed to provide a wide range of data and findings so as to inform community members, members of my family, women in general and historians about the circumstances and consequences of eugenic policies aimed at mixed-race Badimia women over five generations. Within this thesis, Indigenous women speak for and about their experiences of Western social control throughout their lives. Such accounts are valuable in reflecting Indigenous community reality to the Indigenous community so as to gain a broader understanding of the impact of colonialism, sexism and racism.

This thesis aimed to use auto-ethnography to expand the idea of a national identity or history as an imagined, textual community that is linguistically, rather than consanguineously, constructed. It is my hope that such a discussion will contribute to a more wide-ranging investigation into the naming, representation and construction of the 'mixed-race' female subject in imperial and historical contexts.

### **Criticisms of auto-ethnography**

AE is also associated with Narrative Inquiry in that it foregrounds experience and story as a meaning making enterprise. Narrative Inquiry as a methodology is about collecting, analysing and re-presenting peoples' stories as told by them. On one hand, some advocates of narrative inquiry argue for allowing stories to speak for themselves, but some narrative researchers can and have had their work denied publication for being idiosyncratic and narcissistic.

Furthermore, auto-ethnographic texts can be read as ‘authentic’ self-expression or as inauthentic assimilation. It seems clear, then, that auto-ethnographic texts do not necessarily participate in an anti-colonial counter-discourse, although there may be ways in which they wittingly or unwittingly destabilise imperialist constructions of ‘otherness’. However, Pratt<sup>174</sup> warns that when “*their trans-cultural character is obliterated and their dialogic engagement with western modes of representation is lost*” another aspect emerges. I was continually concerned about was that of essentialising my people. As colour is not a reliable indicator of ethnic identity, just as ‘racial’ community may also easily be misread by physical appearance alone, I was careful not to write in a too sentimental way. I was aware that such writing makes my people vulnerable to people’s pathologizing.

However, this did not detract from my own difficulties in determining what kind of voice, as a ‘native daughter’, I was claiming. As a writer of mixed-race, I was careful about marking out a territory in which colour was defined by neither black nor white. My positioning is much more part of the ‘cultural borderlands’. Auto-ethnography is a vehicle and a strategy of challenging imposed forms of identity and exploring the discursive possibilities of inauthentic subjectivities. It is often condemned as apolitical; however, on the contrary, auto-ethnography can be seen as opening the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge.

Any nation-state, including Australia, is situated on the cusp of a dilemma directly related to the tension between selfhood and authority. Most nations have been founded in revolution against authority where the official national entity in contemporary contexts must now impose an authority of its own. Australia’s history is far more contentious. Auto-ethnography, as used in my research, is an exploration and development of more sensitive tools and terms that narrate understandings of the work of power in Australia and elsewhere.

### **Aboriginal Terms of Reference**

I was very aware of research structures the have been developed by Aboriginal people themselves within our own contexts. The paradigm referred to by Osborne and Dick<sup>175</sup> and

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<sup>174</sup> Pratt 1992:6

<sup>175</sup> Osborne & Dick 1994

Kickett<sup>176</sup> as Aboriginal Terms of Reference (ATR) is a process of working and learning when working with Aboriginal people in Australia with principles that:

- acknowledge Aboriginal diversity;
- reaffirm Aboriginal culture;
- confirm the identity of myself as an Aboriginal woman and the participants as Aboriginal people within the context of our own Aboriginal environment;
- create short and long-term goals for conducting this research, so that we become closer as a research group (both research and participants);
- recognise historical, cultural, political and economic realities of our environment as Aboriginal people;
- help us identify Aboriginal issues coming out of or relating to our environment; and
- help us all, as Aboriginal people, to develop individual and collective options for the future.

Within ATR parameters, this project's methodology was framed by the desire to develop a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of our mutual history since invasion. This understanding assisted me and my family members to formulate a question framework and then the types of questions that needed to be answered in the research journey. ATR helped me to determine the general direction of the discussion in a way that would be acceptable to women family members. The questions were open enough to allow each woman to speak about their experiences as an Aboriginal person and to reconstruct their ancestor's lives so that I could analyse this knowledge and formulate general story/understandings in a style acceptable to us all as Aboriginal people. This methodology provided a framework for an important step towards our own cultural survival and our own self-determination as Aboriginal women.

### **Indigenous women's standpoint methodology**

It is a long-held understanding that Feminist Standpoint Theory allowed for the construct of indigenous discourse in research methodology. Feminist standpoint discredits sociology's claim to be objective knowledge that is independent from any given sociological situation in that the only way to truly know a socially constructed work is from within it. Indigenous standpoint theory<sup>177</sup> as expressed by Foley<sup>178</sup> and Ardill<sup>179</sup> refers to a position in society that

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<sup>176</sup> Kickett 1999

<sup>177</sup> Foley 2003:49

<sup>178</sup> Foley (2003)

<sup>179</sup> Ardill (2013)

gives another way of making sense of what is affected by the dominant discourse and society around us. It helps shape structures of power, work, and wealth, when it is viewed and discussed, into reality from the perspective of women's lives. It is with many indigenous female scholars that a writer's matriarchal lineage is presented as a significant development in the writer's cultural space in that indigenous women have sacred skills of keeping and teaching knowledge. With the development of indigenous women's standpoint in research, the argument for indigenous epistemology becomes stronger. This means that for the purpose of this research about Indigenous women, it must be carried out by an Indigenous woman (namely me). The research is for the benefit of Indigenous women and their communities which enables knowledge to be recorded for the community, not the academy. The participants are the owners of the knowledge and not the researcher per se. In essence this research method is flexible and applicable for many different indigenous contexts if not all indigenous nations. It is intrinsically emancipatory and not a copy of existing discourses in research. As indigenous philosophy is based on oral traditions, the contemporary indigenous scholar must not trivialise this but when and wherever possible this tradition should be maintained. As an Indigenous scholar, I do have the opportunity to preserve and develop my own Indigenous epistemological position. This is about empowering communities to preserve and retain Indigenous knowledge.

### **Indigenist research methodologies**

Along with many other Indigenous writers, Atkins<sup>180</sup>, Smith<sup>181</sup> and Rigney<sup>182</sup> have favoured our Indigenous attitudes, practices and values. The essence of their methodologies is that, as Indigenous people, we need to set our own agenda for freeing ourselves from colonial oppression, and that indigenous research is responsible to indigenous peoples and their struggles. In a real sense, as indigenous researchers, we are no longer distant, uninvolved observers but people who provide a social bridge between our research and our political struggles as oppressed peoples. The principles of an Indigenist research approach is of respect, inclusiveness, collective action, critical thinking, privileging and honouring the people involved in the research.

In the past and still today, as acknowledged by these writers, any research is/was a tool used by powerful elites to reinforce attitudes of our racial inferiority. As legitimised oppression,

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<sup>180</sup> Atkins 1993

<sup>181</sup> Smith 1999

<sup>182</sup> Rigney 1997

power was justified through our classification and our construction within a non-Indigenous system.

Steve Kinnane<sup>183</sup> wrote about his grandmother saying that these elites,

*“...did not think that we would one day be leafing through the personal files they created about our grandmother, watching back, as her life was tracked and controlled across those pages for almost half a century. Cuts leave scars. Scars leave tracks. Tracks can be followed”.*

From such records, Kim Scott<sup>184</sup> writes that our collective identity comes *“born out of the past and is nourished by it – our feet tread where others trod before us”*. Constructing our Aboriginal history is a powerful way for examining whether equality and morality existed in the foundations of Australian society and, furthermore, whether such ideals are manifest in our lives today. By constructing an Aboriginal history, our identity is expressed as lived experiences of Indigenous people today.

In Australia, an ‘Indigenist’ research methodology, as adopted by Rigney<sup>185</sup>, is not just a part of the struggle for self-determination but actively challenges oppression, all forms of genocide and its history, engages with stories of survival, and shows where continued oppression occurs and protests about it. This methodological focus provided a strong grounding for my analysis in this research project. I feel that I am also guided in this research by theory which is overtly political in its intentions and that advocates for an oppressed people.

Indigenous research methods can take various forms according to Smith<sup>186</sup> and I have identified several of these to describe the way I have conducted research. Firstly, storytelling is a key feature of my research where these new and old stories contribute to a collective story in which every Aboriginal person has a place. My women family members all convey in their stories the beliefs and values of Badimia culture. They speak of racism and mistreatment with dignity, rage, and sorrow. Together, the storyteller and the story work to connect the future with the past, the people with the story, the people with the land and with one generation to another. As

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<sup>183</sup> Kinnane 2003:12

<sup>184</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:207

<sup>185</sup> Rigney 1997

<sup>186</sup> Smith 1999:145

Smith says, storytelling fits well with Aboriginal oral traditions as part of our reality today. For me, storytelling is about a conversation and dialogue amongst us as Aboriginal people, to ourselves and for ourselves, each story tells its own 'truth' rather than about the researcher retaining the control.

Secondly, using my research as an expression of cultural survival was important. Positive accounts and events are important not just because they speak of survival but because they also celebrate our resistance to domination as human beings, affirming our identity as Aboriginal women and people. This was particularly important in my research, considering that all my participants were women and a majority were Badimia elders who were able to speak about their personal struggles. In celebrating together, as Aboriginal women and not just as participants and researcher, we expressed our individual and communal processes that speak about the journey of life.

Finally, remembering is an important aspect of research, as written by Smith.<sup>187</sup> Remembering the past was often painful for my women participants, especially about how colonisation dehumanised them and what this meant in their lives. In remembering stories of their women ancestors, they lamented the trauma they too endured. Healing and transformation become important strategies for a methodological approach which ask an Aboriginal woman to remember what they have tried to forget. It is important to note here that I did not force my participants to recount aspects of their past experiences, but rather enabled them to relate comfortably their experiences in their own words. In remembering and recounting, my participants were able to contextualise their life experiences as Badimia women, to reconstruct the lives of our women ancestors and to contrast their memories with their lives today.

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations were a significant factor in this research project to ensure the privacy and integrity of the women who took part in the first instance and then the broader Badimia community and its members. I was required by the Curtin University Ethics Committee to obtain ethical clearance. Ethical clearance (level A, the highest level) was obtained through the Curtin University Human Ethics Research Committee.

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<sup>187</sup> Smith 1999:146

During this project, I have observed Aboriginal, and more specifically, Badimia beliefs, customs, and protocols in a respectful way. Following my master's degree from the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Indigenous Research and Development, I have come to understand the considerable and justifiable abhorrence indigenous people from around the world have towards social research in its various forms. For Indigenous Australians, research is known as one of the significant ways imperialism and colonialism is maintained and enacted. Through scientific practices, disciplines, and paradigms, colonialism secured the imperialistic system of control which secured economic markets and capital investments in this country.<sup>188</sup>

Up until the 1970s, imperialism, through what was loosely called 'research', considered indigenous peoples, throughout the world, as not humans or as semi-humans, thus justifying policies to exterminate or domesticate us as peoples. Indigenous people have struggled against such forces and their institutions since invasion. This resistance has persisted today with the struggle for humanity framed within the discourse of humanism and an appeal to human rights. Such assertions have meant the creation of a new discourse against the forces that sought to destroy our histories, our landscapes, our social relations, and our ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting with the world. This new discourse is about how Aboriginal people fight to have returned that which was stolen from them, including lands, the remains of ancestors, artworks, sacred objects, languages, and other cultural property.

I follow Aboriginal Terms of Reference as outlined by Osbourne and Dick<sup>189</sup> and by Kickett<sup>190</sup>. This is a process of acknowledging and working within Aboriginal community processes for interacting that is guided by the boundaries of Aboriginal societies, cultures, locations and experiences held by participants and myself as Aboriginal people. I ensured that all participants in this research were aware of the risks and benefits of the project and that they at any time had the right to withdraw from the research when/if they deemed it appropriate. Prior to conducting informal, semi-structured interviews, I obtained written and verbal consent from each participant involved. I also sought participants' input and approval of any written materials pertaining to the representation of them personally. Furthermore, I was fully aware that what was at stake in the ethics of auto-ethnography is the representation of Self and of the Other, which is always at once a mimetic and a political act. It is important to gain informed consent

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<sup>188</sup> Smith 1999:43

<sup>189</sup> Osbourne and Dick 1994

<sup>190</sup> Kickett (1999)

from participants that includes provisions of release clauses. Any participant could withdraw from the research project without giving me a reason. However, there was the option of participants using a pseudonym or to blank out any material from their own transcripts prior to the final drafting of the research document. I ensured that all participants were treated with the utmost ethical integrity as I understand that the closer the relationship between the writer (namely myself) and the subject, that there was a greater dependency and vulnerability of the subject. This meant that the ethical stakes were higher and the need for ethical scrutiny was urgent.

As the subjects on this research are direct living and deceased blood relatives, there are several areas that need to be considered and enacted to ensure the absence or minimising of harm to these people or their descendants. It was anticipated that ethical issues would centre on sensitivity in representation of personal identities and/or Aboriginalities by my living family members. Equally, there was also careful consideration in not exposing family and cultural secrets in this research without appropriate consent. I also presented balanced representations of Edward Oliver and other non-Aboriginal ancestors in the research. Likewise, despite there being a considered emphasis upon the female members of my family, I also ensured that male family members had fair representations and acknowledgement within the research product.

On a personal level, upon encouragement of my mother, my twin sister and I openly began to identify as Aboriginal when we were 14 years old. Although our grandmother challenged our claim to Aboriginality as something to be ashamed of, the introduction of financial assistance from the government to attend high school included a range of positive support in the form of cultural counselling was made available to us. Every month, all Aboriginal girls at our Catholic girl's school were asked to leave their classrooms to meet together with a prominent member of the Aboriginal community in the school's board room. It was here that I learnt to feel pride for my identity, to strengthen my Badimia language and to make life goals that reflected my desire to become free from fear of being different. Following my year 12 graduation, I started an Aboriginal bridging course (year 11 & 12 equivalency) at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT)<sup>191</sup> where I learned about Aboriginal culture and the impact of previous racist policies that had directly affected my family. The information I learnt from this course enabled me to slowly change the attitudes of my family about their identity and to begin my

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<sup>191</sup> WAIT eventually became Curtin University of Technology

career choices of working in the Noongar community of Perth.

The experience of the Aboriginal bridging course profoundly affected me because the course gave me the passion to increase my knowledge of my history and culture as a dispossessed Indigenous woman. I learnt and strengthened my own Aboriginality for the first time. I was the first person in my family who felt finally free to be Aboriginal and this message I passed onto my sister, my mother, my aunties and my grandmother (a stolen generation's survivor). My life since this course has changed as an Aboriginal woman and my family are stronger for it. My history is no longer whispered but celebrated. By talking about what happened within our family, many questions were raised between us. There was pain in the telling of these stories but this pain was endured so that healing could begin.

I believe my research is informed and enriched by this life experience. This means that I am not only an insider in terms of my Aboriginality, but also in terms of a shared family experience. Objectivity and detachment from participants are not the key methodological assumptions driving this research but rather subjectivity with close affiliation built on shared experiences as Indigenous women and family members.

## **Methods used**

There are specific methods employed in this research that were chosen to best give an adequate level of data for analysis. These areas of importance include the context of methods used, the sample process, the methods employed for analysis and the sources of data accessed and obtained.

The context of methods used in this research simply related to the existing dynamics of my maternal family. As particular participants were mature and, in the case of my grandmother, a senior, the methods employed needed to incorporate considerations for mobility and location whereby I needed to employ techniques that were non-intrusive and accommodating to individual needs. In the case of my grandmother, it was not questioned that I should conduct the interview with her at her home with an audio recorder. For my aunt Barbara, my sister and mother, it best suited them to be interviewed at a quiet location at their home or at a meeting room in a public library.

The sample process was based on Badimia family dynamics according to seniority of generations. My key participants were my grandmother (senior matriarch of my family), my mother and Aunt Barbara (second tier elder women under my grandmother), my twin sister and myself (third tier women of lower standing in our matriarchy). External to this discussion were two non-Indigenous women who were chosen for their secondary accounts of the lives of my great-grandmother and grandmother. The women in my family were chosen to represent three generations of women who were able to give an account of the lives of their foremothers and women ancestors. This sampling decision was so as to document how their stories of women ancestors had changed over time and to discuss the reality of each women's lives as lived in the contemporary as well.

More importantly, the selection of these women was made not because they were descendants of Melbin but were the people who created Julie and me as women today. We all could draw from Melbin and others in this process of telling stories together. This temporary depth was not just a genealogical spread. It was about antecedents through time rather than everyone who had a link to her. Indeed, these were the stories I was told and ethnographic logic was created about why and how I was told these stories.

The decision to choose the order I discussed these women's lives was my own. This was about a temporary dimension moving through memory and meaning-making to Melbin and back again. This was not opportunistic and was not a happenstance method. The way I chose these women and the way I understood this research was connected at a deep level. I deliberately chose the two non-Indigenous women to enrich the context of how my ancestor women's lives were lived. The story gets thinner and thinner as I go back in time to Melbin. This is the same logic as to why I used historical documents and official records to give more depth to the women whose stories were fragile and sporadic. Each woman reflected values that were congruent with others as family members but their individual experiences of life came to the fore in retelling their own life stories in relationship to their previous generations of women. In essence, I chose the participants in this thesis to document the genesis of my sister Julie and myself as the youngest generation of women in our family. This was a journey to go back to our antecedents.

## How research was done (field work)

### Narratives

The narratives gathered for this research entailed ten interviews in total. As my grandmother was the senior woman in my family of a considerable age (89 at the time of interviewing), I conducted four interviews with her each containing new questions or clarifications of earlier knowledge given. My grandmother held a vast amount of personal and cultural knowledge about our family. More importantly, due to her age, my grandmother would easily tire when being interviewed so consideration had to be given for her fatigue. I conducted two interviews with my aunt Barbara with the second being a follow-up interview. The second interview was justified due to time constraints and scheduling issues. My aunt at the time lived in Northampton, which meant that I had to interview her at a time when she visited Perth. The schedule of the interviews had to fit in with her brief visit to the city. My mother, sister, Mrs Mary Hirst, and Mrs Marilyn Elkington all had a single interview each. I was fortunate to have additional oral history material for my sister and mother as they had taken part in a City of Gosnells oral history project. Mrs Hirst and Mrs Elkington, as secondary sources, only needed a specific interview about material relating to historical experiences.

Narratives basically involve representation where people tell their story, construct past events and actions to claim identities and build an image of their own lives. I was particularly interested in what women in my family emphasised, what they left out of their stories, their stance as victims or protagonists, and the relationship their story established between each woman (the storyteller) and myself (the audience). I also paid close attention to the context in which they placed themselves.

According to Reissman<sup>192</sup>, narrative analysis focuses investigation on the story itself and not the speaker as the object of investigation. This methodological approach examines how people make order of the flow of experience in a story so as to make sense of events and actions in their lives. This form of research looks at how the story is told by an individual, analyses how their story is put together, the cultural and linguistic resources they draw upon, and how their story persuades a listener of its authenticity. This makes us ask, why was the story told *this* way? Reissman states that when a narrative is examined, human agency and imagination determine what gets included and excluded. Such examination shows how events are plotted

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<sup>192</sup> Reissman (1993)

and what they are supposed to mean. They are representations and should not be seen as information storage. Narratives “...structure perceptual experience, organise memory”<sup>193</sup> so as to build the events of life. Narrators make storylines from disorganised experience manufacturing “...a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly. In so doing, we move well beyond nature into the intensely human realm of value.”<sup>194</sup> For this reason, narratives must be protected and not fractured by investigators into apparently digestible pieces. Researchers must respect the way participants construct meaning with them and to analyse how this is accomplished.

Narratology is a useful form of methodology because it has a close variant existing within Indigenous community life, which I have used within my research, namely being our strong oral culture. By telling a ‘yarn’ an essential meaning-making structure is enacted within Aboriginal communities. These ‘yarns’ or stories are when culture speaks for itself through an individual’s story. Narratology compels investigators to respect participants’ ways of constructing meaning and making analysis reflects how it is accomplished. It is the participant’s subjectivity, which is firmly placed in time, location and personal experience, and this is what makes the process valuable. Narratives are also valuable in terms of the talking and listening. This dialogue where the participants and the interviewer produce a body of knowledge together in a sense is important, especially if they are from similar backgrounds and share similar experiences.

Auto-ethnography provides a further dimension on this, namely that Indigenous people, women, and other less-powerful groups are able to speak through stories because it is in the telling that we make cultural meaning and truth. Reissman<sup>195</sup> observes that even though people can exaggerate or be confused they still reveal truths in their stories. These truths reveal the past and are understood as interpretations. As Semali and Kincheloe<sup>196</sup> note, the power issues within the academy regarding Indigenous knowledges have been one of tyranny, especially in the late twentieth century. This power struggle involves who is allowed to proclaim truth and to create the procedures by which truth is to be established. The power lies with those who determine what knowledge is of most worth and should be included. In this context, the notion of indigenous knowledge as a “subjugated knowledge” asserts the centrality of power.

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<sup>193</sup> Reissman (1993:2)

<sup>194</sup> Cronon 1992:1349

<sup>195</sup> Reissman 1993:22

<sup>196</sup> Semali & Kincheloe 1999:32

*Indigenous knowledge has been produced by peoples facing diseases brought by European cultures, attempts at genocide, cultural assimilation, land appropriation, required emigration, and education as a colonial tool. Because of such oppressive process, indigenous knowledge has, not surprisingly, often been hidden from history. It is our desire to become researchers of such repressed knowledge, to search out what Western and Western-influences academics have previously neglected, to recover materials that may often work to change our consciousness in profound ways. When Western epistemologies are viewed in light of indigenous perspectives, Westerns ways of seeing, Western education cannot remain the same.<sup>197</sup>*

‘Yarns’ can shake us from complacent positioning as independent from the story and make us aware of our place in the world. Such narratives are situated in particular interactions that are also social, cultural, and institutional discourses brought to bear when we interpret them. Western power-wielders are not good at listening to information that does not seem to contribute to hegemony. This is about their ability to win the consent of the subjugated to their governance. Knowledge that emerges from and serves the purposes of the subjugated is often erased by making it appear dangerous and pathological to other citizens. These ‘dangerous memories’ involve reconstructing the process through which the consciousness of various groups and individuals has come to be constructed. Indeed, identity is constructed when submerged memories are aroused – in other words, confrontation with dangerous memory changes our perceptions of the forces that shape us, which in turn moves us to redefine our worldviews, our ways of seeing. The oppressive forces that shape us have formed the identities of both the powerful and the exploited. Without an analysis of this process we will never understand why Aboriginal people remain oppressed; we will be blind to the tacit ideological forces that construct Aboriginal perceptions of their contemporary life in Australia and the impact such perceptions have on their life experiences. Such blindness restricts our view of our own and other people’s perception of their place in history, in the web of reality. When history is erased and de-contextualised, the policy makers, academics, and other non-Aboriginal people are rendered vulnerable to the myths employed to perpetuate social domination. Many Aboriginal people in Australia and indigenous peoples throughout the world acknowledge that we must record our stories in our own ways for our own purposes.<sup>198</sup> Even

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<sup>197</sup> Semali & Kincheloe 1999:32

<sup>198</sup> Minh-ha 1989, Scott & Brown 2005, Smith 1999

when the wider population do not validate such records as authentic in their eyes, merely because it is not considered empirical and scientifically validated data, it should not detract from such accounts as significant and powerful.

What might constitute appropriate criteria for a social science methodology is whether a story is convincing and coherent. It is also a matter of an individual's actions, voice and biography that must be the starting point of analysis and not the end. I believe that the narrative method can be married with other methods of analysis, so I went further into the broader field of indigenous research methodologies and auto-ethnography to provide me with greater grounding to develop a strong methodology.

### **The process**

Once ethical considerations were cleared by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Curtin University, my first point of contact to commence data collection was my maternal aunt, Barbara Dowling. As my guide, she provided me with the direction to begin contacting older members of my family and to plan my first field trip to Coodingnow, the most significant area of Western Australia to my family. In our discussion, I described the participant group I was considering and my aunt suggested I phone particular relatives to discuss my project, which I did. Unfortunately, I was met with significant resistance and several declined to be interviewed. The reason for this was that my twin sister had made a flippant remark in an ABC documentary about two women ancestors and this was taken out of context by these relatives. Despite my being a separate individual from my twin, I was unable to obtain interviews with the envisioned number of ten interviews in my immediate family. Undeterred, I completed an interview with my aunt Barbara and completed four separate, smaller interview sessions with my then 89-year-old grandmother, Molly Dowling (nee Latham). I also interviewed my own mother, Veronica Dowling, as well as my twin sister, Julie Dowling.

In early 2007, I began to organise a field trip to Coodingnow, the place where it was known that Melbin was buried. I rang Ninghan station, the property neighbouring Coordingnow and spoke with Mrs Leah and Mr Don Bell. Leah was a member of the Clinch family (a significant Badimia family) who I was aware had originally owned Coodingnow station and had left there in 1960. I was given the contact details for the current owners of Coodingnow, which was now amalgamated with another, larger sheep station called Pullagaroo. I was then contacted by Beverley Slater, who was representing the entire Clinch family, who had formed an

organisation called Coodingnow Incorporated.

“Bev” then became my key contact for the Clinch family, explaining to me their continuing difficulties in purchasing Coodingnow from the current owners. Coodingnow Inc. had been unsuccessful on two previous submissions to the Indigenous Land Corporation requesting funding to purchase the property. The main reasoning behind this was the Clinch family’s lack of skills to manage a sheep property when their primary concern was to protect areas sacred to their family and to perpetuate cultural knowledge as Badimia people. I became aware that Coodingnow Inc. would need my assistance in resubmitting a proposal or to at least reassess their options in purchasing the land. It was in this initial stage that I was introduced to a woman elder in the Clinch family whom I interviewed about the close connection between my own maternal family and the Clinch family. This elder withdrew her involvement two years into my research project. Much was revealed from this interview and prompted me to expand my study group to members of the Clinch family to discuss their knowledge about the Coodingnow site, Badimia women’s culture and their own story of colonisation. I felt that this more contextualising study was extremely helpful to me and my own reflections on the women’s stories in my maternal family.

Along with my aunt Barbara, Bev became a significant informant to the research project at this stage. Although refusing to be interviewed, Bev conveyed to me her desire for the enquiry to provide a broader view of Badimia women and culture. I assured her that I would be working with my own family and the Clinch family to accurately reflect our family’s views, and in a constructive way, participants would suggest strategies for action in protecting culture and our stories as women. More importantly, I explained that I would be practising Aboriginal terms of reference to ensure that the research was appropriately organised. Both Barbara and Bev looked forward to the outcome of the study and said that it would provide very valuable information for all Badimia people in our mutual families and said that it would assist in developing strategies for the future goals of protecting culture, identity, and lore. In a sense, this negotiation was encouraging because I could proceed with their support in the research process.

In April 2007, my sister, my small son, my aunt Barbara, and I met with Bev and two of her elders, Mr Owen Clinch and Ms Elva Clinch at Ninghan station. Bev and her two elders then took us to Coodingnow where we were shown significant creation sites to her family as well

as the burial site. It was dominated by the grave of the two matriarchs Galina and Uwanda as built by the pastoralist Gus Clinch, their common law husband. Surrounding the graves were many unmarked sites, one of which was assumed by us all as being that of Melbin, my great-great-grandmother. That evening, as we shared a meal in our shearer's quarters at Ninghan station, our stories were compared to their stories. However, both elders, Owen and Elva, refused to take part in my research project and did not want to be interviewed. The following day, Leah Bell (the owner of Ninghan station) brought out her old photographs of Coodingnow and Ninghan. Our subsequent discussion together provided more details about the life of Coodingnow during Melbin's time. It was here that I got my first photograph of my great-grandmother's brother, Sam Winmar, who worked at Ninghan station his entire life before passing away in Mount Magnet in 1960. Later that day, following the references made by Alex Palmer's<sup>199</sup> book about the town of Paynes Find, we were able to travel to Wydgee Station, which was originally settled by the Oliver brothers (my great-great-grandfather was Edward Oliver) in the 1870s. Wydgee is the traditional country of Melbin and it was here we discovered that its outstation was known as Gullewa Springs, which was the birthplace of my great-grandmother, Mary Oliver. This discovery revealed that Melbin must have worked for the Oliver brothers in these early days and that Edward Oliver had fathered several children by Badimia women during the time he was farming there. Prior to the Oliver's farm, this region was un-colonised semi-desert. The brothers had come to this place with their new wudjula wives from Dongara droving sheep. Edward Oliver was fathering children to Melbin and other Badimia women while he was married to his wudjula wife, Amy Amelia Booth. It was from Wydgee that Melbin was taken to England in the early 1880s.

It was also on this same field trip that we travelled to Perenjori where I was able to interview an elderly wudjula woman named Mary Hirst, who had known my great-grandmother, Mary Latham (nee Oliver) when she was alive in the 1950s and had also employed my grandmother, Molly Dowling, as a nanny. Our interview was very revealing about the race relations during the times when my women family members lived in Coorow, a small town in the region. Her views provided a backdrop to how the different cultural groups engaged with each other and the way women of difference negotiated their relationships together those many years ago.

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<sup>199</sup> Alex Palmer 1989

Throughout this process of interviewing and researching data with members of my family, the Clinch family, and with wudjula women, I continued to conduct smaller separate interviews with my grandmother, Molly Dowling (nee Latham). Each interview revealed more detail and different perspectives of the lives of Melbin, Mary Latham and my grandmother, Molly. It also enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the times in which they lived, the ways they negotiated their culture and identity, and also how each woman held their families together. My grandmother, over time, became very comfortable discussing her life and ancestors with me and expressed her strong encouragement to me as a young woman trying to understand my family. However, each interview was considerably impeded by her speech difficulties following a stroke several years prior. I had to modify the interviewing process so that she could provide minimal answers to questions and to point at numbers on a sheet of paper rather than to verbalise them. Data collection consisted of intensive, semi-structured reflexive interviews with each participant lasting from one hour to three hours each. These interviews were recorded for transcription. My grandmother and my aunt Barbara did not feel intimidated by the process and I could not have asked for a smoother interview process with them. The interview with my grandmother was held in her home and the pace of these was dictated by her frailty as an elder. Her interviews did not go for longer than one hour at a time. The interview with my aunt Barbara was held at the Gosnells Library and took four hours. My subsequent interviews with my mother and my twin sister, Julie, were conducted at our shared house in Maddington. I was able to complete their interviews in one sitting each. My final interview was with Merrilyn Elkington at the business office of my half-sister, who happened to be married to Merrilyn's son. Mrs Elkington provided a contextual scope for the life of my grandmother when living at St Joseph's orphanage.

The interview questions posed to each family participant varied according to the interviewee's relationship with their ancestors or living relatives. Some of the main questions asked of my family participants included the following under broad categories of each woman ancestor or living relative. The questions below, for example, are some of those specifically targeted to my sister, Julie, and reflect the relationships she had at the time of being interviewed:

*Melbin*

- What is the story of Melbin as told to you while you were growing up?
- What does this story mean to you?
- Are there any parts of her story that you have wondered about?
- Are there silences about Melbin's life?

*Mary Latham (nee Oliver) – ‘Granny’*

- What impression did the stories told to you of Granny tell you about her?
- Who was she in your eyes?
- Can you recount a story about Granny that sticks in your mind as being significant?
- Even though the stories are second hand, i.e. through the eyes of Mum or Nana as a child, what did those stories reveal to you about Granny?
- In your view, was Granny living as a Badimia woman?

*Molly Dowling (nee Latham) – ‘Nana’*

- What sort of influence has she had upon you and our family?
- How would you describe Nana to future generations of women in our family?
- Would you say that Nana got along with white people generally?
- Was she treated differently by white people when we were growing up?
- Did she teach us anything about Badimia culture or about identity?

I transcribed all interviews and sent individual participants their own interview. Each participant returned their own transcripts with minimal changes and their authority for allowing my supervisor to read them. This would enable my supervisor to assist me as a student. I then went about writing an analysis of each interview, and decided to present them as individual chapters as seen in this thesis. I followed the general analysis process as outlined by Reissman<sup>200</sup> concerning narratives. I then adapted several key focus areas to reflect the themes raised by participants as our discussions progressed. These overall areas included:

- Reflections on the lives of women ancestors
- Manifestations of identity
- Working life
- Marriage and children
- Owning the story.

The incorporation of historical documents was a crucial stage of this analysis. Once interviews were analysed, I researched various texts to accompany the historical events to contextualise their lives. These texts included newspaper articles, biographical accounts of the non-Aboriginal men in these women’s lives (namely my great-grandfather, Francis Latham, and my great-great-grandfather, Edward Oliver), and government welfare documents pertaining to my grandmother, Molly Dowling (nee Latham). This process was not to reproduce a social

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<sup>200</sup> Reissman 1993

science theory per se but as an accompaniment so as to understand how my family created knowledge and passed it on. Many of these texts provided rich material for colonial discourse because the knowledge they contained could be juxtaposed against the stories of women as transmitted knowledge. This process was about how stories held my family together. It was not traditional historical research. It is about the past and its connection to the present, but more interest should be placed on the stories themselves. It is about how these stories are told and maintained. It is about memory rather than what is recorded in written records. If I gave primacy to such records then the story of Melbin would not exist at all except for a few phrases in a native welfare data card. The written texts obtained were selected for their relevance to the stories of the women themselves. They were integrated into the stories of women in my family to provide additional depth to the oral stories passed down and were discussed as non-Indigenous accounts as secondary sources.

I repeated interviews, particularly with my grandmother, because I gained more information in the research process. Researchers find that clarification happens within repeat interviews. This repetitiveness happened with my grandmother, in particular, because I needed to gain trust, enable her to gather her thoughts, enrich previously stated material, and to provide more insight. My grandmother revealed much more by the time the last interview was recorded. Researching back through time, I was confronted with new information and evidence. This meant that I had to find different ways of contextualising it. I was learning more for my grandmother and ensuring that she could then take control of the research too as she desired it as much as me. This is how we create stories together as indigenous peoples. We let people shape knowledge with us as researchers and storytellers. It is a narrative tradition where all things are connected. We are raised to be aware of connections not just across time but across landscape and spirituality.

Once each individual chapter was written up about each woman's story, they were then sent to the relevant participant for their input and editorial advice. In the case of Melbin and Granny, every living family participant provided input and feedback about these chapters. Each participant reviewed entire chapters relating material to their own input and again, there were several changes made by participants at this stage. I then compiled discussion sections in the analysis of all participants' content and the themes they discussed. This analysis directly addressed the research objectives.

## Data analysis

Narrative analysis is a group of methods for interpreting texts that are in a story form. When analysing people's stories of life and experience, the investigator is focused on understanding how the storyteller organises and sequences events and language to communicate meaning to an audience (the investigator). Those applying narrative analysis specifically interrogate how and why a story is constructed and for what aim. This form of analysis is focused on what 'cultural resources' the story is drawing upon and what the story is trying to accomplish. More importantly how does a story reveal gaps and inconsistencies which hint at alternative or 'counter narratives'<sup>201</sup>

Narrative analysis is influenced by other forms of textual analysis (e.g. discourse, semiotics, and hermeneutics); however, narratology draws from many traditions. An effective narrative analysis works to create an opportunity for the reader to look beyond the surface of what is being said by the storyteller. We can make conceptual inferences together about a social process including the construction of an identity group which makes it highly suitable to the focus of this study. Narrative inquiry as a field had realist, postmodern, and constructionist influences where scholars and practitioners still disagree on the ways to conduct these analyses. However, it does have a lot to contribute in many disciplines when investigation takes place to interrogate how knowledge is constructed through the everyday communication of stories.

The journey of writing down oral stories for Badimia women in my family was about being truthful to myself as a Badimia woman but also to be truthful to my family. The real challenge rested in seeing if we built our history together, how this process can be achieved by other families so they could do it their own way. My simplest explanation is that narrative theory should be used alongside Aboriginal research methodologies. The integrity of this combination rests in retelling stories for another purpose. What made more sense to us as a family was to let our culture "speak itself" through individual stories. These stories made it possible to examine racial oppression, gender inequality and other practices of power. We found that individual speakers would take these themes for granted but as narrators, we spoke together in terms that seemed natural but we could then analyse stories on how culturally and historically contingent these terms are.

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<sup>201</sup> Reissman 2008:11

In my close analysis of the transcribed interviews, I became increasingly aware that indeed, as asserted by Reissman, each storyteller always asserted the terms in which their stories were to be interpreted. This was seen in the styles of storytelling they used. My grandmother, Mollie was particularly unique in how she told stories. As Reissman says, “something said in a whisper, after a long pause, has a different import than the same words said loudly, without a pause.”<sup>202</sup> Each transcript involved a close analysis of how each tellers used their pitch, repetition, emphasis, use elongated vowels, silences and other styles to emphasis what is important in the story. The most powerful element was listening to family participants convey emotion. That is why transcribing should never miss features of speech as they hold important information. This is supported by other analysts such as Keyton<sup>203</sup> who summarised how narrators are “explaining, entertaining, informing, defending, complaining, confirming, or challenging what happened and why.”<sup>204</sup> Of particular relevance to the methodological focus of this study, Keyton stated “*collecting and analysing stories, or narratives, can provide a method for uncovering how seemingly isolated events are actually part of a larger interaction environment, identifying the explanations and justifications people give for their past actions, and determining how participants make sense of particular communication events.*”<sup>205</sup>

When studying narratives, Reissman<sup>206</sup> accurately notes that we must always be sceptical about a “*correspondence theory of truth*”. She goes further by stating that how we use language can be comprehended as strongly causal of lived reality and not as simply a “*technical device for establishing meaning*”. The methodological approach I used examined the participant’s story and analyses how it is put together, the linguistic and cultural resources drawn upon and how it persuades a listener of its authenticity. When I spoke with family members, the yarns we had together were analysed not simply as content but at the forms of telling about experience. I asked at key points, why was the story told *that way*?

There is no *one* method of narrative analysis as it has to do with how protagonists interpret things and is well suited to a study of subjectivity and identity because narratives do not speak for themselves or provide direct access to their times, places or cultures being spoken within stories. These are stories are about “*believability, not certitude, for enlargement of*

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<sup>202</sup> Reissman 1993:19

<sup>203</sup> Keyton 2011

<sup>204</sup> Keyton 2011:297

<sup>205</sup> Keyton 2011:297

<sup>206</sup> Reissman 1993:4

*understanding rather than control*<sup>207</sup>. It is for this reason that the task of identifying narrative segments and their representation could not be delegated. The unpacking of each story or account was essential to interpretation of each woman's story. By transcribing at this level, the way the story is told – provides clues about meaning.

Furthermore, it was not just the material obtained from archives that proved to be a valuable contribution to women's stories but the journey of finding these documents also proved to be highly valued. Many documents only surfaced after my grandmother was awarded damage money by the WA State government's Redress program whereby her native welfare and other documents were sent to her personally. This large body of documents had never been viewed by her or her family. These documents did not just give account of her life alone but also that of her husband and her children and grandchildren including myself. With these written accounts from an official perspective, we were able to see first-hand the hardship and discrimination women in my family had experienced. We viewed these documents in context to the stories already told by women in my family. The value of this consolidation of knowledge is immeasurable to our family and to me personally. The transformation of my female family members since these stories have been retold and researched has given us a passion for these stories. We are all compelled to dispel the silences surrounding the existence of Aboriginal resistance and settler violence in our family's traditional country. It has prompted us into further investigation into what actually occurred for our women ancestors and this journey is envisioned to continue into the future.

The insights from these various sources of data, including transcriptions, shaped the difficult decision about how to represent oral discourse as a written text. There was close and repeated listenings of interviews. This was coupled with methodic transcribing which often led to insights that in turn shaped how we chose to represent an interview narrative into text. We valued, as women in one family, how each personal narrative was rooted in time, place and personal experience. We valued how stories told in interviews were not clearly bounded and located within complex interpretive processes. As women together, we knew that decisions being made to create each chapter, underscored how deeply the listener and narrator were part of the text being written. That is why the story metaphor emphasises that we create order, construct texts in particular contexts.

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<sup>207</sup> Reissman 1993:22

When analysing each transcript, I focused on the structure of the narrative: how was it organised? Why did the storyteller develop her story *this* way in conversation with me, *this* listener? Reissman<sup>208</sup> assisted me to scaffold the analysis from the inside, from “*the meanings encoded in the form of the talk and expand outwards, identifying, for example, underlying propositions that make the talk sensible, including what is taken for granted by speaker and listener.*” Interpretation cannot be avoided as narratives are situated in this project in particular as interactions that include cultural, social and institutional discourses which were used to interpret meaning in them. The study focused on power and whose voice is represented. It was my task to expose readers to see issues families face together as interpretive issues about a shared history. Auto-ethnography enabled me to represent my voice in the final product too.

However, the issue of de-contextualisation in telling of narratives was important to the representation of the knowledge we created together. We agreed that using large sections of dialogue between us as speaker and listener were important to show the ‘dance’ between us as family members. These quotations of dialogue emphasise how we speak together and not simply having each chapter of the women constructed as interaction with me (writer) and the evidence. The symmetry of theory, methods and presentation of evidence in this thesis came about in a non-linear fashion. Each chapter was constructed in stages with consultation with participants. We learnt by doing each chapter identifying what was missing and whether we felt was missing in the story of each woman. We discussed what aspect needed to be foregrounded above others but the emphasis was always on continuity, of strength being passed on and demonstrating our resilience as family members. There was a lot of digression in certain chapters because my family members did not want to adhere to topics of discussion but for their own belief in their importance. When writing these chapters together, we all became aware of how yarning styles varied and participants did not always stay on topic. It is through this process of writing down our oral history that de-contextualisation became noticeable.

De-contextualisation in this research was seen as a process of detaching the story from the conditions that constrained its original meanings and actions. This means the story is looked at in isolation whereby each chapter was crafted as a history to help us all to strengthen our own knowledge in writing. Each of us spoke about complex and troubling events that we knew

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<sup>208</sup> Reissman 1993:61

should vary in interpretation because the past is a selective reconstruction. People exclude experiences that undermine the current identities they are trying to claim. The emphasis was on coherence. Collectively, we wanted to show that our interpretation of these women's stories was more than ad hoc. Coherence had to be as 'thick' as possible so that it could be related globally, locally and thematically.

We all knew that members of our family group had endured severe trauma. Survivors experience significant gaps in memory and stories change as missing pieces are recovered. In a word, traditional notions of reliability simply did not apply to our narratives and validity has to be radically reframed. The issue is validation through the trustworthiness of our interpretations in each chapter. The semantics of trustworthiness versus truth must be considered here as the latter assumes objective reality, whereas trustworthiness is about the processes of the social world. This was our emphasis in decontextualizing our oral stories into the written medium.

Yarning theory applied when conducting research interviews conveyed knowledge in a non-linear and unordered representation. The story and the plot of telling a story gave elbow room and acknowledged how people are not cyphers for family history. Each woman defined what they thought was important. Yarning is cyclical in nature and does not have to be sculptured like western stories do. There are people who are storytellers in western traditions but in Aboriginal families, the storyteller does not follow neat, compartmentalised patterns. Where the teller wants to go and how they make connections should not have to be simply as a tale to be told. Many stories are lessons of how knowledge is conveyed to the listener. As a 'junior' member of my family, as a grand-daughter, a niece or daughter, I had to create a different dynamic as a researcher. As a junior, I was conscious of my participants help me achieve my learning goals. As storytellers, my family members would often test me for receptiveness to the knowledge being shared. Assumptions were made that we were getting everything all at once until I explained that the fidelity of the story was still up to me. However, the gift given by senior family members was in a sense my opportunity to tell the story in a different context. It was my freedom to choose what to emphasise.

Indigenous women's writing emphasises the importance of the practice of listening, and recognising and respecting the political and cultural imperatives and agendas of Indigenous people. Their discussions are about cross-racial, anti-racist and social justice issues. Added to

this are 'mixed-race' autobiographies also problematising the issues of colour. As 'mixed-race' becomes a more speakable reality, the ability to take positions within the black community that claim a colour other than black is now widespread. Writers of mixed-race are marking out a territory in which colour is defined by neither black nor white. It is a life as lived.

By having a member of a family conduct 'yarns' in a semi-structured way, the focus is no longer of creating an artificial environment for creating knowledge. Instead, the lack of a research hierarchy means that both interviewer and interviewee form a team of sorts searching through various subject matters for meaning. The journey I took with female members of my family was motivated by making our knowledge stronger together. When asked about these processes, participants stated that they felt stronger as knowledge keepers because they were able to speak about their own life stories in relation to the women who went before them. Their stories became connected to other women's stories within the family and when official records were eventually uncovered, these documents were analysed and discussed as a family of knowledge keepers. It added to family cohesion and gave greater depth to our discussions together, especially when talking about oppression and survival as Badimia people.

I have used a thematic analysis of stories from my family members to prompt the reader to think beyond the superficial of a story and to provide a broad commentary of the lives of Badimia women since invasion. As an ethnographic exercise, I worked to emphasise the social forces at work in these personal narratives. I moved back and forth between individual biographies of the women and broader institutional/social frames. I do not leave myself out of the construction of this ethnography but assist in the construction of them which means that these are, in a sense, a group narrative.

Narratives embody the relationships being spoken. Conversations with relatives and others during this thesis were centred by a topic and this topic was already set prior to data collection. It was not a random selection but was centred on the importance of the women ancestors being spoken about and their stories. These topics also shaped what we were trying to do in making meaning together. This process was not perfect; however, it provides a reason why our narratives flowed the way they did and why it was important to present them in this way. This meant that the analysis of these narratives was more than about what people said but the flow of dialogue between me as the researcher and my family members as respondents. Reissman states that,

*“...traditional approaches to qualitative analysis often fracture these texts in the service of interpretation and generalization by taking bits and pieces, snippets of a response edited out of context. They eliminate the sequential and structural features that characterise narrative accounts”<sup>209</sup>.*

This is why I have asserted the use of sometimes lengthy sections of text dialogue between interviewer and interviewee. That is why a focus of analysis in this thesis has been on the interplay that occurs between significant women and myself as members of one family. This family connection of both knowledge and experience shaped what we were doing in these exchanges. As the research progressed, the subject matter (i.e. specific women ancestors) shaped the very people who took part and would have more to add to each story.

Deliberate decisions were made to start the flow of chapters presented with my sister and myself. It was a place to draw the reader to and to also follow us on our journey to understand who these ancestor women were so as to make a new story created together as living Badimia women. Therefore, the analysis of these narratives was more than just about creating a clearer understanding of each woman’s story. It was about answering questions about our women ancestors and to create a clearer understanding of who we are as Badimia women today as an exercise in the affirmation of our identity.

Elliot<sup>210</sup> highlights there are different approaches to this kind of analysis. Rather than apply a categorical analysis, I have favoured a holistic approach to comprehend the different elements of a story in context of other elements of each narrative. I worked to retain the candour of the entire story. In the close reading of each transcript, I used Elliot’s method of four close readings of interview transcripts:

1. Reading for the plot and how I respond to the story being told
2. Reading for the “active ‘I’” telling the story
3. Reading for the interviewee’s relationships within our family and close friends
4. Reading for the broader social, cultural and political context of the interviewee.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Reissman 1993:3

<sup>210</sup> Elliot 2005:38

<sup>211</sup> Elliot 2005:158

Then, in analysis of each transcript, I would consistently ask the question framework described by Hollway and Jefferson<sup>212</sup> whereby as a reflexive researcher, I asked:

- What do I notice in each account?
- Why do I notice what I notice?
- How can I interpret what I noticed?

How can I know that my interpretation is the right one? Van Manaan<sup>213</sup> provides a rare detailed analysis of different approaches to writing about writing up narrative analysis. There are three kinds of accounts: the confessional tale, the realist tale and the impressionist tale. The realist tale, as presented by the researcher when writing up her analysis, tends to focus on the concrete details of daily life and aims to display the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the culture agents they study. The confessional tale is an attempt to demystify the process of fieldwork by documenting the practical elements of the research process. The final approach at writing up analysis is the impressionist. The impressionist tale when writing aims not to push the researcher's interpretation forward but to present the reader with a vibrant account that invites the reader to participate in the interpretive process. These tales are always unfinished with the researcher as one of the key protagonists alongside the subjects of the research. This kind of writer shows the audience the relationship between the actors in the story. I assert that when writing up my analysis of these stories into chapters, I took the impressionist tale stance so that the reader could interpret the stories for themselves.

## **The role of the researcher**

*Some of us, variously estranged from our Indigenous heritage, want to respectfully consolidate that past in ways that generate momentum into a positive future. That's a continuing struggle, and about more than survival.*<sup>214</sup>

My positioning in this research is as a conduit, being able to relate to family members as both a member of the family and as a fellow woman. Each interview included my own self-disclosure with each participant so that discussing our family became more true to lived experience. A common feature of this auto-ethnography project was the first-person account

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<sup>212</sup> Hollway and Jefferson 2000 in Elliot 2005:159

<sup>213</sup> Van Manaan in Elliot 2005:163

<sup>214</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:207

that was intently and unambiguously subjective. In this research, my Self-narrative had multiple voices. There was the Self then, the Self now recalling then, and the Self now interpreting the Self then from the present perspective. The very act of telling one's story created the opportunity to correct myself. It was important to make an effort to split between myself as narrator and myself as protagonist.

As the narrator, I attempted to stand apart from, and comment on, the actions of myself as the protagonist. Although the two are the same person, this created reflexivity allowed me as the speaker to be moral, even when as the protagonist in the narration I may not necessarily have been so. The most potent aspect of using auto-ethnography was the characteristic of being culturally displaced or in a situation of exile from my ancestral country. This phenomenon of displacement was linked to issues such as rapid socio-cultural change, globalisation and transculturation, as well as the extremes of violence occurring on the frontier. This breaks down dualisms of identity and the insider/outside status. Whether I wrote as the anthropologist studying my own kind, the Indigenous woman telling my own story, or the Indigenous anthropologist, as a figure, I was not completely 'at home'. Auto-ethnography is about developing the ability to write in a way that transcends everyday conceptions of selfhood and social life. It involves a rewriting of the self and the social at the same time. In narrative, the self is treated as the other with moral evaluation of the self. Such life story describes who we are and how we got that way. They also serve to negotiate membership in one or more cultures.

In telling our stories, we are also re-affirming and re-educating ourselves, our experiences and our lives and creating new stories. By working together on creating our mutual family story, women in my family and I made a genuine account of our women ancestors. The foundation of this account was created from discussing issues such as identity, colonisation, oral stories and the tangible written documents or photographs about Melbin and Mary Latham (nee Oliver). I was cautious when devising questions for the individual in-depth interviews because I wanted the women to set the pathways for this research. My own self-disclosure with participants along with their own revelations showed how half-known aspects of ourselves could be accessed as we reached intuitively into some part of ourselves that was outside of our notice. In telling our stories together, we used auto-ethnography to bring about healing. In writing stories of traumatic experiences it has produced physiological changes that contribute to gains in health and feelings of wellbeing.

As a researcher, the research experience has affirmed my own understandings of identity formation, Aboriginality and the impact of colonisation. Our yarns together provided me with new understandings of how transgenerational trauma from overt racism has shaped our own identity. Identity is not a given which a person learns just by living, but presupposes a self-aware reflexive process. It was in negotiating between these resistance strategies and the exercise of power that differing notions of identity were formed. It has revealed that success in shaping both your own and other people's identity is crucially dependent on whether you have a preferential right of interpretation in society and the access to the proper channels of discourse. Fundamentally, this means the power to define what is right and what is wrong.

I am also conscious of the words of Lester Rigney<sup>215</sup>, who notes that we, as indigenous researchers, must start to find epistemologies that assist with “*constructing, re-discovering and re-affirming our own knowledge and culture*”.<sup>216</sup> This plays strongly into this research as I recognise that we must make our own place in anti-colonial cultural critique. I also particularly believe that Indigenous Australian writers, such as Langton<sup>217</sup>, Rigney<sup>218</sup> and others, directly challenge the way research should be framed. Nothing is un-exposed to its influences and, when considering my research topic, there are multiple layers of influence that need to be peeled back to expose power relations and the way Indigenous people (and women) are still being racialised so that power can be exerted over them. Furthermore, such colonial approaches still exist and still affect Indigenous peoples' lives.

The only difficulties or confusion I experienced in my role as a researcher centred on my own self-doubt as a writer and my hopes to accurately reflect the experiences of women in my family. In particular, I was concerned about women elders' abilities to relate to me as a younger, fair-skinned woman who identifies as Aboriginal. I felt that being a 'white face asking questions' would influence my ability to establish a rapport with women. More importantly, I worried that senior women in my family would feel intimidated or mistrustful of me in the interview process. Instead, this was overcome by explaining the research focus in a straightforward way. For example, an older relative phoned me prior to starting my research project strongly stating that I was to 'pass everything by her' before I wrote anything up about my grandmother. Having a strong understanding of community protocols, I was able to explain

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<sup>215</sup> Rigney 1997:7

<sup>216</sup> Rigney 1997:7

<sup>217</sup> Langton 1993

<sup>218</sup> Rigney 1997

to this family member who I was, where I was coming from and that I was not going to endanger my own grandmother in the research. This initial discussion lasted a few minutes and I did not have to speak with this elder again about interviewing my grandmother because they understood where I was placed in my family and community.

In summary, my methodological approach to research was influenced predominantly by the use of narratives and Indigenist research methods as outlined by Rigney<sup>219</sup>, Smith<sup>220</sup>, Mihesuah<sup>221</sup> and others. This approach provided the guidance for carrying out interviews and family/community interaction. I was also influenced by auto-ethnographic research methods as detailed by several authors including Reed-Denehay<sup>222</sup>, Motzafi-Haller<sup>223</sup>, Russell<sup>224</sup>, and Pratt<sup>225</sup>. Guided by ethical guidelines including the consideration for the potential influence of a history of negative research experiences, I wanted these research methods to guide me in obtaining the voice of Aboriginal women in my family as they engaged with their life histories and the histories of their women ancestors. In all, I believe these approaches were well received by women participants who generously contributed their time and dedication to this project.

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<sup>219</sup> Rigney 1997

<sup>220</sup> Smith 1999

<sup>221</sup> Mihesuah 1998

<sup>222</sup> Reed-Denehay 1997

<sup>223</sup> Motzafi-Haller 1997

<sup>224</sup> Russell 1999,

<sup>225</sup> Pratt 1992

## **Chapter Four**

### **“Jules & Me” My twin sister, Julie Dowling, and Me**

#### **My sister’s story is my story too:**

My sister’s story has always been intertwined with my own life story. The reason for this often intense connection is because I was born with my identical twin sister on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1969. I was born at 2.40pm and six minutes later Julie Ann Dowling came into the world after a difficult birth. Whereas I was a very quick breach birth, Julie was caught under my mother’s rib cage requiring the doctors to break two of them to quicken her coming. Our mother, who unbeknownst to the doctors, was allergic to anaesthetic resulted in her heart stopping twice while she was unconscious. Shortly after our birth, we were transferred to the special intensive care unit at King Edward Memorial hospital for Women in Subiaco where we stayed for a day under observation. We were then moved to the general baby’s room. We met our mother for the first time as soon as she awoke and we were placed upon her knees. We stayed in the hospital for another two weeks as Mum contracted severe mastitis in her breasts.

While still very weak and tired from our birth, Mum took us straight to our grandmother's crowded state housing fibro home. We were the first grandchildren and my earliest memories were of many people holding us, caring for us and laughter. Our three aunts slept in the same small bedroom as our Mum and us. Every night, my mother would barricade the bedroom door against our uncle Robert who suffered from schizophrenia terrorising the household whenever he came home from Graylands Mental hospital. When Uncle Robert wasn't around, the house was light and happy. Whenever he came home from the hospital, there was always a sense of dread, haste and tension. In any case, the first two years of our lives as we lived with our grandparents and extended family was one of security and warmth. We were very poor but our mother and grandparents made sure that we always had basic food and clean clothes.

Mum knew that the situation could not last forever as Uncle Robert was becoming more violent and abusive to the adults in my grandparents' house. After a particularly frightening incident where my mother was punched in the face, our mother bundled us up and we went to live in a women's refuge for a week. When we returned to Nana's house, fearing that he would turn on my sister and I, our Mum made an emotional plea to the welfare department to find emergency housing for us three. Upon our Mum's request, we were moved far away from our family to Armadale to a state housing flat where other single mothers were housed. One of my first powerful memories was sitting in the back of a removal truck, as the driver didn't want us sitting in the cabin, watching as our family wave us goodbye. My sister and I cried and cried. We were not quite three years old but we knew that we were running away from something scary and that our Mum was trying to protect us.

Our new flat was clean and empty. We had not furniture except a cot and a bed but we felt like it was a new beginning for our little family. Eventually we were given more furniture by the charity Saint Vincent De Paul. Along with the furniture came more frequent visits from our aunts who sought refuge from their brother. Eventually, Auntie Liz, who was a teenager, came to live with us for long periods of time.

We would travel by train and bus to visit our grandparents every weekend but if our uncle Robert was at the house then we would have to turn around and come right back to Armadale. Eventually, my Nana made sure that he was not present when we came to visit. We would stay the weekend meaning that we could have home-grown vegetables, chicken and eggs. Our grandfather was a very gentle soul who tended his garden and despite his own mental illness,

he was the calming influence upon us all. We loved him dearly especially when he made us a cubby house of corrugate tin that anyone could have slept in comfortably. We remember these weekends at Nana and Nanpop's house as always being filled with people. Cousins, great-aunts, great-uncles, and friends would visit from up north or down south of the state. Julie and I would be introduced to them all and learnt very quickly our place in our extended Badimia family structure as well as our Noongar in-laws.

The kitchen was the main place where the older women held court. We were expected to behave respectfully of our family position and that we were obliged to respect our women elders. I often think of these times as being incredibly rich in texture because my Grandparents house was considered an important meeting place for my extended Badimia family when they visited Perth. As Minh-ha<sup>226</sup> observes, any woman writer or creative person for that matter, should work at un-learning the dominant language of the coloniser by re-establishing contact with her foremothers. This period of time was formative for Julie and me as it showed how a living tradition never congealed into a fixed form. Life itself kept on nurturing life in our family and through our experiences at Nana's house, from a young age, we grew to understand that the past continued to provide the link for the present and the future.

The yarns that were told by the old people to each other, while Julie and I sat quietly under the kitchen table, left no doubt that Australia's history was a racist history built on assumptions of racial superiority. When our cousins from up north reminded us that we were indeed Badimia, just like them, despite being fair-skinned, the stories spoken by our kin was about the legacy of Aboriginal voices being silenced for many generations. This incubator meant that Julie and I wanted to respectfully consolidate that past in ways that generated momentum into a positive future for us and our family. We knew that this situation was a continuing struggle and was about more than survival as Badimia people. It was about how the coloniser had emptied spaces of Aboriginal people in order to fill them with their own people and with their own representations of us. In this atmosphere, Julie and I began to formulate a shared cultural project. We felt from this early age that we had far more freedom to express our Badimia identity and thus could use our voices to express our own version of history and to celebrate difference; something that our recent ancestors were prevented from doing.

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<sup>226</sup> Minh-ha (1989:148)

Another level of influence came from the location of our grandparents' house. It was directly near the Perth domestic airport. The Tonkin Highway did not exist yet. Instead there were extensive freshwater swamps and bushland directly opposite to the house. It was here that Julie, our cousins, local Noongar children, low-income wudjula children and I would play. Always every second day, especially on holidays, our Nana would take us 'bush-hunting' with her, except these trips came with a twist. One section of the bush was a local dump and it had a major impact upon Julie and I. We would all go searching through the rubbish finding old books, bibles, health manuals, toys and the like. Julie spoke of this time to Art & Australia journal<sup>227</sup> stating, "*...that's how I learned about art. It was a form gathering information on the fringe, learning from it, knowing you have intelligence but not being able to access it. We'd translate the prejudice we felt by finding Wudjula information that was dumped, learn from it and use it. Mum calls it the 'keyhole effect' where you have a piece of ephemera and it takes you into a realm that was from our community first.*" I can still remember the old wicker pram that Nana pushed along as she used it to carry firewood she would gather and various things we found from the dump. She'd always wear one of her floral aprons which creates a fond memory for me. After a while, we would stop and boil a billy for some tea as Nana taught us about bush-tucker and plants. When the season was good, my uncle John would get marron or freshwater crayfish from the swamps. They were big and black and juicy. He'd also go trapping for rabbits with Nanpop. We thought the bush was rich with food and wished that we didn't have to return to the isolation of Armadale every Sunday afternoon or when holidays ended.

### **"The sky is the limit!"**

One of the expressions used by our Mum when it came to our lives when growing up was that "the sky is the limit" for us as young girls and that doing well at education was the key to that freedom. Education became the primary concern for our Mum when it concerned Julie and me. We started school in Armadale at Saint Francis Xavier primary school on the charity of the church when we turned six. It was a difficult year because our beloved Nanpop died of a heart attack at Nana's house devastating our entire family. Julie and I keenly felt his loss and our schooling became affected. Despite knowing how to read and write when we started school, Julie and I did not progress. We were put into special classes to catch up. However, it was our lack of food at home that became a real problem for us. Every day we would walk from our

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<sup>227</sup> Snell 2003:3

flat up the hill to the school for three kilometres and then another three kilometres back home when school finished for the day. Each day, Mum would come to collect us from school.

On one of these walks to school, I remember a car clipped my mother on the hand creating a huge gash and there was a lot of blood. It was a hit and run. The man who did it momentarily stopped his car to see what he had done but casually drove off even though my mother was obviously injured. An old man nearby drove us to school that day while Mum went to hospital. I spoke with Mum about life in Armadale when we were going to school and she described it as being very tough.

CD: What about when you were a single mum? Were you treated differently because you were a single mum?

RD: No.

CD: You were treated with fairness?

RD: It was okay.

CD: Or was it still the early days?

RD: It was okay. There wasn't many [single mothers].<sup>228</sup>

However, when the City of Gosnells Aboriginal Oral History project interviewed my sister Julie, she gave a different impression of our childhood years especially concerning the scrutiny of the welfare department and the Catholic Church.

I remember lots of nuns poking around and welfare giving Mum hard interviews and Mum was sort of in tears after some of them and feeling like she had to be super perfect and all that sort of thing was like being looked at; was really a major sort of feeling I had growing up.<sup>229</sup>

When we were eight, upon the assistance from our auntie Liz who was now a trainee hospital nurse, our little family began to rent a private house not far from Nana's house in Belmont. We went to another Catholic school named Notre Dame where the nuns were particular fond of corporal punishment. Julie's educational level began to become better than mine but shortly after we started at the school we had to move house again to be closer to the school. This was when our Uncle John decided to stay with us and our auntie Liz began to become involved with

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<sup>228</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 2008:27

<sup>229</sup> Jebb 2008:6

a Scottish man who would eventually become her husband. Julie and I did not like him from the moment we met him. He was a lot older than our auntie and did not respect women<sup>230</sup>. It wasn't long after Auntie Liz moved out that Mum decided that we needed to return to State housing again because she could not find any work. When we were ten years old, we moved to Karawara which was a large low income suburb across from WAIT (Western Australian Institute of Technology). This was a rough place to live with crime, violence and flourishing drug scene existing all around us. We were not the only single parent households in this area by any means. There were hundreds of households just like us. Looking back now, I view it to being similar to an American ghetto or slum.

Julie and I started school at Saint Pius the tenth primary school in Manning. We once again attended on the charity of the church. Each day, the school bus would come into Karawara to pick up us underprivileged kids to attend this school. It was also the same bus that picked families up to go to church on Sunday. I remember going with Mum to church on this bus and experiencing the subtle disapproval of us as a family by the elderly church going women who sat on it. My mother was a 'fallen woman' after all. We eventually stopped going to church because of the scrutiny we felt from the nuns and the other church goers on the bus and in the church community.

The principal of the school was Sister Finbar, a strong Irish nun who immediately felt that we should have our educational level re-examined and finally noticed that we needed specialised assistance. At ten years old, Julie and I still could not read so we were placed into the school library away from the other students and individually taught by an elderly nun named Sister Elizabeth who grew to love us. Soon we began to excel and we were returned to our classroom. Julie and I began to become athletic and became exceptionally good at softball. We stayed at Saint Pius and to our surprise we both gained scholarships to Saint Joachim's Ladies College in Victoria Park. This was the same high school that our aunties once attended. Once again we were granted exemption from school fees because of our low income.

As an all-girls school, Saint Joachim's was considered one of the more modest private Catholic high schools. Most who attended were children of migrants and/or low to medium income families. On the first day of school, Julie and I were immediately singled out by a couple of

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<sup>230</sup> He sexually abused Julie and I on several occasions while we babysat our young cousin. Julie and I never spoke of it to our mother until we were adults and my Auntie had divorced him. We received extensive counseling as a family.

Noongar girls for 'a good flogging'. Because we could not afford the new blue colored school uniforms, so we had to wear our threadbare bright green and brown uniforms from Saint Pius. You could not have been more conspicuous than us two. After what seemed like an eternity, we eventually got our new blue uniforms and with relief, blended in. We also began to receive assistance from Abstudy. Ironically the woman we spoke with at the Department of Education about going on Abstudy was the mother of the two Noongar girls who wanted to bash us. They eventually became good friends with us upon realizing that we were Aboriginal too.<sup>231</sup>

Starting school in the early 1980s, it became quickly obvious that Julie was an exceptionally talented art student. Singled out as one of the school's best, Julie became the favourite of Mrs Emery, the elderly Anglo-Indian art teacher who had previously taught our aunts. Mrs Emery would ascribe projects to Julie that centred on important historical figures such as Ghandi or Martin Luther King. Other students were asked to paint flower studies or landscapes. Julie and I became known as creative souls. We were relied upon to produce school drama productions together for the entire school. Julie would often be the Director and I would be the property and stage manager. We would put on plays concerning themes ranging from a space age future or special break dancing displays because our large group of friends were into the early movements of hip-hop. Our productions were always welcomed by staff and students. We felt a certain level of acceptance and popularity.

However, this all changed once we completed year 10. The charity of the Church stopped and to complete our TEE, our Mum was expected to pay full school fees for the first time. Mum was on a modest single parent pension and we struggled through our studies despite the financial hardship we lived with. Along with a grueling study regime, Julie and I tried to earn money outside and during school hours. Julie would sell little sketches to other students. I had a busy baby-sitting business and I also sold hand-made dolls to my fellow students. This money went straight into paying for food because most of Mum's pension went onto school fees. Even with the welcome addition of Abstudy, the fees became an all-consuming issue for our little household. We also became acutely aware that attitudes towards us by faculty staff and even students began to change. Several expressed to us their opinion that we were not Aboriginal and that being poor was a reason for stigmatism. Our popularity and confidence began to wane and Julie would often find refuge in her artwork. She gained a school medal and a mention in

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<sup>231</sup> One of these girls had remained a good friend of my sister and I. She eventually becoming one of the first Noongar lawyers.

the year 12 school leaving year book for her artistic talent. Mum and I were very proud of her and marveled at the work she was producing which would range from fun portraits of Michael J. Fox to reproductions of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco on canvas. We established a small gallery in our home for her works.

Fortunately for us, the Department of Education and Training sponsored an innovative scheme to expose all Aboriginal girls at Saint Joachim's to mentors from the Perth Noongar community. One such person was Robert Eggington, who figured strongly in our lives ever since we met him as a mentor. Robert encouraged us to study hard but to also consider applying for the Aboriginal Bridging course at WAIT should our scores be too low for university entry. Upon explaining about the course as an option to my form teacher, I was promptly told that I was not Aboriginal and that such a course did not exist. It was the first time that I knew that not every teacher was someone to look up to. Julie and I realised that once we left school, we needed to make a new life for ourselves away from such ignorance and to strengthen our sense of identity.

### **Visual expressions emerge**

Julie and I grew up knowing that our Mum and our Nana were gifted artists. However they were held back because they were Aboriginal and they could not fulfill their true potential as intelligent women. I think that Julie felt a tremendous sense of obligation to make the most of her talent. When talking about Mrs Emery to Art in Australia<sup>232</sup>, Julie states that she was told to "*use my art as a tool of identity.*" She began to research Albert Namatjira and how he identified his country in his painting and how he used the colonialist tools of art, its methods and media, to celebrate his country. More importantly she recognised that his land in his work inspired generations after him to continue to paint their country in the same way. Her understandings of Aboriginal contemporary art began to become her passion so that by the time she graduated from high school with too low scores for university entry, Julie knew that the best place to study art technique was Claremont School of Art. Along with Mum, Julie took her folio to the interview and was immediately accepted by the school. I, on the other hand, decided to attend the Aboriginal Bridging Course at what is now renamed Curtin University of Technology. For the first time, Julie and I went our separate ways. I went onto the 'Bridging course' learning many things about what it was to be Aboriginal while Julie began to learn

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<sup>232</sup> Snell 2003:4

about a variety of skills for art practice. The knowledge I was gaining at university was immediately passed over to Mum and Julie. Julie's work began to explore her identity and the story of our ancestors. She quickly became one of the highest scoring students at the school. When I yarned with Julie about this time, she explained that her work became more focused than what was expressed in high school.

JD: I think it's a bit like rock art. Someone explained that to me once and I agree with it.

CD: Which means what?

JD: When I was younger, I sort of was about that as well...especially at Claremont.

CD: It's not just about the art itself but how you interpret it...even if it is words on a page?

JD: You are creating something for other people to see. It is the beginning of a visual language. You begin to develop your work from the dialogue or yarns around you in your family. From here I thought that I needed to be idealistic or to make my artworks to reflect my view of peace between people as being achievable. Most of all I began to realise that my artwork could function as a collective exercise. The individual could be taken out of the job. That art could again become a ritualized thing rather than something that stepped outside of a family.

CD: Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

JD: Good thing. <sup>233</sup>

Julie really enjoyed Claremont School of Art because she felt that it had a progressive attitude toward its student's art practice. She met a wide range of artists who eventually became long-term colleagues in the industry but also she was able to focus entirely on her art practice. Julie was able to learn diverse art techniques ranging from print-making to ceramics, from sculpture to working with iron. However, it was painting that took her passion. Her painting abilities gained a strong following especially when she sold every piece of her graduation exhibition. Some 27 pieces were snapped up in the first two days after it was opened. By this stage I was well into a three-year traineeship at the Western Australian Aboriginal Media Association as a trainee radio producer/announcer. I was working for the Noongar community at a key

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<sup>233</sup> Carol Dowling interview number two with Julie Dowling 16 July 2009:19

organisation and Julie was exposed to many of the issues and people that I engaged with in my work.

After completing the three-year course at Claremont School of Art, Julie was immediately granted acceptance into the gruelling Bachelor of Fine Art (Painting) degree at Curtin University. The commencing class consisted of approximately 300 students. By the end of the three-year degree there were only 15 students in the painting degree. The students studying painting were considered the most pressured within the faculty of arts curricula. Not only did Julie have to produce enough work for a weekly individual art critique by colleagues and faculty staff, she also had to contend with an ever increasing number of lecturers who felt that she should steer away from her Aboriginality as a focus of her artwork. I remember that Julie resented this extremely because she felt that the ideology of the faculty was too much about minimalism and post-modernism. She also felt that the predominantly male lecturers resented her being a strong Aboriginal woman. Julie was increasingly interested in narrative and figurative artworks especially about our family and the situation of Aboriginal people in Australia. Her weekly critiques became like battle grounds so much so that by the time she had her final major 'crit', Julie and I schemed to make a grand spectacle. It was permitted to invite guests to attend. We invited Robert Eggington and as many physically intimidating, identity-strong Aboriginal men as possible. There were five of these men sitting at the back of the 'crit' that day. I witnessed first-hand how the packed-to-capacity venue passed Julie's work without a single criticism. This was simply unheard of in her previous critiques. The mere physical endorsement by these wonderful men of the Noongar community sent a clear message that Julie's work held significance outside of the university environment.

In 1992, when every single piece of Julie's works in the graduation show sold, the university realised that she was a significant star in the making. One of the major pieces entitled *Blind Justice* depicting a Noongar woman blindfolded holding a spear was sold to Lord and Lady Cruthers. What really impressed our little family was that Julie was the first Aboriginal woman to graduate from the Fine art degree in painting course at Curtin University. She was also the second person in our entire extended family to have graduated from university. The first person was our aunt Liz who graduated from a Nursing degree a few years before. However, Julie and I felt that there was a tremendous amount of work still to be done within our family to begin the journey of healing from oppression especially the trauma from Nana's assimilation at the orphanage.

When talking with Mary Ann Jebb as part of the Gosnells Aboriginal Oral History Project, Julie went into detail about this time at university and the intricacies of cultural alienation and fear that existed in our family at the time.

***How do you think your grandparents would feel about your life today?***

*My Nana... she's very tough on me. She doesn't like me to talk too much but its also about eldership and what's the right thing to talk about but I sort of think there are a lot of things there in society as I was growing up, even right up until the late 80s that I was still being treated differently; I was being treated differently at university. I was the first Aboriginal woman to do fine art painting and I sort of felt it then sort of other people telling me I'm not Aboriginal enough that sort of stuff.*

***What did they want from you do you think?***

*Well (laughs) funny enough they thought that I would be sort of like ghettoising Aboriginal art; It was very strange. I was looking at the connection that indigenous people needed to have and recognition about what we were dealing with. As well as having to be recognised; that's what I really wanted to talk about because it seemed to be the main focus of my family you know? I wanted to know why my family would sort of sit there and worry about land rights as something that might actually pull the family apart. Meaning that in a sense that the government might find out that we were blackfellas that's how scared we were and that was land rights. I mean we were still sort of in shock...you know...post colonial shock after all this hiding and things.<sup>234</sup>*

## **Looking after Nana**

Suddenly, shortly after Julie graduated from Curtin University, our Nana had a severe stroke. Our beloved matriarch was left paralysed on her right side and even though the hospital named her 'Mrs Miracle' because of the speed of her rehabilitation, Julie took it upon herself to put her new artistic career on hold. For an entire year, Julie lived with our grandmother in the little house in Redcliffe where we had learnt to walk helping our grandmother to learn to walk again herself. Julie provided around the clock care to Nana and on weekends, I would travel by taxi to stay allowing Julie to come home to our Mum to relax. I envied Julie during this time because she formed an incredible bond with our Nana and was able to gain insight into her as a woman rather than as our grandmother. Julie also began to paint our Nana's story in bold colorful portraits. She says "*my grandma's very quiet. She doesn't talk much about things but she does talk about how to fit in as a white person because she's assimilated. She's been well and truly conquered. She's been colonized really badly. She was a washer woman for the Church from*

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<sup>234</sup> Jebb 2008:12-13

*the age of eleven (11) until she was about twenty two (22).”<sup>235</sup> My Mum and I strongly believe that the year with Nana helping her to gain independence had a profound effect on Julie’s artworks. Julie has painted Nana more than anyone else in her artistic career. She has said that it is important to make connection with elders because of their relevance to your own story as an Aboriginal person. She says “I talk about my grandmother’s and my mother’s story as if its mine as well. It’s very strange. The women that are in your family actually are stories about your own character that you should retell because it actually talks about pride in yourself and you’ll know that their lives and the best of their lives really reflect on how well you want to be in your life.”<sup>236</sup>*

Once Nana was able to live by herself again, with the assistance of home and community care, Julie was able to begin focusing on her career again. One of the things she became acutely aware of was the need for more Aboriginal cultural education in primary schools. Sponsored by the WA Education Department, Julie was able to make large murals at schools while teaching her unique cultural perspective. What was satisfying was how Julie could reach the next generation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. She became a confident teacher and traveled to nearly all of the primary and high schools in the Perth metropolitan area. Her murals were large, dynamic and colorful, drawing the students into a life where identity was accepted and celebrated. I would sometimes go with Julie to help her and I was constantly amazed at how she could hold the attention of children as entire classes from grade one to senior high school students came to terms with an Aboriginal perspective on life. Often the major hurdles she faced was not so much to lack of knowledge of children but the deep help ignorance of teachers and parents who attended these sessions. Julie often told me that these incidents strengthened her resolve to bring about change through her art. Although many of these murals have now faded and some have been painted over, the knowledge that she passed onto students was invaluable. Many teachers and student still approach Julie to thank her for her teaching them about tolerance.

While strengthening her public speaking skills, Julie also produced the first series of works for sale while she was studying at Perth Central TAFE in the Associate Diploma in Visual Arts Management. In 1995, Julie had her first solo exhibition at the Fremantle Art Centre in a show entitled ‘*Secrets About Being Strong*’ receiving favorable reviews and good attendance. Edith

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<sup>235</sup> Jebb 2008:6

<sup>236</sup> Jebb 2008:14

Cowan University bought a series of small portraits of Nana from this show and it was at the opening of their acquisitions exhibition that I witnessed Julie being approached by Brigitte Braun. Brigitte was new to Perth from Germany and had started a small gallery space in Claremont. She offered to represent Julie and so began over 15 years of a successful professional partnership.

### **A career blooms**

In 1996, with the considered management of Julie's professional career, Brigitte was able to begin placing my sister's paintings into substantial group exhibitions in Darwin, Melbourne and at prominent venues in Perth. By 1997, Julie was being represented internationally by Gabrielle Pizzi Gallery in Melbourne having her work taken to the Art Fair in Cologne in Germany receiving favorable attention. She was made a finalist in the prestigious Portia Geach Memorial Award for women's portraiture. Following an Australia Council Development Grant in the previous year, by 1999, Julie's paintings were being seen in group shows in Germany, South Africa and even further a field in Australia. In 2000, Julie was named the winner of the Mondorla Award for Religious Art and became the overall winner in painting at the 17<sup>th</sup> Telstra national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) Art Award for a painting depicting our Nana and Granny. In the following year, Julie was named a finalist in Australia's top prize for portraiture, the Archibald Prize and with a portrait of Nana was named the People's Choice award at the 18<sup>th</sup> Telstra National ATSI Art Award. In 2002, Julie was again named a finalist in the Archibald Prize with a portrait of historian Henry Reynolds. The portrait had to be painted from life, which meant that Julie and I travelled to Launceston in Tasmania to meet him. Henry became a good friend even though we had admired him for many years for his incredible re-writing of Australian colonial history. As her sister, it was incredible moving to witness my sister being acknowledged for her hard earned position in the Australian art industry. In that same year, Julie was named by Australian Art Collector magazine as Australia's most collectable artist.

Being named 'most collectable' was an incredible honor for any Australian artist. The response to the announcement was incredibly revealing. Many of her colleagues were very proud of her while others believed that Julie was far too young and new to the industry to receive such an accolade. My sister simply took the praise and criticism with humility emphasizing that the message was far more important than herself as the messenger. Julie and I were the focus of two ABC-TV documentaries that went to air bringing to light the story of our family and the

intricacies of our story as sisters. I have always felt unsure about the inclusion of my story making the focus of us being twins took away from Julie's incredible work. Being followed around for three weeks by a film crew was also strange intrusion into our usually private home life as well. However, again this did not prevent Julie was continuing her work and my own pursuit of further studies and now lecturing in Aboriginal Studies at Edith Cowan University.

In many ways it was an incredible time for Julie and my family. Mum, Julie and I finally moved out of our dilapidated state owned house in North Perth. We had lived there for 18 years and the shift into our spacious current home in Maddington was a wonderful development for us. Finally, Julie had her first studio rather than painting from her cramped bedroom. What was even more of an adjustment was that we were no longer struggling to feed ourselves and we finally bought our first car. More importantly, we were able to help our extended family especially our Nana a lot more. We immediately fell into the value of spreading resources around just as they had done for us when we were children struggling on the single parent pension. This concept was often confusing and frustrating for Brigitte but as time developed she grew to understand that this particularly Aboriginal value was important for our family to survive and prosper especially in hard time. If a person succeeded and prospered then you become obliged to spread your wealth throughout the family.

The major difference in our lives centred on Julie's notoriety. With every painting that Julie handed over to Brigitte, our family's stories became public. We soon developed a supporting role with each other as sisters whenever Julie had to appear in public especially at openings or special events concerning her work. Julie preferred and still favours limiting such engagements to a minimum. However, to some degree this merely intensifies the attention she receives when she eventually appears. The regular process is that we'd sit together, while people spoke with Julie in person. I would act as a preliminary interviewer vetting those who waited to speak with her. Most of the time, they would assume I was Julie anyway and start talking to me. Many people were informed and genuinely appreciative of Julie's messages but many were also in need of basic knowledge about Aboriginal perspectives. It was here that my lecturing experience in Aboriginal studies came into use. It was also a case of Julie needing rescuing from certain people who monopolised her energy and I would act to move people along so that Julie could at least enjoy her exhibition with our friends and extended family who came along to witness this world. Julie has always seemed to take the attention and scrutiny in her stride

making these engagements learning experiences so that she could articulate in words the message of her artworks.

Gradually, I noticed that Julie's approaches to each painting became more specific. The concepts used in each work grew out of considering mechanisms of dispossession such as mining, farming or government institutions or just social dynamics. In an article<sup>237</sup>, Julie is quoted by saying *"I try and get it down to a singular. A lot of my paintings have a central motif in them, a colonial tool like coins or guns or a steering wheel. Even in the portraits, you'll find there's some tool of emphasis in it; that's essential. That leads on to the figure itself."* When Julie painted a figure, either alone or within a historical narrative, she purposely uses the dramatised, high Baroque style of realism. Together, Julie and I theorised that when a viewer is confronted with an Indigenous face in her paintings, there is a lot of other things happening. Julie says it best by how *"you're facing your own encounters with Indigenous people, which is if you're a white person. For a black person it's acknowledging history. I never want it to be easy."*<sup>238</sup>

Brigitte supported a rapid series of solo exhibitions for Julie at her gallery named Artspace. It was Brigitte's vision to make Artspace into a gallery that represented purely Western Australian artists both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Brigitte gradually began representing over 30 individual artists of which Julie was considered one of her most significant. With every exhibition, Brigitte insisted that I write the catalogue essay and this has become an ongoing tradition for Julie's shows. I also assisted Julie in writing up the descriptions for each painting so those who acquire them have a definitive account of each work. During this process, Julie and I also began to learn Badimia language and developed a stronger connection with our traditional country in the mid-west of Western Australia.

Each exhibition was an opportunity for Julie to tell a story that flowed through our family. It enabled Julie to also investigate the idea of painting especially portraiture. One such exhibition in 2006 entitled *Widi Boornoo* which means 'Angry Message' in Badimia demonstrated the way that Aboriginal perspectives of a colonial history could be considered. Julie painted and celebrated our historic warriors and resistance fighters in Australia. To Julie portraiture had a long history of recording the gentry, while colonial portraits of Indigenous people were a means

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<sup>237</sup> Snell 2005:2

<sup>238</sup> Snell 2005:3

of recording data on a race that was considered soon to be extinct. This exhibition came from a fateful visit to the South Australian Art Gallery when Julie was beginning her career.

*My grandfather was named after the colonial artist Robert Dowling. He was the artist who painted Truganini and a whole group of Aboriginal Tasmanians together. It was a colonialist tool, a way of saying 'these people are dying, you should smooth the dying pillow'. ...I waltzed into the South Australian Art Gallery one festival day and there was a picture of Robert Dowling's painting. It freaked me out. Ever since then I've been coming to terms with colonial art and how it's regarded as valued history.<sup>239</sup>*

In the catalogue essay for this exhibition, Julie and I formulated the importance of these stories of resistance in the following way...

*We need the freedom to navigate the dynamics, the positioning and the trajectory of resistance because the stories of these warriors have shaped our contemporary Aboriginal consciousness. We reach across the generations, trying to understand what had happened to our people, feeling what we have in common with them and where we differ, so that we can see who we are and see what we might become. Despite our many efforts, we see the dominant cultural majority disregard our oral histories as 'anecdotal evidence' or 'unreliable'. This is the luxury of the coloniser. It is about who can belong in this land and the insecurity they feel in their relationship between themselves and us as Indigenous people.<sup>240</sup>*

When discussing the importance of her exhibitions Julie emphasised the impact of previous generations upon our work together: Julie as the artist in collaboration with me as a writer.

JD: At our age, our generation so far is that we are ground breakers. Things like what our previous generations were doing they were doing it any way they could. They could see that something was going on. The things we were dealing were as big as they were dealing with. But what is different is that we have a place to live in...people are listening and we can actually have a sense of freedom about a lot of things. Now we can see the ceiling with relation to the world and that can sometimes blow your mind.<sup>241</sup>

Julie and I believe that our generation has become more exposed to the struggles of Indigenous peoples throughout the world. That is why recording and acknowledge resistance is one

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<sup>239</sup> Snell 2005:4

<sup>240</sup> Dowling 2006:2

<sup>241</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling number 2, 16 July 2009:10

mechanism for articulating sovereignty. The use of writing and portraiture creates a dynamic where our positioning in Australia as first nations can be respected.

### **A historical context to Julie's life**

Julie's artistic expression is informed by her family, she respects her cultural history, conceptualises where she sits in the broader community as a fair-skinned Aboriginal, and employs the tools of colonisation to reveal the story of her mob to anyone who will listen. She is one of the first women in her family to gain a university degree, an artist well situated in her generation and in touch with her time. She is prepared to reach back into the past to show all Australians a different way to the future. Julie is strongly aware that as Badimia woman, she has an opportunity and to a large extent an obligation to previous and current generations of women in our family to speak about our oppression. This means expressing and explaining what it means to be fair-skinned and how identity is put into visual media namely painting. Something happens when a person as talented as Julie conceptualises her position to an audience.

CD: What does it mean to be a fair-skinned Aboriginal person?

JD: We are a litmus test for race relations.

CD: Can you explain that a bit?

JD: Because you get it from both sides exactly how healthy the relationship is.

CD: Between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people?

JD: Yes that is the basic...the blandest idea I can think of that helps to explain it.

CD: Is it an easy position to be in?

JD: No. Not in Australia.<sup>242</sup>

A fair-skinned urban Koori lawyer, Larissa Behrendt<sup>243</sup> says that this uneasy positioning comes from the stagnant stereotypes of Aboriginal people that focus on the 'traditional' aspects of those Aboriginal people in regional Australia. This 'romanticism' means that the economic and social needs of urban communities are ignored. Urban or 'mixed-race' Aboriginal people have

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<sup>242</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling number 2, 16 July 2009:23-24

<sup>243</sup> Behrendt 2006:8

“*distinct post-invasion experiences*” and have specific socioeconomic problems that need “*special services and targeted policies*” that those in remote regions would not have to deal with. Another fair-skinned writer, Kim Scott<sup>244</sup> along with his auntie Hazel believe that a gap or separation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities is manufactured in such a way so as to promote healing and to help consolidate a heritage. As there had been far too much intervention and interference by the dominant culture, many feel that certain communities need to maintain their power. However, he states that such a division can also maintain the need for cultural brokers whose power is often not challenged or frequently replaced over time. For those who live in urban areas, such as our own family, we face poorer levels of health, shorter life expectancy and higher mortality rates. Many in our family and community reach lower levels of education, experience higher levels of unemployment and an increasing level of overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. These are all dimensions of the distinctive needs and circumstances of Aboriginal people in the Perth city area as is also experienced in other urban communities throughout Australia.<sup>245</sup> Many specific services such as the Aboriginal Medical Service and the Aboriginal Legal Service were established throughout Australia as a response to the racism that many felt they experienced when they try to gain access to mainstream services.

Julie’s images tell a different history and current reality. She says “*We maintain our sense of culture, our sense of place because we’re informed by survivors,*”<sup>246</sup> Experiencing two kinds of prejudice as a fair-skinned Aboriginal woman, there are complexities that come to surface in her art and they act as a way of entering into a dialogue with the truth and coming to terms with it. In her significant analysis of identity code switching, Ahmed<sup>247</sup> states that the encounter with which a person of race experiences is limiting. Most identification by others misses the mark by putting a person into a singular classification. As Ahmed points out these “*relations of power to identification is perpetually assigned and threatened according to their related though distinct regimes of difference.*”<sup>248</sup> Julie and her work may be given a temporary ‘fixed’ identity but is open to argument in the frequent confrontations with family, the law and many other contexts. In Grossman’s<sup>249</sup> discussion regarding Sally Morgan’s bestselling book *My place*, he discusses her Aboriginal heritage as being “*successively submerged and then*

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<sup>244</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:191

<sup>245</sup> Behrendt 2006:9

<sup>246</sup> Snell 2005:4

<sup>247</sup> Ahmed 1997:161

<sup>248</sup> Ahmed 1997:161

<sup>249</sup> Grossman 1998:171-172

*recuperated over several generations within her own family*". The fascination in what Julie paints and how she discusses her identity is always present. Most discussions with people I have experienced or have witnessed Julie undertake, focus on either non-Aboriginal people wanting Julie to justify her positioning because they are adverse to her pride in her Aboriginality or they themselves wish to justify their own potential Aboriginality. Julie has often been placed in a position at her openings or educational forums to aid in people's understanding of identity either their own or that of other Aboriginal people. When I discussed identity with my sister, I wanted to discuss her own unique journey about identifying as Aboriginal. Julie views her identity as protection rather than as something she must justify or validate to those around her including her own family. I began by discussing the time when we sought financial assistance as Aboriginal people when we were attending high school with our mother.

CD: Why was it scary?

JD: Because everyone else around me was saying "no you are not!" at school.

CD: Mainly you felt that it was the people at school around you who were telling you that?

JD: Yes. I felt I was the only person having to identify out of all these people.

CD: Is having a strong sense of identity important to you?

JD: Yes. Yep. It's like armour really.

CD: Armour against what?

JD: Racists.

CD: Is there a lot of racism?

JD: Yep.

In another two solo exhibition about speaking back to racists and the colonial dominant culture, Julie and I collaborated to write while she painted about the ongoing struggle for self-determination. Again in 2003 with "*Yes, Boss...*" and in 2004 with "*Warridar Sovereignty*",

Julie emphasised how her work could assert our unique indigenous rights. In “*Yes, Boss!...*”<sup>250</sup>, she articulates how such an expression describes how Indigenous Australians were once treated unequally and is an expression used sarcastically by Aboriginal people to remind wudjulas that such inequality still exists. If a Noongar or Badimia person uses this phrase against you today, they are letting you know that they will no longer tolerate a life of oppression and that they are reminding non-Aboriginal people of a relationship forged in a shared colonial history as Australians. Many of the works in this exhibition depicted Aboriginal people as domestic servants, midwives or stockmen while others showed contemporary positioning such as prisoners, miners or mother’s waiting for their stolen children. It was a broad conversation on past disempowerment revisiting the present. In *Warridar Sovereignty*<sup>251</sup>, this exhibition was a direct assertion of our family’s specific claims of sovereignty. The warridah is the Badimia word for Wedged-Tail Eagle, a sacred and significant animal to our specific clan. In the catalogue essay, Julie wanted me to pose the question if our dispossession as Aboriginal people in Australian would continue. With the abolishment of ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission), Julie’s exhibition was an assertion that it was illegitimate for the federal government and the courts to impose a definition of Aboriginal sovereignty. As I wrote, “*our self-determination is not an experiment! It is a matter entirely determined according to our system of law and we cannot be given sovereignty just as we cannot be given self-determination. We must claim it, define it and exercise it as Indigenous peoples. If we want to be treated as sovereign nations then we must act like sovereign nations.*”<sup>252</sup> *Warridah Sovereignty* according to Julie was an assertion of Badimia/Aboriginal sovereignty and should be recognised as complementary or of mutual benefit to all Australians.

Julie had another four solo exhibitions. All sold out before the exhibition opened and the venues included the prestigious fortyfivedownstairs gallery space in Melbourne and Brigitte Braun own gallery now relocated to Melbourne in 2005. The subject matter of these exhibitions included works ranging in themes such as unclaimed ethnographic photographs with unknown Aboriginal subjects to historical resistance fighters such her portrait of *Yagan*<sup>253</sup> measuring at an impressive 150cm by 200cm. This painting was purchased by the State Gallery of Western Australia and is on permanent display within the Australian art collection. I recently paid of visit to the painting with my two small sons who ran around giving the security staff much

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<sup>250</sup> Dowling 2003:1

<sup>251</sup> Dowling 2004:2

<sup>252</sup> Dowling 2004

<sup>253</sup> Artplace Gallery website: [www.artplace.com.au/exhibscurrent/](http://www.artplace.com.au/exhibscurrent/)

stress just so that they could see their 'Auntie Jules' painting up close. I was approached by the internal public affairs officer who asked me to meet two prominent collectors of Julie's work who had travelled to Perth to see the work in person. They asked me to discuss Yagan to them and clumsily I spoke about the awe of her painting it before our family describing the story that was given to us by Robert Eggington.

This story spoke about how Yagan, one of Perth's most significant Noongar resistance fighters, appeared at an exhibition spear throwing competition held on what is now the Perth esplanade. With a large price on Yagan's head, the ruling colonial elite devised the competition to improve relations with the local Noongar people. As the story goes, a crowd of Noongars had congregated at the exhibition as did wudjula members of Perth society supervised by their troops. The crowd of Noongars parted and through them walked Yagan along with his little black female dog. As the legend goes, Yagan hit far more targets than anyone who competed on the day. The colonial troops could not arrest him for fear of immediate retribution by the Noongars who outnumbered the wudjulas attending. What is amazing to me as her sister is that this is but merely one of many significant works within these recent exhibitions.

In 2006, Julie was presented with an Honorary Doctorate of Literature by Murdoch University for her contribution to Australian popular culture and society. In her occasional speech to over three thousand members of the audience including the graduands, Julie made the following statement about her work and what she had been driven to present.

*This is not to say that I am haunted by the ghosts of my ancestors rather that I am strengthened by the quest to uncover a repressed history. It is a counter history which prizes open a European linear history. It breaks open a history of dispossession and deprivation and allows hidden stories to emerge. My works are a reminder that the story is unfinished - that although many incidents have been uncovered, the narrative woven into my work comes from the traces of our stories that can never be anything but incomplete. Only echoes and whispers remain because our stories have become entangled in the web of human actions belonging to the stories of others. Our voices are muffled but they are so important to us as Aboriginal people today and to us all. Stories of our survival against oppression and the experiences of displacement from our lands are all embedded in the personal and social memories of our communities in Australia and are within reach of the imagination of all. Here are events with which many in the wider Australian society could empathize and for which they could express sorrow - if they have the courage and maturity.<sup>254</sup>*

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<sup>254</sup> Dowling 2006:6

## Manifestations of identity

Julie and I have been influenced by one of the most prolific periods of Australian women's writing and artistic expression. In particular, there has been a steady increase of Aboriginal women writers, musicians, dancers, and actors expressing their histories of disempowerment. In translation, Aboriginal women express their lives, and those of their families and communities to describe and pass on the essence of the everyday in their very different contexts. In these expressions, they dispel myths about Aboriginal peoples in particular those claiming we are outcasts. Their works tell the truth about racism and sexism. Of particular importance to our generation of Aboriginal women, is the work which discusses the difficulties of recognizing blackness and identity in a racist community.

In Steve Kinnane's book entitled '*Shadowlines*'<sup>255</sup> writes about the strong women in his family namely his grandmother and mother and their survival through oppressive assimilationist eras in urban Perth. Towards the end of his book he describes the views of Helena Clarke, a strong elder from Port Hedland who defied the rules of AO Neville by traveling freely around Australia during the 1940s. She stated that "*if the rules are laid down for you by someone else, you're doomed.*" Helena continued to influence those young women around her especially concerning Native Title legislation requiring her people to justify their continued spiritual cultural practices. Her words hold much resonance to our family's current situation in declaring and repairing our connection to ancestral country called Coodingnow. Helena expressed strongly that no court can decide whether or not she belonged to her country because she knew where she belonged. This 'ol girl' insisted that those anthropologists used by the native title industry to check out the spirits and ghosts that were always following her around and bothering her. She said that these anthropologists could do her a favour and be useful by getting those spirits to go back to their country. Such a belief is particularly important to many Aboriginal families not just our own. Spirits are metaphors for the many stories and memories of injustice that still haunt Badimia and other Aboriginal nations in Australia. That is why identity is such an intense battleground between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people today.

When yarning with one of his women elders, Kim Scott<sup>256</sup> speaks about how many insist that a small amount of so called Noongar blood (or any nation for that matter) is reason enough to make a "*considered public position*". Such a positioning is deliberately designed to highlight

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<sup>255</sup> Kinnane 2003:333

<sup>256</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:207

how unequal Australian society still is and more importantly how this comes from a history of oppression. Julie and I discussed the positioning of being fair-skinned as one of acceptance in the Aboriginal community and that integrity is the key to that articulation of identity.

CD: What are some of the things that you need to consider when dealing with Aboriginal people as a fair skin.

JD: Not much.

CD: Not much?

JD: They accept me more.

CD: They accept you more?

JD: Well they are...they are my mob.

CD: They understand your perspective?

JD: Oh yeah! Hell of a lot more yes.

CD: Do you think that it is important that the story of these women [*our ancestor women*] be told.

JD: I think you are no different than them basically.

CD: So I'm free to interpret their stories as much as my own? Is that right?

JD: Yes and I know that you don't lie. That's it.<sup>257</sup>

In a publication entitled '*A Dialogue on Indigenous Identity: Warts n' all*<sup>258</sup> released through the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University, the editor Darlene Oxenham was able to present the discussion between several Western Australian Aboriginal men and women covering issues of identity in contemporary Australia. Many of those who courageously had their words published were personal colleagues of Julie and I. On the situation of fair-skinned Aboriginal people, Marion Kickett was direct. She says "*I think it's harder for people who have fairer skin because they can walk in and people could be talking about Aboriginal this and Aboriginal that – imagine the feeling – now they can either say, do I own up and say, 'Now hang on a minute I'm Aboriginal' or they can just walk away. I mean it's hard, so if they're willing to identify and come back and say, 'Yes I know I'm Aboriginal...' It's not easy. I mean*

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<sup>257</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling No.2, 16 July 2009:24-25

<sup>258</sup> Oxenham 1999:73

wouldn't it be easier not to [identify]?"<sup>259</sup> Indeed, Julie and I have found ourselves in many situations throughout our lives where we have 'walked into a room' and the non-Aboriginal people present have drawn their discussions towards Aboriginal people in a negative and condescending way. The issue is not whether in these circumstances that Julie and I have the courage to speak up about our identity to those present but to our energy levels. These situations are far too frequent and the ignorance far too entrenched to bring immediate change but in most circumstances, we work to confront and educate. From a young age, Julie and I vowed that whenever we left our house in the morning we would educate at least one non-Aboriginal and one Aboriginal person in our day about our unique position as fair-skinned Aboriginal women. However, what we find confronting is the ignorance by darker-skinned Aboriginal people who believe that such a position is somehow easier for us to shift in and out of our Aboriginality when it seems convenient.

Jean Boladeras writes that this so-called choice is a myth. She asserts that this implies that fair-skinned Aboriginal people such as herself are somehow comfortably able to select their racial preference or have the ability to leave behind any unsavoury or shocking histories without consequences. In her opinion, this is not a choice of racial identity but it is about a "*political, social and economic act that may be carried out for any of a multitude of reasons.*"<sup>260</sup> My long-time friend Jean says that this comes from mainstream Australia's consciousness of those who had a 'touch of the tar-brush' and were envious of Aboriginal people's right to translate levels of Aboriginality. Kim Scott and his elder Hazel Brown<sup>261</sup> also discussed how this difference between a Noongar with white skin and one with black skin as being a legacy of colonialism. They say that people are still treated according to the degree to which you are recognisably 'Aboriginal' and that this still holds currency. Julie and I have had many in our community state that they have had no doubt about our Aboriginality because of the way we speak or our nose shape while others seem to view us as opportunists. However, we still cannot move away from the strength of the stories within our family and the impact it has had upon us emotionally and intellectually.

Julie's art seems to have developed as an extension of our family's oral history. She says "*It's a cultural thing. You know the stories; you carry them with you and pass them on the younger*

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<sup>259</sup> Kickett in Oxenham et al. 1999:73

<sup>260</sup> Boladeras 2008:15

<sup>261</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:19

*generation - if they'll listen. Then you become a part of them.*"<sup>262</sup> These stories always come back to our connection to traditional country. Julie says in an interview with Art and Australia journal that "*Land has an underlying importance and is spoken about with reverence.*" That is why many of Julie's paintings actually have red ochre in them, mixed in with her acrylic paint. She believes that her country bestows spiritual power especially when she paints figures to reveal our humanity as Aboriginal people especially as Badimia people. Julie always keeps a container of red ochre from our country in her studio and makes sure that it is topped up whenever we travel back to Coodingnow for healing time.

While researching for this thesis, I initiated a more extensive connection with Badimia people who were undertaking the Native title process in the Mid-West region of WA. The process has revealed to my family the deep divisions that such legislation has caused through their mounting of a negotiation with the State Government of WA. As dispossessed Badimia people, our family is legally classified in the native title process as 'interested parties'. Julie has painted several works about this dynamic especially the situation of Noongar people being recognised as the traditional owners of the Perth metropolitan area and the subsequent drama when the state government appealed the decision stating that Noongar people could not demonstrate continual cultural connection. Badimia people have tried on three occasions to present their connection report to the state government in the hope that a settlement would be reached preventing it going to a legal trial. The case is now going to trial. Many Badimia elders have passed away since the court case was mounted nine years ago. I witnessed at Native title meetings in the small town of Mount Magnet how those in the Badimia claim group felt that these delays were an attempt to weaken their case and to bring divisions within our nation as they slowly saw their most knowledgeable elders pass away. When yarning with his auntie Hazel, Kim Scott<sup>263</sup> observed that even though Native Title processes in Australia have become another way of dividing people, giving an opportunity to dispute one another's Aboriginal identity while make non-Aboriginal law most important and promoting racism. Scott says that such criticism and conflict must impact upon those who are disconnected from their heritage. Like many in our situation, as dispossessed 'mob', we suffer "*identity confusion and mental health problems.*"

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<sup>262</sup> Snell 2005:3

<sup>263</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:193

This is not to say that what is said is not hurtful and degrading especially more so by our own community. Julie has been told that she has ‘jumped on the gravy train’, ‘crawled out of the woodwork’ and that she is a ‘born-again-blackfella’ or a ‘nine-to-five black’ throughout her rise to notoriety. The worst of these came from Badimia people themselves who classify us as “Bitumen Badimia” in that we only come up from down south via sealed roads to make claims of connection to country. All of these terms have appeared in response to changing legislation that means declaring your Aboriginality may mean gaining access to a range of ‘positive discrimination’ policies and even employment in the Indigenous bureaucracy. However, for Julie and many of us, such representation in the mainstream is a way of supporting other Aboriginal people and working for social justice. More importantly, Julie and I believe that affirming our identity is a powerful act of self-determination and is part of being an ‘activist’.

Many of Julie’s artistic colleagues are well able to provide a challenge to assumptions about traditional Aboriginal art just like Julie’s work does. Even with multi-faceted ethical considerations, this challenge is particularly aimed at non-Aboriginal culture and is not only about it; it is about racism, legal injustices and access to health care. Such work challenges people’s beliefs about Australia’s past in a way that enters the psyche. Julie’s works have been described as ‘conversation pieces’ between races. Many of her Indigenous artist mates have now been recognised by the National Gallery of Australia in their *Culture Warriors* exhibition as a triennial showcasing 30 of Australia’s top Indigenous artists through state galleries in Australia. This exhibition, including five of Julie’s own pieces, and was shown in Washington to high attendance numbers. It was then toured throughout the USA and then onto Europe. In her master’s thesis about Julie and her work, Julie Lim states that “*by virtue of her intelligence, ancestry, sensitivity, education and prodigious talent and energy she [Julie] is uniquely placed to take the lead in such a conversation.*”<sup>264</sup>

In a fundamental way, I believe that Julie’s paintings also destabilise the categories of ‘black woman’ and ‘black women’ as foundational categories. She brings the social relations of gender and race together in the form of autobiography enabling the first steps to be made in establishing, sharing and expressing cultural identities. Julie views such battles over Aboriginality as being persistent for many years to come.

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<sup>264</sup> Lim 2006:33

JD: I feel good because I know a lot more than I did when I was younger. I have a lot more confidence being able to tell people things about my culture and that. I feel really good about that now.

CD: What if people are challenging you about your Aboriginality?

JD: They got a hard fight, yes.<sup>265</sup>

## **Julie and her women ancestors**

The journey for this thesis meant that Julie and I were able to travel back to country for the first time in a meaningful way. We were welcomed back into the story of our traditional country by the Clinch family who had a long association with Coodingnow before they were forced to leave in 1960. The experience of speaking with the ‘Clinch mob’, who are possibly our distant cousins, meant that we could match our stories of country with their own. When being interviewed by the Gosnells Aboriginal Oral history project, Julie went into detail about this profound experience.

### ***Can you tell me something about that visit?***

*All the visuals that were always spoken about were actually real so you could actually touch the grass and walk on the land and all the stories that Mum would say and what Granny would say were there. It's sort of an interesting way of making some kind of journey to country. It's very hard to describe what it's like. It's like culture that was spoken for so long to have a place and its really quite fundamental in lots of ways and what's really spiritual about it...where it was centred. I remember walking onto the big meeting ground which is where everyone used to trade and have ceremonies and get painted up and all that kind of stuff is at Coodingow. It was where every sort of people...you know Wongathas, Noongars, you know everyone used to come there to trade and barter; but not only that they used to come there to do matchmaking. So you know walking on that and seeing all the artefacts there was pretty amazing and you know sort of spearhead shavings and camps, places where people used to sit around. It was really amazing to see that.<sup>266</sup>*

In the process of returning to country, Julie and I took our auntie Barbara and my small son. As we walked upon this earth and came across the graves where Melbin was resting somewhere under the earth in an unidentified grave, the weight of responsibility in that phrase that says “they are gone but I am still here” was intense. All that we had achieved in our lives seemed to culminate in the knowledge we learnt as we walked with our kin over the red earth of our ancestral country. As we weaved through the scrub with our heads down and our arms crossed

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<sup>265</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling Number Two 16 July 2009:1

<sup>266</sup> Mary-Ann Jebb interview with Julie Dowling 24 June 2008:7

behind our backs in respect, the only sound was the wind and the crunch of earth under our feet. We came across a clearing with what looked like two small hand-made wooden corals. These were weather beaten and held together by rusty wire. The graves were for Galina and Yewanda<sup>267</sup>, the wives of Gus Clinch. Galina was our Granny's half-sister and somewhere under one of the many small low placed cluster of granite stones slabs were unmarked graves. One of these unnamed graves was possibly the grave of Melbin, our great great-grandmother. These clusters of stones spread out under scrub or placed together in groupings over a great area. It was an eerie sight for Julie, Auntie Barb and me especially because this place was kept so secret by the Clinch mob. We are pleased to know that they have had this large area of graves registered with the Aboriginal sites section of the Department of Indigenous Affairs. It was at this place that we vowed to have Coodingnow back in the hands of Badimia people.

What is important to consider in this journey for Julie and I is that as individuals our identity is a continual construction-in-process in relation to power. We have never assumed that we have an identity but rather are part of the process and structuring of identification and should be understood in terms of 'becoming' rather than 'being' Badimia. Our connection with our women ancestors comes from a passion to learn the truth behind their amazing stories of survival and strength. The medium for this to occur for Julie is her paintings. Mine is through my writing.

CD: What I am saying is that we could be long gone and the canvas is still there standing on the wall.

JD: Well they only have a life of 500 years.

CD: Whatever...they are still sitting there. Is it the same as a story passed on from generation to generation?

JD: It is a part of it yes. It is a part of an oral history...it comes from something solid like a place or a thing.

CD: Or a basic ingredient that makes it the story.

JD: There is no culture on the planet without a visual manifestation of that society's language or history. Sometimes that is the only thing left of a society...without the language or anything else. It might just be what written on stone or painted. That's all that is left. The oral history in written form is the same but people just don't identify anymore. That's how identity has gone away from place. It comes from shame or

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<sup>267</sup> Also known as Uwanda

failure or authority or autonomy has been taken. It is like a dying culture.

CD: Who do you think has the right to do that painting or recording?

JD: People who have got no other way to say it about what they see. They have the right. The real authority rests with the elders. But if you have community and you feel the wounds in the community then the last resort is for those who are fighting the battle have the right to say it. If you are fighting a battle you can say what is going on. These are the weapons you use...its about what have you got...what have you got? That's what it is like.

The significant of choosing a medium to express what remains of a culture or as a tool for decolonisation cannot be underestimated. Julie's connection with the stories of our women ancestors is manifest into her paintings. These stories challenge assumptions and speak of a shared pain and vision where language seems no longer appropriate. They appropriate the European form and order but function to validate Badimia culture as legitimate and authentic. Julie claims the right for our stories to be told by one of us. These repressed thoughts and memories come to the surface in some cases as feelings of joy bringing back good memories connecting individuals to their communities. These are memories of how knowledge building occurred within these communities for generations. In other cases, these are feelings of sadness, loss, and a yearning to reclaim one's story and identity. These stories are like fuel to a fire within our families.

CD: So what can these oral histories do?

JD: They are part of a journey for those past us...who come after us. That's the way it works. You tell them what is important.

CD: Who should tell a family yarn?

JD: The oldest. Yep, the oldest...the oldest to the oldest to the oldest. That is the purest line of it. Or something like that. That's how it works.

CD: What about people who take on the role of storyteller?

JD: The storyteller?

CD: You just know that they are the storyteller. They are the ones that tell the story or they know a story...that sort of stuff. Is it like that?

JD: No, no, no.<sup>268</sup>

In 2007, Julie celebrated 15 years of professional practice as a visual artist. The University of Melbourne's Ian Potter Museum hosted a retrospective show including over 50 of Julie's works donated by private collections from throughout Australia and internationally. The exhibition's 30-page catalogue had to be published twice and was the first to have ever had done so in the history of the Museum. The opening of the exhibition was attended by over 500 people. Julie, my small son and I attended the opening. It was a profound experience viewing works we had not seen in many years revisiting the important messages they contained and meeting the many people who had been affected by her work. It was an incredibly fulfilling experience to witness Julie being treated with such respect and awe. I can still remember walking into the area that was designated for refreshments. This huge gallery space had well over three hundred people assembled in it all talking amongst themselves. When I walked into the room with my son, it seemed that every face turned towards us. Needless to say, I was unable to get a drink because everyone wanted to talk with me about Julie and her artwork. It was tremendously moving to have so many people know so much about Julie and our family stories so far away from our home.

By this stage in our journey, Julie and I began to learn to speak Badimia language. Even though the Yamatji Language Centre in Geraldton had it classified as an extinct language, we were able to learn using a language list and by discussing it with prominent speakers such as Mr Ollie George and others. Julie and I presented a speech in Badimia at the opening. People who yarned with us after the speech said that it felt like they were able to witness something rare as they had heard language spoken by Kooris but never a language whereby less than 300 people could speak it fluently. In the speech, I spoke in Badimia and Julie gave the English translation.

***Boola woolarha, boola ngwoba kalla boola moolaburn.***

*There was much crying, much blood and many were dead.*

***Ngai'oo wattandee yow annea, yow walganda, yow yailba ootalloo kalla yow o'garain.***

*My people had no dancing, no painting, no plentiful food and no Dreaming.*

***Yailba we-lurdee aathee athee.***

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<sup>268</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling number two 16 July 2009:18

*There were many mixed blood babies.*

*Andharre wonga beearaba abbala*

*Our grandmothers speak of their sorrow to their daughters.*

*Oorongoo abbala moonjee garro yakkara nowamba alla oottheroongoo yanda.*

*Today, daughters go back to look at their country to heal.*

## **What Julie means to me**

It is quite difficult for me to express the tremendous admiration and respect I have for my twin sister Julie. It has become a regular occurrence for me and our Mum to be amazed at her achievements from the time we were small children until the present day. I have always had her presence with me either in spirit or in the physical and yet, our closeness has remained a mystery. We are very close friends with each other that is based on an often harsh honesty but based on unconditional love. Many people have commented on how such an affiliation can happen between siblings but I believe that it comes from the way that our Mum raised us to appreciate what a family is about.

CD: We were raised together as twins, how have you found it to establish your individuality?

JD: I fight you a lot. [laughing] Well I do. To be better...[giggles]

CD: ...to establish your individuality?

JD: No. [giggling more]

CD: It is funny though because people always ask us "so how does it feel to be a twin?"

JD: That is just so dumb. We are two individuals...its just a coincidence that we happen to look the same but even then that just gets into the wash. Someone comes up to us and they say "Gee you look alike" Then we look at each other and say "Yeah Yeah but we are not." I think it is quite warm and funny because it brings me back to when we were little girls and dressed up together to look the same. Its sort of feels comfy.

CD: From a young age you have been able to express yourself through drawing and painting, has this limited you or given you freedom?

JD: Freedom really. I think. I always saw it as a bandaid a lot. If some [difficult situation] was going down I'd always scribble down

something. It felt like a panacea for a lot of [difficulties]. [giggle] But also it's a language and you are learning it. You never stop learning it. It's like what you do really.

In my own perception, Julie's painting has always seemed to be an extension of herself rather than just something that she does to cope with stress or other stimuli. I have seen Julie 'zone out' as she paints where she loses all consciousness of who is in the room or what is happening around her. When she is not painting, Julie is irritable, irrational and unfocused with her family and the other public relations expectations that come with her success. I have worked as her informal assistant for many years organizing her diary, managing her finances and filtering her correspondence. She has had several artist assistants that have found their jobs frustrated because of Julie's inability to delegate responsibility to them rather relying on taking the hard road herself. Most of the time Julie shrugs off the tremendous demand for her work by playing on her computer and extending her knowledge of multi-media art such as the online cyber world known as 'Second Life' where she networks with Indigenous Artists from around Australia and the world.

In 2008, Julie and I presented our first joint multi-media art installation at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art receiving record attendances. The piece showed large projected photographic slide shows of our trip back to Coodingnow and our return back to Noongar country where we live. The images were presented on a continual loop with a 'soundscape' I had recorded and produced including my voice and my son's voice as I taught him Badimia and Noongar language. It also included native bird song and a recording of Didgeridoo playing by Robert Eggington. This work was chosen as one of seven Australian finalists in the Queensland Premier's Award for Multimedia works. Ironically the winner of the award was a young fellow who had created a virtual exhibition on Second Life while he worked in New York. Julie believes that her next movement into art will be either in the virtual work or through film making. She sees herself moving into this direction for the next ten years limiting her works on canvas to very large pieces for public collections.

All of these future works will still centre on her search for broader community recognition of our family's legitimate efforts to reconstruct elements of our sovereignty, our governance structures and systems of law that may have been lost. We wish to remain sovereign peoples. Like many other Aboriginal artists in Australia, a treaty between Aboriginal and non-

Aboriginal Australian is one of the desired outcomes of this effort. It is about recognition of the ongoing dimension of that sovereignty and our desire to be free to build and expand our scope of freedom. Like most Indigenous people throughout the world, our family wishes to determine our own future. The visual arts have become one of only a few ways Indigenous people can truly express our voice against oppression and art such as Julie's becomes a political voice of resistance. In a view that is very similar to our own, Henry Reynolds states there needs to be a revised way of viewing Aboriginal people such as Julie and I especially concerning our assertions of individual nations.

*“By viewing Aborigines and Islanders as either actual or potential nations we can dispense with the concept of race. In doing so we can avoid those constant attempts to relate Aboriginality to racial characteristics, to distinguish between ‘real’ Aborigines and the rest, to talk of people as being ‘half-castes’ or of ‘mixed blood’...It is, after all, politics not pigment that matters if it is nationality we are talking about.”<sup>269</sup>*

When thinking about Julie's career and her life philosophy, it has always been about reconnecting and the ability to connect, not materially and not necessarily physically with her Aboriginality but through ideas and art and feelings. While discussing this quest with Mary Ann Jebb for the Gosnells Aboriginal Oral History project, Julie revealed something about the origin of her views.

*I think while actually growing up I sort of felt quite like an observer of my own family. In a strange kind of way because my grandmother thought that we were fine because we were fair, that we were safe and that we weren't going to be taken away. ...It was a very strange sense of understanding family as something very quite ephemeral and changing and under a lot of stress. So as an adult having an articulate language about what a real family is, is a kind of a yearning that I suppose in lots of ways is similar to lots of people no matter where they are and what sort of cultural background. So I actually like to reflect on what the ideal is in a universal sense about the value of having a family that is strong enough to help other people and can withstand what life gives you and things.<sup>270</sup>*

In my own understanding, Julie's paintings and her life has been about creating an arena for personal, communal and political reconciliation. She uses tools of colonialism to make her art. She accesses words, photographs, documents and social constructs that defined us as ‘the

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<sup>269</sup> Reynolds 1996:180

<sup>270</sup> Jebb 2008:11

other'. As an artist, she is able to initiate a process of conversion or a decolonisation of the history of our people. Over the years, I have worked with Julie to include text within her paintings but these often derogatory words which were once used to debase us are over ridden by the innate dignity of the figures in her works. Even photographic images of unknown women and men which were designated as members of a 'dying race' are used by Julie as proof of our cultural survival.

She challenges non-Aboriginal viewers by using official documents intended to regulate and assimilate or to isolate and decimate or to sanction accepted 'usages' of Aboriginal people and our land. This causes the viewer to reconsider what was once deemed politically correct especially when thinking about the use of Aboriginal land. On another level, Julie also has a form of artistic balancing between design and ability. She mixes symbols of our Aboriginal spiritual beliefs with religious icons from the Christian world while using red ochre blended with modern acrylic making masses of dots, from which appear powerful black faces sculpted in western chiaroscuro. I love Julie's work immensely and I feel very privileged to be able to have some input into this world she has created for herself. We believe in what Kevin Gilbert<sup>271</sup> wrote about every Aboriginal person must be another Aboriginal person's keeper to keep our campfire burning about what the right rules of Aboriginality.

If there was one painting that stood out as my favourite and as the most significant of her career it would be her first portrait of Melbin our great great-grandmother.<sup>272</sup> The most astounding part of this painting is the label tied to Melbin's arm. Without knowing her story, any viewer knows that she is a piece of luggage; she has been dehumanised, or made into the colonial 'Other' to the extent that she must be given a number. Even now that I have tried to research Melbin's movements, this images had such resonance to me because the only ship's manifesto listing Edward Oliver made no mention of Melbin by name. Instead, it is listed that '26 natives' were also being transported with Melbin and her baby daughter, Mary (my great-grandmother) on the return journey to Western Australia.

Julie also uses a mix of Christian and Aboriginal religious symbols to mix things up but there is no doubt by painting a halo around Melbin's head that she is someone that is venerated within our family because of her survival in life even in a life where she had no control. It is also about

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<sup>271</sup> Gilbert 1977:305

<sup>272</sup> See Appendix 3: Portrait of Melbin by Julie Dowling

how our Badimia spirituality was subsumed by a new religious power. Julie uses dark faces around Melbin's body to represent her ancestors and family who she leaves behind her as if the distance makes it difficult for her to remember their features. However, it is Melbin's face that speaks the most to me. She is a sad, frightened young girl dressed in a large Victorian dress about to go on 'the big water'. For Badimia people, the ocean was a place associated with Kanyongoo which translates as 'the land of the dead across the sea' and we believe that Melbin would have had to place much trust with her wudjula master, Edward Oliver to board that ship bound for England.

The dynamic of painting the stories of our women ancestors has often been an intriguing process for me as Julie's sister. Our discussion revealed that such works are about understanding these women's resilience and perseverance so as to inspire and guide us today as women.

JD: ...I always think I am talking about women first. It just so happens that they are Aboriginal. I want to reflect what Aboriginal women are like and what our society is like. Yeah.

CD: So its like a postcard or a reflection of your life as it is.

JD: Sort of ethnography..ish It's like we are making a dialogue about exactly what my life represents in a real kind of bland experimental way to see what exactly can develop in this era. What kind of position I can have. Its an experiment...well not experiment...its research into my reality.

CD: When you hear about the stories of struggle and courage of our women ancestors, about Nana and Mum, what does that mean to how you have lived your life? Other than "get a tough hide".

JD: Yeah [giggle] Yeah that's true. Definitely don't complain. I think it makes you find ways of getting around things quicker. Its like finding ways of resolving things without too much fuss.

One of the most impressive and courageous acts Julie does in her paintings is her use of the gaze or one in which the 'object' and 'subject' share a gaze of equal power. It is my contention that Julie's work 'confronts the viewer' so that he or she will know that the subject is an individual and thus a person in his or her own right. Theorists in this mindset base their thinking on the writings of Mikhail Bahktin, Russian literary theorist. This can be described as the '*theory of the returned gaze*'. To be able to look back means '*you cannot be possessed by the*

*gaze of the other*<sup>273</sup>. This notion incorporates the idea of an engagement of both parties, with the responsibility of the ‘gazers’. Innumerable subjects in Julie’s paintings hold the gaze with such intensity that when viewing them, you as the viewer are drawn in to the subject and its narrative. Julie work has been compared to Rembrandt for her technique; Freda Kahlo for her emotional intensity and to Goya for her socio-political commentary. I believe in a simplistic way that Julie is a storyteller just like generations of women before her. It is just that her stories are painted and they act to prompt yarning and the perpetuation of the story.

Julie has painted portraits of me. She painted a portrait of me sitting on the ground with my feet bare resting my dog, Daisy between my legs was painted on a large canvas. This picture was named a finalist in the Archibald prize with newspaper commentary stating that I looked as if I was hovering as a female representation of Buddha or Circe or an Indian goddess. Much humour came from these comparisons in our household. It was very strange to realise that hundreds of people went to the national touring exhibition passing by this portrait. On another occasion, Julie painted me as part of her dispossession series naming the portrait ‘*Sista Carol*’<sup>274</sup>. The portrait has me wearing a plain black t-shirt against a bright red background in which the dotted texture can just be discerned. Across the top of the image is the sentence ‘*Democracy means majority rules with minority rights*’. Julie said that this was about my own views about democracy in Australia as being under challenge because the national government would rather not recognise Indigenous people’s distinct nations who have never ceded sovereignty. Lim writes in her thesis that this portrait sees me as a “*young, but mature, woman gazing directly at the viewer. Remembering that Carol is Julie’s twin, it is easy to imagine that she is proud of her sister...*”<sup>275</sup> I think that is quite humbling considering I admire my sister very much and what she has achieved in our shared life as twins.

## Summary

The primary concern for Julie’s life right now is how to handle the stress of a very busy career. She practises her profession from our home with a studio on site as well as a place where many significant meetings take place around our kitchen table. It is humorous to think that these types of meetings happen much the same as Nana’s did in her kitchen all those years ago in Redcliffe.

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<sup>273</sup> Rivkin & Ryan 1998:510

<sup>274</sup> Appendix 4: Portrait of Carol Dowling entitled “Sista Carol” Archibald finalist painting 2000

<sup>275</sup> Lim 2006:90

The difference is that those who yarn with us and drink their tea are musicians, writers, political activists, poets, painters, government officials and academics from all over the world.

In her own words, Julie has expressed that her artworks and her career as a public speaker has been about vocalizing the things left unsaid between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia. She says *“my ancestry gives me continuity and I pray for the mother’s in my community who get no sleep. I know that if I don’t see that I am strong then I won’t be. I live my life never to shame or waste everything my foremothers earned in tears for my culture. I urge you all to go back to your roots to find a world without hatred, where ancestral wisdom can pass over mother earth. My mother taught me my culture and to live positive and to learn and not to waste everything my ancestors earned in tears.”*<sup>276</sup>

When I discussed the idea that decolonisation something important that she does with her work she did not seem to believe that what she was doing was about reviving a culture. She seemed to view that these people were special and were doing the ‘big battles’.

JD: The people who decide to do that sort of thing are those who have their head above all the mire. Everyone is holding onto them to do that. There are a lot of people who are just trying to get along with their day to day needs. The ones who go out and write books or research things, go back to country and fight for land rights and things...they are just like rest of our people but they have the know how or their community and family that they can do that for us. The thing about that is knowing the endurance of that person. If you can’t keep doing it...I don’t think you can do it all the time...sometimes you need to stand back and sort of...I’ve done this bit...it doesn’t mean that I am a loser but...

CD: So burn out is real issue?

JD: Yeah. I think that if it’s not burnout, it is a sense of “I know what that is about and I’ve said all I need to say about that now...for my lifetime and then leave it for someone else...”

Julie’s view of what sort of future there is for Aboriginal people in Australia is based on the pursuit of a treaty. A treaty would affirm and protect rights of Aboriginal Australians where the Australian constitution has not yet done so. This ‘unfinished business’ is purely about us,

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<sup>276</sup> Dowling 2006:6

as Aboriginal people, being able to truly make decisions for ourselves. The opportunity exists for a treaty, according to Julie, to be negotiated where the equality of peoples is valued and provides the context for the issues between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people to become resolved. There are many in our community who view the saying of sorry as not being enough and that it is time to say 'sovereignty'. In my view, Julie protects our ways by retelling our survival for future generations through her paintings. Steve Kinnane also write about this phenomenon as a fair skinned Aboriginal person whose grandmother was Mirrawong from the region around Kununura in the Kimberleys. He says that by tracking the histories through his country there is a way opened up where what has been hidden can be revealed through stories of survival. Those spirits who remain silent can be brought to life again by those willing to listen and reinterpret the stories for those wanting to listen.<sup>277</sup>

There is a poem written by J. Martiniello<sup>278</sup> that best explains some of the sentiments felt by many Aboriginal women writers and creative artists such as Julie. This poem exemplifies how I feel about Julie work and its relationship to our women ancestors.

#### Women's Ancestral Hand

i am the pattern of life within the seed  
in the palm of the hand of the Ancestor  
that created my Women's Law  
the tongue that spoke it the song  
that sand it the feet that danced it  
i am the dust danced up from my  
mother's body in the dance i am  
the ochred herstory that painted the journeys  
in the deep earth of remembering  
i am the mind that remembers  
i have no ending time i am  
continuous as the long search i am the shoot  
sprung from the soil after the fire has passed  
i am its spirit  
that has not forgotten its roots

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<sup>277</sup> Kinnane 2003:381

<sup>278</sup> Martiniello 2006:166

## Chapter Five

### **'Melbin: Gami Gami'<sup>279</sup>**

#### **Gurdang (A long time ago)**

One of the most enriching and fulfilling parts of my journey to understand and account for my ancestor women was to build a vision of what it meant to be Badimia both prior to colonisation and to visualise the clash between these two world views – Badimia and colonial England. This chapter is about Melbin, my grandmother's grandmother (great great-grandmother) who walked the sacred earth of Coodingnow, read the stars of the Milky Way, sailed the seas to England, returning to see her people and land changed forever.

In writing about her life and people, I have become closer to her. I have gained a greater understanding of the harmony she surely felt with her land, the wonder and disgust of the white man, and ultimately her reasoning for her rejecting of their ways.

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<sup>279</sup> Gami Gami is Badimia for grandmother's grandmother. (Bundiyarra-Irra Wangga Language Centre 2014)

## **Gamidyu Wiru (Grandmother spirit): Melbin's Legacy and her message to me**

*Seekers of light in the dark hold of Australia's colonial past must overcome a great deal: governor's despatches with more slant than the tower of Pisa, London's great white Secretary of State deciding on a far-away black people of whom he knew nothing, weeders of official documents, tearers-out of tricky pages in diaries and farm daybooks, casualty figures that did not tally, missing witnesses, slothful recording and sheer damned bigotry.<sup>280</sup>*

The most obvious message that has been given to me as a Badimia woman living today is how difficult it has been to acquire direct evidence in written European records of the life of Melbin. It has been frustrating and disheartening to learn how adept offending squatters were at covering their tracks and how little was committed to station daybooks or any kind of records about my great great-grandmother and her children.

Writing, the act of making small marks upon a page is like beginning a journey and in this case, a collective journey, to try and bring together minds and hearts as a way to bring to life and to grow a sense of community. This act of decolonisation is about continuing a heritage that began before colonisation by grafting a growing culture while shaping something new from those roots. There are few places for Badimia or indeed Aboriginal people generally to come to terms with the reality their ancestors lived and how they are missing from the coloniser's archives. For those of us who are alienated from our Aboriginal heritage, we want to respectfully strengthen that past in ways that generate momentum into a positive future. This is a continuing struggle, and is about more than just survival. It is about celebration and ownership.

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<sup>280</sup> Austen 1998:212

**Why does it matter?**

**A family like mine needs story;  
Needs to be telling them  
Over and over.  
Perfecting them, re-interpreting them  
Correcting the teller (be they young)  
Feelings of Shame, anger and disbelief  
at their story, their truth.**

**Why is the story important?  
Why should it matter?  
Because it is all we have,  
All that is left.  
Moved from country,  
From language,  
From culture and lore  
Moved on & on & on  
Not welcome here!**

**Better off white & forgetting  
But we never forget  
We remembered & we savoured  
Those stories of Melbin  
Sailing the seas  
We at least owned her  
She lives in her story  
She lives in us.<sup>281</sup>**

Since the beginning of my research journey, I have become involved in the Native Title process for the Badimia people. For over sixteen years, the State has been negotiating with a Badimia working party representing the various families from our traditional country. Each time evidence of continual material culture is demonstrated to the legal representation of the WA state government, it has come back to the Yamatji Land and Sea council requiring the Badimia claim group to provide additional evidence and to strengthen their claims. As time passes, more of our old people pass away and their depth of knowledge goes with them. Historian for the Badimia claim group, Mark Chambers has stated at one particular meeting that *“inside each of you is a wealth of information and what we have to do is tap it.”*<sup>282</sup> The Badimia claim group cannot provide documentary evidence of early colonial or anthropological accounts as used in the successful Noongar Native Title claim. The first colonial record of white occupation of

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<sup>281</sup> Poem I created at Battye Library June 2009

<sup>282</sup> YLSC Correspondence 2007:4

Badimia country is of Frederick Fox, Yalgoo's first police constable in 1895. It is well known that squatters were present in the district as early as the late 1860's. What remains is oral history of those who remain and the stories passed down to their children and children's children such as me and my sister, Julie.

The Native Title negotiations for Badimia people have concluded with the state government rejecting all claims. It has now forced my people to go to trial with the state government. During that time, the claim group, including my family must prove a continuing material culture demonstrating our connection to country prior to European colonisation. The situation is ironic considering that the Yamatji Land and Sea council is a government funded body and yet we are arguing with the State government to recognise our rights to country.

The relationship between gender prescriptions is a subject that remains unevenly explored in Australia and overseas. Stoler<sup>283</sup> states that even though more contemporary works account for the different classes experienced by European women in the colonial venture, being different from one another and from men, there is hardly any written about the racism they shared. The way that sexual control became locked to racial tensions is elusive and also obvious. As Stoler<sup>284</sup> states, for example, nearly half of European male population in 1880's Indies were unmarried and living with Indigenous women. Even despite colonial government decrees ordering there be a limit to the amount of concubinage in 1903, it was never enforced. Such open sexual access to Indigenous women, according to Stoler, bore a "*striking resemblance to the sexual politics of colonial expansion in other times and places.*" Sexuality appears the most obvious marker of 'Otherness' and appears prominently in any racist ideology.

### **Making my story from a mystery**

**Where in the chasm of time can I see her face?  
Her touch is but a flying piece of debris.  
I want her walking with me  
Translating and guiding.  
A rudimentary base line  
A median point from when the lines of culture were basic.  
She was black & I am white  
But the colour is confused coz my skin is not my own  
It is the colonizers!  
The migrant!**

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<sup>283</sup>Stoler 2002:45

<sup>284</sup> Stoler 2002:46

**The stranger!**  
**I do not want to be a stranger.**  
**The fear of it freezes me to my place**  
**A place not created by me**  
**But my what people see**

**My words give a story.**  
**It shocks**  
**It challenges**  
**It creates drama & intrigue**  
**It forces a focus on something unknown**  
**To become real**  
**To force away unconsciousness**  
**An overwhelming reality**  
**I was asked once by a young Wudjula girl**  
**If Melbin actually benefited from her connection with her white master.**  
**I fumed & I raged at her.**  
**“Of course she got something out of it!”**  
**I blurted to this woman/child**  
**“She got survival & the survival of her daughter!”**  
**“She got to tell her story and that story survived!”**  
**“She was one of the luck ones!”**  
**How many of our women died**  
**Leaving nothing in their wake?**  
**Their footprints were blown away in the wind.**  
**Their embrace erased and forgotten.**

On the day after the Badimia Native title meeting in Mount Magnet in July 2008, I by chance met with the late Mr Ollie George, a respected Badimia elder at the home of his granddaughter. Mr George was the last fluent speaker of Badimia language. I spoke with Mr George about his dear mother, Ms Clara George who lived to a very old age and is referred to in this chapter. Uncle Ollie told me that those people who came to the Native title meeting had no clue what a ‘real’ Badimia person was. Shocked, I asked him, “what is a real Badimia person?”. He smiled, thought to himself and looked into my eyes for some time. Here I was, a fair skinned European looking woman and before me was a dark skinned grey haired elderly man. We could not have been more divergent from each other. Uncle drew a slow breath and said to me “someone who speaks their language for a start.” While Badimia share many cultural aspects similar to neighbouring tribes, it is our spoken dialect that is considered to be distinct from local nations. Today, Badimia is considered an extinct language with less than 300 fluent speakers. With its loss go distinctive characteristics that perpetuate knowledge of a certain ecosystem and a specific world view or enlightenment. This chapter is written to describe how this connection became stressed and disturbed forever as demonstrated through the story of one woman –

Melbin, my maternal grandmother's grandmother. It is also a story about Melbin's influence upon my own life especially my Aboriginality and the survival of her story.

Here is a section from an interview with my aunt Barbara Dowling, my Manggan (maternal aunt) about the importance of telling Melbin's story. Aunty Barb was my main guide through my family and the stories that were told to us all.

Barb: I think that by various studies, you can actually read and see it. And often times when I've read that research I thought well, she would have gone through that.

CD: Yes, so you're connecting those stories to her.

Barb: Definitely, there's definitely a connection there because you can see the results in our family now, because of it. Because of what happened to her, what she went through. And things that you wondered *why did that happen?* Or *why was that choice made?* Now you can see why. Because of that survival, you had to go on.<sup>285</sup>

My twin sister, Julie Dowling has painted the story of Melbin in several portraits to demonstrate how such a journey to England must have been overwhelming considering Melbin's life experiences up to that point. Julie continues to paint the stories of our family women to demonstrate and explore the critical interface of white male/Badimia women sexuality and the wider political order. Julie's first portrait of Melbin was in 1992 and was included in the private collection of Lord John and Lady Sheila Cruthers. This painting shows Melbin standing on the docks at Fremantle about to board the boat for England. She is dressed in clothes of the period (being 1875-1880). Melbin is labelled with her name bound for Plymouth, England. In her dark hand she is clutching a torn scatter of gum leaves: a last grasp of her country and home. This nationally significant painting has been in many group shows and continues to celebrate Melbin's strength to her family and her people. This painting represents to me a beautiful vision of my ancestor as she may have looked and felt at that singular moment. It speaks about the brutality of those times and the utter vulnerability of our women.

*Historically, all that is known about "Others", particularly Indigenous peoples, has been written from the perspective of the coloniser. This is certainly true of the discourse of describing Indigenous women. There can be little doubt that Aboriginal women have been misrepresented, not just by colonial observers, but by many commentators since. There therefore exists a*

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<sup>285</sup> Dowling, C. interview with Barbara Dowling 1<sup>st</sup> February 2007

*need to challenge these representations, and surely the challenge should come from Aboriginal women themselves.*<sup>286</sup>

The relationship between gender prescriptions is a subject that remains unevenly explored in Australia and overseas. Stoler<sup>287</sup> states that even though more contemporary works do account for the different classes experienced by European women in the colonial venture, being different from one another and from men, there is hardly any written about the racism they shared. The way that sexual control became locked to racial tensions is elusive and also obvious. As Stoler<sup>288</sup> states, for example, nearly half of European male population in 1880's Indies were unmarried and living with Indigenous women. Even despite government efforts trying to limit the amount of concubinage in 1903, it was never enforced. Such open sexual access to Indigenous women bore a "*striking resemblance to the sexual politics of colonial expansion in other times and places.*" Sexuality appears the most obvious marker of 'Otherness' and appears prominently in any racist ideology.

*Us and them' - 'black against white' - seems an almost instinctive reflex in many people. Many Noongars have it too, of course, especially those whose identity has been so crucially formed by generations on the receiving end of racism, and that's most. It's like there are two worlds.*<sup>289</sup>

European dominance allowed few stories of Aboriginal hardship into the newspapers. It is only through the stories of the living today that we see how colonisation has affected them and their women ancestors. Those that remain, with our often fair skin, by emphasising our heritage express solidarity with our ancestors, and at the same time, subvert notions of an exclusively race-based identity. Whichever way we do it, in the act of writing down these stories, we are offering nourishment and life to our people. We are also writing about fertility, about creation which is an intimate matter. Those of us who are descended from the same people are looking, searchingly across generations, attempting to comprehend what took place so long ago, sensing what we have in common and where we differ, who we have become and what we are destined to be.

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<sup>286</sup> Houston 2007:46

<sup>287</sup> Stoler 2002:45

<sup>288</sup> Stoler 2002:46

<sup>289</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:227

## **Who are Badimia?**

### **Mabarn (medicine/magic)**

The Badimia nation is located in a territory known as the Mid-West of Western Australia within the Murchison district. There have been no excavations in this area to determine the earliest presence of Aboriginal people here. In nearby districts, there have been discoveries of the presence of mega marsupials that flourished in lush conditions within a temperate climate. This climate changed, as did the people who lived there, adapting and developing skills needed to survive the drier conditions. A very high degree of harmony with their arid environment and the seasons was passed through generations of Badimia. The profound dependence on this country meant an equally profound dependence on the source of creation and from this developed Badimia spirituality. Myths and beliefs spoke of great beings that created Badimia people and their way of life. These Great Spirit beings (primarily the sacred serpent named the Beemara) performed certain important actions giving meaning to life and changing their surroundings. In this way, Badimia self-identity was strengthened and the environment was preserved. Important Dreaming places were created and treasured by Badimia where sacred stones were arranged in highly symbolic patterns.

It was at these important meeting places, according to belief, that spiritual and supernatural forces were called upon to create a plentiful food supply. One of the significant traditional actions of Badimia people was the chipping of a certain white rock, in certain locations, and collecting the fragments of this, and scattering them around to ensure new life. It was this ceremony that ensured, for example, an increase in Bardi grubs (witchetty grubs). This type of action practised by the Badimia was, in effect, a communication with the forces of creation. It was a sacred act and so was limited to certain tribesmen and women.

The laws and customs of Melbin's people were a harsh discipline. They were required to survive in a near waterless environment. The Badimia population had to be kept in exact balance with nature; never taking more food than needed to protect animal and plant abundance was a continuous process of observation and action. The Badimia population practiced infanticide and contraception to maintain small family groupings easily able to travel and be sustainable. To discourage other tribe's people from entering their territory, ritual cannibalism was a swift and effective deterrent. This is not to say that Badimia did not practice extensive trade and marriage arrangements with neighbouring North-West, South West and Western Aboriginal nations. See Fig. 1 of the gathering ground at Coodingnow. For example, ochre was

mined, pounded and ground on stone mills at the ochre mine at Wilga Mia (near Cue) and taken all over Australia<sup>290</sup>.

The use of ochre in material and artistic culture is seen in the caves where Badimia sheltered. They took shelter in a series of caves along a range now called the Breakaways. The Breakaways are so called because of the fretting nature of the walls as they once were the banks of a mighty flowing river system. Only a few hand stencils of children are visible today along these cave walls but there is evidence to suggest that a greater number of paintings may have been created. See Fig. 2 of a Cave where Badimia camped during winter. These paintings would have included one of the most significant stories of Badimia Lore.

In the night sky stories were attached to various star clusters. The Yalibirri or emu dreaming was the most powerful being made up of the dark patches across the Milky Way. In autumn, once the nights became colder and following the first rains, this emu in the night sky became clearly visible. Below the emu is a cluster of eggs (known as Wallah). This signified that the time was right to look for emu eggs. This was also the time for dancing as central focus of Badimia practical social, judicial and spiritual law. From such meetings came law, judgement and decisions that gave guidance to the small family groups who travelled in Badimia country. The dancing and music (usually with clapping boomerangs and voices gave expression to beliefs and many stories were passed onto generation after generation for thousands of seasons. These stories of the dreamtime and past significant events were told in this way as they danced on the softer soils where Wandarrie grass grow today. These special ‘corroborees’ or mamayugari were followed and performed until the winter of 1951 when the last initiation ceremonies were held in the Nalbarra/Kirkalocka area. The numbers of those who could perform and practice ceremony were stopped due to a decreased population and economic necessity.

### **Ngalguwa (to eat and drink)**

The small family groups of Badimia country were reliant on the women and young children gathering native bush tucker – vegetables, fruit and seeds. Men were specialists in the use of plants for medicine. Among the favoured seeds collected for food in Badimia country were *Bowgada* seeds, *Mulga*, *Jurrajong*, *Curare* and *Wandarri*. They could be eaten raw or ground

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<sup>290</sup> Day 1995:4

into flour and cooked as damper. The seeds were seasonal enabling certain proteins and vitamins to assist the body in gaining maximum nutrition in these extreme conditions.

To grind the seeds (and ochre for skin protection and ceremony) particular stones were chosen and, at the more frequented camping places, left from one season to the next. Over time, these large grinding stones (mortar) developed deep, smooth and rounded wells while the hand held working grinding stone (pestle) was worn to the shape of a smooth pebble. Many sweet gums called *Bimba* were collected using a cup made of bark. *Bimba* was and still is a highly-prized delicacy. Fruits such as the red *Quandong* with its high vitamin C content were collected in season. The *Cogla* (silky pear) which grew from a sparse vine was eaten raw or cooked in the ashes.

The women gathered Protein in the form of *Ngawu* (emu eggs) scrambled in the shell in the ashes. *Bardi* grubs and *Bannabindi* (honey ants) were dug out using an all-purpose digging stick called a *Wana* fashioned from a sturdy straight piece of mulga tree. Women would track small animals like *Bulla Bullah* (lizards) and the larger yellow *Quoelle* (Gould's goanna). Some women were considered the better trackers in each group and they could catch these lizards as well as smaller common marsupials such as *Boodie* kangaroo rats and *Bilbys* by using brush yards and fire to help in the capture of this tucker (game).

The men were responsible for hunting larger game like emu and marloo. The *Marloo* or desert red kangaroo was the preferred eating. The *Euro*, also known as the Beegoordoo, was a thickly set kangaroo found in the *sugar brother* or hill country where vegetation was thick. *Sugar brother* refers to the abundance found in such areas. This kangaroo and other small game were often herded and trapped by Badimia men building brush yards around these animals as they came down to drink at waterholes. Men and boys used mimicry and tricks to stop game from moving enabling them to become easily speared.

One of the most potent and effective cure-alls used by Badimia was the *Murin-Murin* bush. This is also known as the Currant bush. It has white daisy flowers with yellow centres and the seeds go purple like a currant. *Murin-Murin* is a highly prized cure for cancer in its various forms. The *Murin-Murin* bush root is dug up and boiled in coolamons (hard wooden dishes). The oil floating on the surface of the water is then skimmed off to apply to the skin daily. This oil is then believed to cure skin cancer. The leaves and trunk are boiled for two to three hours.

When cool, this liquid is diluted with water again and half a litre is drunk per day. This is a cure for all internal cancers. Most other medicines used by Badimia were of an astringent quality to assist against infections caused by cuts, scrapes and scratches while living in this semi-arid country.

Water was and still is scarce in Badimia country. With long dry stretches between watering holes, a small wooden bucket, called a *Dhaga*, was fashioned to carry water. This enabled the people to travel long distances. The timber generally used for this came from a tree which did not grow within the Badimia boundaries, so was a traded commodity used by neighbouring tribes. This wood was known as beefwood. Other sources of water were more inventive. The sand hills surrounding the lake systems held frogs (Wanderoo) that could be dug up. These frogs bloated with fresh water from the last rains and were cast on the fire before eaten providing food and water at the same time.

### **Dyubamarda<sup>291</sup> (baby): Melbin's early life**

It is possible to piece together a summation of Melbin's early life. Day<sup>292</sup> gives account of how small family groups were sustained in arid conditions by yarning with a key Badimia woman elder named Clara George who lived to well over a hundred years. Clara recalled the time when kangaroo skins were used to carry babies on the backs of their mothers. Melbin would have spent her first years carried around by her mother in this way. My Nana (maternal grandmother) and her brother, Great-Uncle George Latham, gave account of Melbin's mother being named Wallah<sup>293</sup> meaning emu eggs. Wallah could have tanned the skins of the Marloo until they were extremely soft. She would fold and join the skins into a bag as a holder for her baby. The skin would be laid on the ground and Melbin would be placed into it. In a swift movement, the baby in the skin would be swung around onto Wallah's back. They would have walked well-used routes for bartering food, sacred artefacts, songs, stories and news. There were long lines between the Kimberley and south west, from the west into central and South Australia and even linking Arnhem land with the far west. Relationships were established with neighbouring tribes through marriage and trade. Wallah may have come from another tribal group as a young woman given over in marriage which was common at places such as Coodingnow.<sup>294</sup> This meant that family groups would establish kinship bonds with neighbouring tribes.

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<sup>291</sup> Dyubamarda: Badimia word for Baby

<sup>292</sup> Day 1995:3

<sup>293</sup> Wallah dreaming is considered a major creation story for Badimia people and will be explained later.

<sup>294</sup> Day 1995: 2

Fire and smoke signals were very much a part of survival for these travelling families. It not only provided a means of communication but warmth and social focus during the icy evenings. As they moved, Wallah and her baby would have been directed by the use of smoke signals used to co-ordinate the hunts and food gathering. This practice was extremely valuable where distances were large and population and food was scarce. Fire was made by the men using dead split mulga branches into which was placed dry grasses. A second stick was swiftly rotated back and forth until the friction achieved ignition temperature. Wallah and Melbin would have slept between two fires along with their family members. Each adult member would carry a firestick for warmth during the cold. It was by the campfire of her family that Melbin would have grown into a young woman learning about her people's beliefs and culture. She would have learnt the ways of women to live from seasonal foods and to find waterholes with ease.

It would have been fire signals that told Melbin and her family when others came into their area. It was such signals that could have warned them that white people had finally come. In the western scale, I believe that the time period this would have occurred was the early 1870s. Generally, communication between tribes and distant parts of the continent was quicker than many white explorers realised. The Badimia would have heard about the violence and injustice experienced by their Noongar cousins to the south-west. An account by Moran<sup>295</sup> describes how the majority of Aboriginal people in Western Australia continued to confront the colonists as they settled, explored and prospected that vast landmass of the state. This was the case for Badimia who the colonists simply shot, subdued others and employed those they deemed useful in developing their sheep stations. Moran states "*this cycle of offence by Aborigines with strong retribution by the whites became part of the colonists' culture*".

The Badimia's environment was not as bountiful as the higher rainfall areas to the south. The encroachment upon the food and water by an ever-increasing number of white pioneers had to be defended with force. There were many reprisals by the white settlers as Badimia began to kill sheep for food and to demand that respect be paid to them as traditional occupiers of their lands. It was during this early time of contact with whites that Badimia were openly shot or poisoned for resistance. Most massacres were only remembered by the Aboriginal people throughout the north. Other multiple killings were recorded so vaguely or ambiguously that

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<sup>295</sup> Moran 2001:28

after a while murky arguments developed as to whether they happened at all. Austen<sup>296</sup> gives account of the June 1936 observations by the then Chief Protector of Aborigines stating that in the 1870s ‘...there was not a little wanton destruction of life which might have been avoided by the exercise of forethought or less hasty action’. He added “...some fifteen natives were shot at one time on the Murchison in 1870 and in 1875...sixty-three were destroyed between the DeGray and Gascoyne during the journey of one [European settler’s] party alone. The year 1880 was a very bad one, probably a greater number of losing their lives in this year than in any other.”<sup>297</sup>

As the intensity of such hostilities continued throughout the Swan River colony, a prison specifically for Western Australian Aboriginal incarceration was opened at Rottnest Island. Along with many other tribesmen, Badimia men found themselves chained and charged. Seldom were they brought to trial and if they were, they were swiftly convicted even when the accused did not speak English and a translator was rarely consulted. During the early 1870s, increasing numbers of Badimia men were taken to Rottnest Island in chains. They were walked overland for hundreds of kilometres and at gunpoint escorted by mounted police before boarding ships bound for Fremantle then rowed to the prison. As the arrest records noted by Moran<sup>298</sup>, the majority of prisoners taken from the Mid-West and Murchison was primarily for stealing sheep. The numbers of prisoners on the Rottnest Island penal settlement grew to overcrowded levels resulting in disease and death from lack of heating and general hygiene. Austen<sup>299</sup> cited a comment in the early newspaper *The Inquirer*: “Rottnest...is simply a hideous blot upon the reputation of our fair colony – a crying shame upon our Government – and a wicked outrage upon Christianised humanity”. Rottnest became a place where many differing tribesmen from the South, North, East and the Swan River settlement area were thrown together in a place that would represent a direct attack on Aboriginal resistance and leave a lasting scar upon those communities whose men were taken.

New diseases introduced by the settlers also dramatically lessened most of the Aboriginal population who were free and still residing in the Gascoyne and North West of the state. In particular, two major epidemics (influenza followed by measles) raged through Badimia

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<sup>296</sup> Austen 1998:73

<sup>297</sup> Austen 1998:73

<sup>298</sup> Austen 1998:85

<sup>299</sup> Moran 1998:85

country resulting in many deaths and subsequently fewer numbers of prisoners being taken to Rottnest Island by the 1880s.<sup>300</sup>

Those men and women who survived were subjected to blackbirding as the pearling industry based in Cossack demanded cheap and submissive labour. Austen<sup>301</sup> notes Pastor Gribble's booklet 'Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land' with page after page chastising the white so-called Christian station owners and pearling boat operators in the region for their labour methods that looked very much like slavery. Men, women and children were stolen from Badimia country deep in the interior, walked towards the coast having never seen water larger than a rock pool and made to dive to dangerous depths to gather pearls and pearl shell. The majority never returned to their country and believed to have perished in the depths. On the stations, men were in neck chains for punishment, floggings and racist sexual oppression were rife. Fleeing child workers were brought back by the sting of the stockwhip. Settlers told Gribble that they '*owned*' all the '*natives*' on their runs.<sup>302</sup>

### **Wudyanu<sup>303</sup> (strangers): The Oliver family and colonisation in the Mid-West**

My maternal non-Aboriginal ancestors came to Western Australia in 1853. The first person of significance was William Oliver. As recorded in Broomhall<sup>304</sup>, William was born in Manchester, Lancashire, and at 16 enlisted in the British Army. He served for 19 years including 16 years in the East Indies before serving in the 1842 Afghanistan campaign for the British colonial force. He was present at the actions at Leazam and Tazun for which he received a medal of bravery. At the age of 33, in Cambridge, he was drafted for Western Australia as a Pensioner Guard. Along with his wife and infant son, George Oliver, he came to Australia and was immediately listed as Police Sergeant at York. His second son Edward Henry, my great-grandfather, was born there in 1854. By the 1860s, William was living in Guildford and was known to have employed five Ticket of Leave convicts between 1864 and 1867. It was in Guildford that his youngest son, Thomas Richard, was born in 1860. Sometime after 1867, William Oliver was then appointed as night warden of the Greenough Penal Prison south of Geraldton housing Irish Fenian prisoners. William was eventually discharged from guard duty

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<sup>300</sup> Moran 2001:98

<sup>301</sup> Austen 1998:94

<sup>302</sup> Austen 1998:94

<sup>303</sup> Wudyanu is Badimia for 'strangers' which is what white people were to Badimia people.

<sup>304</sup> Broomhall 1989:B221

in Western Australia in 1873 but returned to draw his pension at Ashton-under Lyne in England leaving his sons to prosper in the Gascoyne region.

The enrolled pensioner force could be traced to the British government's employment of returned soldiers to maintain public order. These men were organised into special units of the regular army and were paid as regular soldiers out of Army funds. In the late seventeenth century, units of such veteran soldiers began to be formed to fill the vacancies in existing army companies as a means of providing home defence in cases of emergency. In Western Australia, this pensioner force made up of soldiers who came as guards on convict ships between 1850 and 1868 transporting almost 10,000 prisoners from the gaols of the United Kingdom. Many remained as settlers after their military duties were finished. These soldiers had served the previous twenty years in Britain's wars in China, the Crimea, the Kaffir Wars, in India before and during the Mutiny, in Persia, the Maori Wars and Afghanistan.<sup>305</sup> They were awarded pensions for long service and good conduct, for wounds or for meritorious service. On average they were strong and healthy, well-disciplined, loyal and of good conduct; and, spread through the thinly-peopled districts (such as the Gascoyne), were a welcome addition to the labour force as warders, police, postmen or mailmen, tradesmen or agricultural labourers.

William Oliver, his wife and infant son, George, arrived in Fremantle on the *Phoebe Dunbar* on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1853. In May of that same year, the War Office granted Lieutenant Colonial Bruce permission to station small detachments of Pensioners at the principal country centres. The detachments would be available to support the civil power in any emergency likely to arise from the presence of numbers of ticket of leave men or "*the depredations of natives in and around these outstations*"<sup>306</sup> The Greenough flats showed the first garrisoned outpost in April 1858 where the land at the flats was "*first class and pioneer farming had been carried on there for a considerable time before the Pensioners arrived.*"<sup>307</sup> It was evident during this time that pastoralists were pushing ever outward into Aboriginal lands and conflicts arose. There were demands for police to be appointed to counter the resistance posed by Aboriginal people throughout the region. Pensioner guards increasingly became called upon to uphold the civil authority in the region. William Oliver, along with his fellow guards, would have represented the colonial force in the Irwin district. This force was a colonial one and would have espoused

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<sup>305</sup>Broomhall 1989:Foreword.

<sup>306</sup> Broomhall 1998:12

<sup>307</sup> Broomhall 1998:96

the ideologies of the time being the so called justified dominance of colonised peoples such as the Badimia and others in the district through any means necessary.

Not long after the funeral of my 90-year-old maternal great-uncle, George Latham, I visited the preserved historical Greenough Prison settlement south of Geraldton with two of my male cousins. I wrote in my journal about the experience as it was a tangible link to my white ancestor, William Oliver and his life.

**I was visiting the preserved Greenough Penal settlement today. The prison cells still contain one large cell specifically devised for Aboriginal captives. While white prisoners had smaller individual cells, Aboriginal prisoners were chained by the neck and hands to a long bar suspended from the wall so that they could not escape. Straw was laid as the flooring. In these dark, forbidding and cruel colonial buildings, built by the hands of convicts, I knew that this place could break the spirit of a free people - my people.**

**One of my white ancestors had walked these hallways inspecting these cells and bestowing punishments beyond this confinement alone. His eyes would have looked upon these black prisoners of war as he had done in the colonies of the East Indies and in Afghanistan where he had served as a young man for the British empire.**

**How could I reconcile this reality. While one ancestor watched over these prisoners, these warriors and resistance fighters were most likely my ancestors too. Their necks were in chains - my great-uncles, my grandfathers! I felt shame and confusion that I could only bear to be in that place for minutes while they were held for weeks waiting to be shipped to Rottnest Native Penal Colony or Burney Island or worse, to die in chains.<sup>308</sup>**

After seven years of serving, a pensioner guard could obtain his discharge and remain as a settler - which is what William Oliver did - and after 1880 guards were eligible for a free land grant of some 10 to 33 acres. Those who decided to settle in Greenough were often granted 40 acres; however, as recounted by Maley and Farrelly in 1927 for the WA Historical society<sup>309</sup>, these new farmers found no market for their produce. They grew enough wheat and vegetables to keep their bodies and souls together and carried on. In a report to the Governor of Western Australia dated 5<sup>th</sup> April 1866, Lieutenant Colonel Bruce stated that the Pensioners were deserved to be classed with the very best farmers in the Greenough for they were "*less in the hands of the storekeepers than any other section of that community.*"<sup>310</sup> Even while they were

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<sup>308</sup> Excerpt from my personal journal 2006

<sup>309</sup> Broomhall 1998:96

<sup>310</sup> Broomhall 1998:98

farmers in this region, they were also considered available for “*protective purposes*”. This may have been the reason that William Oliver returned to England leaving his almost grown sons to venture inland. By November 1880, the Enrolled Pensioner force was disbanded.

During the late 1860s and through the 1870s, the Oliver brothers joined more farmers who had left the more settled south to try their luck into the interior. Many were accompanied by Aboriginal assistants and guides, driving sheep or cattle for up to two thousand kilometres. These journeys took months, with water shortages, straying or sick animals, bad weather and the need to avoid Aboriginal resistance to invasion.<sup>311</sup>

In the early 1880s, there were fewer than 30,000 colonists but increasing numbers of shipments of farm produce left for England. Sheep and cattle stations flourished. Horses were shipped to India as mounts for the British Army and sandalwood was exported to China. The earth glinted with signs of gold and the colonials bore a ‘she’ll be right’ manner even when life remained rough.<sup>312</sup>

Austen<sup>313</sup> gives an account of a special report commissioned for *The Inquirer* newspaper, dated April 1875, which he regards as being disturbing for its correspondent writes that every settler near the coast had ‘natives’ around his household for many miles. To me, this indicates the increasing vulnerability of Aboriginal people in this region, if not all over the state, during that time. By 1897, the British government had control over three aspects of the destiny of the colony in Western Australia. It continued to appoint the governor, it retained the right to subdivide the colony into smaller colonies if it thought fit and it continued to be responsible for ‘native affairs’. The reason given at the time was that it considered “*the settlers had a bad record in their treatment of the Aborigines.*”<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Austen 1998:59

<sup>312</sup> Austen 1998:59

<sup>313</sup> Austen 1998:71

<sup>314</sup> Crowley & De Garis 1969:42

## Walybala<sup>315</sup> (whiteman): Melbin's life with Edward Oliver

*“Clad in nature's garb except for a native hair belt stuck full of kylies [boomerangs]; his hair plastered up on end with red ochre and grease while the same colouring was streaked down his face and body, two spears and a woomera or thrower in his right hand and a huge black and white painted shield in his left and who looked as dangerous and deadly as a tiger snake out for a fight”<sup>316</sup>*

It is claimed in many accounts about my ancestral country that the Oliver family knew this country well. By 1870, the two elder brothers, George and Edward explored as far west as Lake Barlee, far into the interior. They were the first Europeans to do so. During their expedition from Greenough to Lake Barlee, they discovered Wydgee Springs (today Wydgee meaning “no” or “nothing”). I believe that it is during this initial journey that Edward Oliver took my grandmother's grandmother from the bush and named her Melbin after his favourite town of Melbourne.<sup>317</sup> Austen<sup>318</sup> states that many Aboriginal people were “glibly labelled with common, facetious, racially disparaging names by whites [so] that their true identities passed into obscurity.” Such was the case with my grandmother's grandmother. Her descendants do not know her original Badimia name to this very day.

Austen<sup>319</sup> observes that white males during this time in the outback went for months and occasionally a year or so without having seen a European woman. Such men sometimes experienced friendships and love matches with Aboriginal females although the power imbalance between the colonial male and the woman was obvious. In his book, entitled Copper-wire George, my great uncle George Latham writes “*where ever he went, he took her. He took her to Perth; he took her over to England and back again.*” This story has passed down through the generations to me. I have always wondered what happened to Melbin in England.

According to Maxwell<sup>320</sup> and others, live displays of colonised people were the most popular at this time with international exhibitions throughout England and Europe while Melbin accompanied Edward Oliver. Such exhibitions coincided with the renewal of European imperial expansion during second half of the nineteenth century. The British Empire in the

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<sup>315</sup> Walybala is Badimia for White man.

<sup>316</sup> An account by an early prospector in 1891 writing of an encounter with a warrior within sight of the Wydgee Ranges Day 1995:22

<sup>317</sup> Palmer 1999:111

<sup>318</sup> Austen 1998:69

<sup>319</sup> Austen 1998:82

<sup>320</sup> Maxwell 1999:1

1880s, in particular, saw the scramble for colonial possessions and exhibitions were used to justify exploitative practices in the existing colonies and the invasion of the remaining unconquered territories in Asia, Africa and the Pacific. Such expositions gave the leading nations an opportunity to display the human wealth gained from their colonial possessions. Edward Oliver was a wealthy man by such standards and in deference to the public's pleasure in forms of education, he, like many others, exploited the myths of colonised women's prostitution.

*Colonisation saw native men lose land and often with it the ownership of the means of production. Indigenous women lost this and much more. Many representations depicted "native" women as nothing more than sexual objects, without power, autonomy or property, they were owned by their men and devalued by their society. The colonisers had made women, like "knowledge", a commodity, accessible, exploitable, and disposable.<sup>321</sup>*

This was to deflect the violence they had inflicted on 'native' populations back on to the people whose resources they were exploiting, whose lands they were occupying and whose cultures they were undermining. The idea was not only to expose the masses to the spectacle of racial difference but also to make people, such as Edward Oliver, feel mentally, physically and morally superior to the colonised. In this case, the vulnerable Badimia woman was my grandmother's grandmother. Melbin and her people would have been represented as Maxwell<sup>322</sup> surmised as the "*non-interiorized 'others' who existed outside the common bonds of humanity and the flow of history*". Co-incidentally, steamships were introduced to Western Australia leaving from Fremantle speeding passengers such as Edward Oliver and Melbin and mail back to England. Even with the introduction of modernising technology such as the telegraph and ocean cables to facilitate communication with Britain, there was little attempt to improve relations between black and white people in Western Australia.

Austen<sup>323</sup> writes that young Aboriginal women possessed a natural modesty. But this modesty meant nothing when, as many incidents documented, these women were bartered for "*an ounce of navy-cut tobacco, a quarter pound of sugar or some flour*". It was dangerous for any of Melbin's people to refuse and modesty did not come into the deal especially when guns were involved. Few of these partnerships were recorded because generally white society did not want

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<sup>321</sup> Moreton-Robinson, 2000:166&169

<sup>322</sup> Maxwell 1991:2

<sup>323</sup> Austen 1998:82

to know of permanent liaisons involving another race. There were also a number of cases of squatter's leading a 'black hunt' into the interior of Western Australia as late as 1891 capturing up to twenty desert Aboriginal people at a time. Half were most often females, who were to be handed over to stockmen as sexual fodder to prevent them from moving onto better workplaces.<sup>324</sup>

Austen<sup>325</sup> noted a survey in *The Inquirer* newspaper examining claims of racial trouble on pastoral stations in the Gascoyne and Murchison regions. Of the fifteen stations surveyed, there were sixty white employees there but well over two hundred Aboriginal workers. Some of these colonists relied entirely on black labour and said that sheep farming would not pay without it and would encourage the mixing of the sexes. It was found that the best shepherds were Aboriginal women of which Melbin was but one. This survey noted farmers had Aboriginal workers that were “...all assigned to him, I might say, from birth...Influence, intimidation and local sway all bind the black tribe to him. In Fremantle, Perth, Guildford and in fact, in all the Swan settlements, you may constantly hear it asserted, ‘Oh, it is no use trying your hand in the North. You won’t get a nigger. They are all signed.’ True enough. They are signed and signed and doubly signed – from year’s end to year’s end. A glaring system of slavery staring the Weld policy in the teeth with a grin of defiance.” It also became legal in 1882 for landholder masters to flog Aboriginal people on their stations. The practice was widespread before that but in remote areas, such as in Badimia country, it was impossible for police to either find out or do anything about it. Now flogging was common practice and on some stations, it was normal punishment for males and females alike should they make a mistake or were thought disobedient. Such atrocities were given account by Pastor Gribble’s booklet detailing the treatment of Aboriginal people in the Gascoyne including the areas were my ancestors tried to survive.

The Oliver brothers returned to Wydgee in 1882 with a flock of sheep travelling overland from Dongara. These five initial leases were registered under the name of Samuel Fortescue Moore, a notable and prosperous gentleman of the Irwin District who was known for giving assistance to others in their enterprises. Moore may have known their father William as a prominent settler. The Oliver’s built a mud brick house by the creek and it still stands today.<sup>326</sup> They

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<sup>324</sup> Austen 1998:82

<sup>325</sup> Austen 1998:87

<sup>326</sup> See Appendix 5: Photograph of original mudbrick ruins of Oliver brother’s homestead on Wydgee Station.

moved westward by another 15 kilometres to another block they named New Gullewa which has since been absorbed by Wydgee station. It was at New Gullewa in 1882 that Melbin gave birth to my great grandmother, Mary Oliver. By 1887, the Oliver brother's sold this property to Robert Broad. In this same year, Edward and his brother Thomas married their non-Aboriginal wives. Thomas married Jane Herbert in West Guildford while Edward married Amy Amelia Booth of Dongara, sister to his older brother George's wife, Rebecca Booth. Amy was 14 years younger than Edward. Erickson<sup>327</sup> notes in her Dictionary of Western Australians that Melbin had three children by Edward Oliver prior to his marriage. As to whether Melbin and her children followed Edward Oliver is unclear. It is recorded by Michael Cheeseman<sup>328</sup> that Amy's first child, Edward Lockier, was also born in 1887, the same year of their marriage.

In 1888, the brothers took up 8,000 hectares around Yalgowthar Spring and by 1892, when Mary was 10 years old, they increased their holding to 18,000 hectares which encompassed what is now Messengers Path and Golden Grove. It was in this place and time that Warriedar station was established by the Oliver brothers. This station comprised of 72,200 hectares and took its name from Mount Warriedar which is a somewhat imposing hill arising 180 meters above the surrounding plain but is visible for many kilometres distant. The hill itself is named after the Badimia word for Wedge-tailed eagle. The Warriedar is considered a sacred animal by Badimia people in my family. Through the centre of the property runs an offshoot of the *Gnows*<sup>329</sup> Nest ranges of which Mt Warriedar makes up the southern end. The eastern boundary of the station adjoined Thundalarra station, its southern leases end on the shores of Lake Monger (another sacred area for Badimia people) and to the west was the shire of Perenjori. Within the seven years of their marriage, Amy had four more children including twins in 1892. However, she died in childbirth in 1894. It is believed that Melbin and Mary stayed and worked on Warriedar station throughout Mary's childhood. Mary began to look after the children of Edward and Amy as a young girl.

In 1892, gold was discovered in Pinyalling and Field's Find further south of Warriedar station in that same year. Thomas and Edward established a travellers' stop over at Golden Grove on their property, which they licensed as a wayside inn named 'The Shadow of Death' or the 'Bush Inn'. A more incongruous name would be difficult to devise for the hotel was placed in a

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<sup>327</sup> Erickson1985:85

<sup>328</sup> list administrator for the Pensioner guards online archive

<sup>329</sup> Gnow is the Noongar word for Mallee Fowl

beautiful setting nestled in the cool shade of a grove of gum trees greeting weary and thirsty passengers of the horse drawn coaches that arrived. The inn was rough but homely and was renowned for its hospitality though it lacked personal comforts and was often out of liquor and forage for horses. Police records show that it was often in danger of not being re-licensed because of lack of amenities.<sup>330</sup>

It is understood that Mary, my grandmother's mother began working at the inn at a young age. It is believed that her mother, Melbin had decided to leave Warridar station stating "go find one of your own kind" to Edward Oliver. It is believed that Melbin gave birth to a son, Samuel Winmar<sup>331</sup> whose father was a Noongar man. In 1898, Edward Oliver died at Baron mine in Pinyalling to the south of the Inn. He would have been only 44 years old and his cause of death due to an influenza epidemic which had swept the goldfields. It is not known what happened to his children with Amy Amelia Booth although it is assumed that his brother, Thomas' wife, Jane took on some responsibilities until her own premature death in 1910.

### **Dyudyabaya<sup>332</sup> (growing old) Melbin's later life and the role of Shepherd Dinah**

By 1900, as there were scarcely any white females coming to the Swan River Colony compared to the number of men sent out as convicts, there was still a notable increase of the population and consequently the available labour. Flindell<sup>333</sup> notes that the absence of white women also generated prostitution and other social problems among Aboriginal people. The Anglican Bishop who visited Cossack during the early 1870s wrote of seeing Aboriginal children of no more than eight years old being '*criminally abused*' by white men. He exclaimed that these men should be brought to justice by the magistrate, but the mayor retorted, "*My Lord, I sure he will not!*" He was told that the Cossack police station was no better than a brothel. Most white men on the stations, more so station owners, could cohabit with as many Badimia women as they wished and did so even when it caused reprisals from these women's families.

One of Melbin's children was Samuel Winmar who lived to an old age dying in Mount Magnet as a respected Badimia elder and loreman.<sup>334</sup> My family is still unsure as to why Sam's last

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<sup>330</sup> Palmer 1999:113

<sup>331</sup> Sam grew into a respected lore man within the Badimia community dying in Mt Magnet in 1960.

<sup>332</sup> Dyudyabaya is Badimia for growing old.

<sup>333</sup> In Austen 1998:47

<sup>334</sup> See Appendix 6: Samuel Winmar, to left of donkey, with large mostache. Half-brother to Mary Oliver.

name was Winmar as this is a prominent Noongar name from the South-west. Many Noongar men travelled through Badimia country assisting colonials when meeting with Badimia people and it is likely that Sam was fathered by such a traveller. Uncle Sam figured prominently in the lives of my Uncle George and his other brothers teaching them Badimia bush craft when they came of age. He spent his later years working at Ninghan station gathering sandalwood and working as a stockman he eventually lost an eye when a branch hit him while mustering cattle. The name and sex of the third of Melbin's children is unknown. It is assumed that this child died young from health issues.

According to my grandmother, Mary Dowling (nee-Latham), Edward Oliver also fathered a daughter to Shepherd Dinah of Coodingnow station. This child was named Galeena and she eventually became the first wife of Gus Clinch a pastoralist at Coodingnow and Ninghan station.

CD: Where did you visit her? Remember you went on the spring cart apparently, that's what Uncle George said.

Mary: Mmm.

CD: Was that your mum's sister?.. Or was it her cousin, or...at Ninghan?

Mary: Mmm.

CD: Was it your mum's sister?

Mary: Yes.

CD: She was married to... Gus Clinch.

Mary: Yes.

CD: So was her name Galeena?

Mary: I think so.

Galeena died soon after childbirth when she was 30 years old. Shepherd Dinah was there at her death which occurred at the women's birthing place known as Wardagga Rock north of Ninghan station. Gus Clinch then had another Badimia wife named Yewanda. Mr. Gus Clinch, unlike many white farmers of the time, left his property and holdings to his children by Galeena and Yewanda. It is Galeena's descendants who welcomed my family back to country generations after. It is the 'Clinch mob' who encouraged my research and introduced me to

Badimia language and lore. It is unknown if Edward Oliver fathered any more children to Badimia women but this is not out of the question considering such happenings were a common occurrence in the late 1890's and early 1900's.

My grandmother, Molly gave an account of a very intriguing story about Melbin in her later years. It is tied to the life of one of her daughter Mary's child Edward or Ted. Mary's husband, Frances Latham, was often intolerant of his children and could be cruel to his wife and children especially when he was drunk. When Ted was an infant, Frances Latham was hitting him for being disobedient. Apparently, Melbin disapproved of Latham's treatment of her grandson and so stole him and took him away into the bush to protect him. It is not clear what happened next other than that Ted was returned to his mother and to Frances Latham. It is believed that Melbin died shortly after. The year was 1913 so Melbin was approximately 45-50 years old when she died. When I asked my great uncle George Latham how his grandmother died he explained that she was walking in between towns (presumably either to Perenjori or Wubin) on her way to do itinerant work as a shepherdess and she died suddenly, possibly of heart failure. Uncle George explained that it was common practice for the bodies of unidentified Aboriginal people to be buried in unmarked graves and this was the intention by the shire council when her body was found. What happened next is remarkable and reveals much about the importance Melbin had to her people. Her body was claimed by the Clinch mob at Coodingnow and buried along with their kin on the station. When asked about the exact location of her grave, my grandmother said that she was laid to rest at the top of a small hill just inside a gate on Coodingnow. The specific location of the grave is still unknown. However, I believe that my Nana knew the site well and was very specific about where it was to be found. I have found her detailed knowledge of Melbin's grave to be significant and that Nana and her brother wanted it to be remembered. Despite following their detailed descriptions, Melbin's grave could not be found by my aunt Barbara, my sister or myself. However, the fact that Melbin was laid to rest on Coodingnow suggests that she had a close kin relationship with Old Dinah, as she was called, and other people at Coodingnow.

'Old Dinah' lived to well over 90 years old and died on Coodingnow station.<sup>335</sup> I believe that following Melbin's death Dinah assumed a more prominent role with Melbin's daughter, Mary and Melbin's grandchildren. When my grandmother, Molly was a child, before she was taken

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<sup>335</sup> See Appendix 7 Unknown graves at Coodingnow station (permission of Clinch Family) & Appendix 8 Image of track leading to the path of the Beemara behind Coodingnow homestead.

to Saint Joseph's orphanage, she would travel with her mother and younger sister by horse-drawn sulky to Ninghan and Coodingnow to "visit relatives". As related to me after he died, my Great-Uncle George, who was then only 12 or 13 years old, was left to look after their farm in Coorow while his mother and sisters travelled into the interior. As he recounted in his book<sup>336</sup>, "*As my mother got very old, she often used to associate with the old native girls that she'd known when she was a girl. There was one old girl called Shepherd Dinah (she was a shepherd as a young girl and was called after her work)...Dinah lived till she was about 103 years old, they say. She came from Ninghan station, out north east of Wubin, and she lived on there nearly all her life.*" My own mother, Veronica speaks about her grandmother, Mary Latham being visited by an old women frequently when she was a child when she stayed there as a 10 year old. My mother remembers seeing her grandmother and another woman who must have been Old Dinah, sitting on the soft ground of her farm in Coorow, speaking fluent Badimia and making sand paintings of women's lore together. My mother felt that the old woman was very significant to her grandmother.

In addition to this, when I came back from my trip to visit Coodingnow and to meet Leah Bell from Ninghan station, I was given scanned images of Shepherd Dinah and of Sam Winmar as an old Man. When I showed them to my grandmother, she excitedly pointed to Shepherd Dinah in the centre of the photograph<sup>337</sup> stating "*that old girl birthed me!*" meaning that Dinah helped her mother give birth to her at Banna Station to the east of Lake Moore. It was a poignant moment because it meant that Dinah was indeed a very significant woman in my great grandmother's life too. This is further enforced by a simple story written in my great-uncle's book<sup>338</sup> detailing the cultural role of Old Dinah or Big Dinah as she was also called.

*The native people are also very sensitive to sound. When I was a kid, about six or seven-year-old, Big Dinah, she used to go around and dig out bardies or lizards or whatever. They always had a stick, called a Wanna, which is a piece of mulga about five-foot-long - depending on the height of the woman - and it's sharpened at one end with fire to make it hard, and they'd dig with that. They'd also sound the ground. They can sound the root of a tree that has a bardi in it before they start digging. They can also sound where a rabbit-warren hole ducks off, or goes along three feet or more. They sound the ground on top, and they can find it and dig straight down onto it.*"<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Latham 2001:38

<sup>337</sup> See Appendix 9: Group photograph of Shepard Dinah with Mary Galbraith to the left in white dress. Shepherd Dinah is the oldest woman holding a digging stick or wanna.

<sup>338</sup> Latham 2001:133

<sup>339</sup> Latham 1999:25

This story demonstrates many truths to me. Dinah was not only a teacher to Mary's children of Badimia culture but she had assumed the role of grandmother. According to Badimia lore, this was only bestowed upon either a biological sister or cousin-sister to Melbin. Such survival skills are also seen to adapt to foreign species such as rabbits. Skills learned as a child of six or seven stayed with my great-uncle George who wrote his book well into his 80's. The respect my great-uncle held for his surrogate grandmother is also evident in another story he recounts:

*There was a woman called Dinah. Big Dinah we called her, and she had a husband called Albert Neebrong. One time, old Neebrong had a cancer on the tongue, so he went in to the doctor in Dalwallinu. The doctor said, 'You're a very old man. I could operate on you, but it might kill you. The best thing you can do is go home, and I'll give you a few pills to kill the pain when it comes. Take the pills, and you might live quite a while yet.' Well, it was seven years later when they reported the old fella dead. The police at the Mount Magnet Police station had to come and take him down to Dalwallinu for the doctor to hold a post-mortum [sic] on him, and as soon as the doctor heard it was Neebrong, he said, 'I know what he died of. He died of cancer - he had cancer on the tongue.' But when the doctor opened him up, he said, 'This man has cured himself of cancer. Seven years ago he came to me, and I told him he'd better go home and live it out.' So that policeman from Mount Magnet went back to Ninghan and asked Big Dinah what she'd given the old fella to cure him. She showed him the Murin-Murin bush and told him what she'd done - boiled it and got the juice out of it, and let him gargle his throat with that. The oil out of the roots that she had boiled, she painted over his tongue, and that's what cured the cancer, according to her.<sup>340</sup>*

Again this points to the skills with which Dinah was able to treat her husband. The properties and uses of the Murin-Murin bush was passed down to me and practiced by my great-uncle George and my grandmother. This story demonstrates the respect that my Uncle George had for this old healer and the Badimia knowledge that was passed down to him from his respected elder.

### **What remains behind?**

The white descendants of Edward Oliver, my relatives, have refused to take part in my research. Coodingnow is now part of a larger station called Pullagaroo. After an unsuccessful attempt by Badimia people to purchase this property, it is now owned by people who wish to run horses over our sacred places. The 'Clinch mob' have now registered important sites with the State Department of Indigenous Affairs. These areas are mainly concerned with the gravesites and

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<sup>340</sup> Latham 1999:32

the track of the Beemara so that it is protected forever. This means that Melbin, Dinah, Galina and Yewanda's graves can be honoured by their descendents and more importantly, our language and culture can be preserved.

### **The Bottomless Ocean**

**Searching for her is like  
Trying to look to the bottom of the ocean  
as you sail across it.**

**The chop, the waves breaking on the bow  
with salty froth making it even harder.**

**So it is for me  
her great great-granddaughter  
trying to see her life,  
to understand what happened  
in that foreign land.**

**She looked over the side of the ship too  
into the ocean for many many days.  
Dark waters the like she had never seen before.**

**The pages of books, the microfiche and the boxes  
are as deep and foreign to me as the ocean deep.  
Is she lost at sea?  
Will I find her?<sup>341</sup>**

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<sup>341</sup> Poem written by Author at Battye library August 2008

## Chapter Six

### **“Granny” Mary Oliver (My grandmother’s mother)**

CD: So I want to ask you a really concise question here: were you aware that Granny was Aboriginal?

Mary: Oh goodness me, yes.

CD: Yes, and what made you think that that was the case? Did she speak to you about her family or culture or anything?

Mary: No.

CD: But everyone knew?

Mary: Yes, everyone knew she was Nanny Latham. It’s a bit hard to explain.<sup>342</sup>

### **Introduction**

These are the words of Mary Hirst, who as a young white mother in the town of Coorow in the mid-west of Western Australia, knew my Great-grandmother, Mary Latham (nee Oliver) in her final years. Mrs Hirst raises questions to me about the dynamic between the people in this small

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<sup>342</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Mary Hirst 26/04/07 p4.

town and the Aboriginal people who worked and lived on their fringes. This chapter is about my search for ‘Granny’ or ‘Little Granny’ as she was affectionately called by her descendants. What this journey has revealed to me is how colonial power shaped her life as the child from the union of a vulnerable Badimia woman and a powerful white pastoralist. The dominant colonial beginnings in the mid-west of WA saw many children like Granny being birthed on the numerous new pastoral outstations. Granny was born at New Gullewa outstation with her Badimia women relatives and a traditional midwife in attendance. New Gullewa was part of the newly established holding of Wydgee station, owned by the Oliver Brothers. Wydgee literally means ‘nothing’ in Badimia language. Granny was fathered by Edward Oliver, one of three brothers who had pushed deep into the interior of the district hoping to establish a large sheep run financed by backers in Dongara. Her mother, Melbin, is believed to have been one of the ‘full-blood’ women they had encountered as the first white men in the area.

It was highly advantageous for these men to have formed unions with local Badimia community because forming such unions prevented hostile resistance from Badimia people and was good for business. Melbin had intimate knowledge of the local water sources and geographical layout. The level of societal sophistication would have seen Melbin birth her first child at a designated birthing site such as Wardagga Rock now part of Ninghan station. Granny would have experienced her first year surrounded by other Badimia men and women. However, as was explained by a non-Aboriginal woman named Mary Hirst (nee McGilp), who knew her as an elderly woman; Granny was exposed at an early age to the conflicting position she was born into as a mixed-race woman. In this early period of colonisation in Western Australia, the so called ‘half-castes’ were immediately the focal point for the goal of racial absorption or assimilation. The then eighty-seven-year-old Mary Hirst identified in her yarn with me that Granny’s positioning as a mixed-race Badimia woman was too complex for her to explain. Mary Hirst’s relationship with non-Aboriginal people in small country towns meant that she felt that my Granny fit in a strange place – not white and not black. Such a positioning is not as difficult to explain for Granny’s descendants who were witness to tensions within their immediate family when issues of Aboriginality and where government policy were concerned. In a database held by the shire of Carnamar<sup>343</sup>, this relationship was explained by the deeds that Granny did for the township of Coorow. It notes that Granny was an excellent tracker helping local farmers to locate missing stock and identifying poisonous plants. She gained

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<sup>343</sup> Carnamar is a town located within Badimia country. See Appendix 1: Map of WA Murchison Region.

much respect after Granny found a missing toddler named Marion Johns. The child was found at night asleep on the railway line in Coorow a few hours before a train was due.<sup>344</sup>

This chapter will document the wider socio-political context of Granny's life while remaining forward about the machinations of assimilation impacting upon her descendants. As a direct descendent of Granny, I struggled to comprehend the many difficulties that she endured during her life as well as consolidating her life choices and their impact upon my own life today.

### **Early life with her mother, Melbin**

The early colonial experiences of Melbin, as reflected in the previous chapter, exemplify the early power relations between colonial white men and the Badimia community they confronted. The exploitative and violent nature of expanding pearling, pastoral and mining frontiers in the north from the 1860s and the 'reign of terror' and death by parties of police and colonists, which continued into the twentieth century embroiled the colony in a culture of denials and cover-ups of atrocities and abusive treatment of Aboriginal people. Western Australia had a significant Aboriginal population that expanded to 24,000 at the turn of the century.<sup>345</sup> The prime task for the state was to break active Aboriginal resistance through punitive policies and the exploitation of the increasing powerlessness of Aboriginal society. During the establishment of pastoral leases, Aboriginal women and their children were legally bound to work for a white master for up to three years. The system of buying and selling people to labour hard for no wages and with little compensation was chiefly accepted by magistrates and the government alike. Austen<sup>346</sup> writes that many correspondents during this initial period who came back to Perth from the north reported that in some interior parts of WA that Aboriginal people were dying in hundreds from starvation because their native food was taken or dispersed by Europeans. Many Aboriginal people then moved through hostile country to become 'signed' onto stations. In this early period over ninety stations were established between the DeGray and Ashburton rivers using in excess of 2200 Aboriginal workers<sup>347</sup>. Some places had as many as seventy workers, with landholders regarding them as property. Stations were bought and sold according to the number of acres, sheep and blacks. *"On sheep stations, young native*

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<sup>344</sup> Coorow-Waddy Database 2009:1

<sup>345</sup> Haebich 2000:210

<sup>346</sup> Austen 1998:144

<sup>347</sup> Austen 1998:148

*women and children did most of the shed work and when that was finished they went fencing in a slave-gang driven by the taskmaster”.*<sup>348</sup>

According to oral accounts passed down to me, Melbin went to England with Edward Oliver. Oliver presumably returned there to visit relatives following his father’s death in 1881 in the district of Manchester. Edward Oliver took Melbin and their infant daughter, Mary. Shipping records<sup>349</sup> account for Edward Oliver returning from London on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1884 on the steamer Glengoil, a trade vessel with 42 other third class passengers. Mary (‘Granny’) was two years of age when they returned. Even though she was probably too young to recall the journey, Mary traveled with her mother and father safely to return to her mother’s country. It is probable that the travel overseas over several weeks was overwhelming for Melbin while she cared for her first baby on board the steamer. There is conjecture in my family that Mary did not take the journey and was left behind with Melbin’s relatives. However, there is no note of Melbin let alone her daughter, Mary within shipping records.

Edward Oliver’s motives for taking a mother and her infant child to England is a site of conjecture although it is certain that when they returned to Western Australia, the overall servitude of Aboriginal people had dramatically increased. For example, in the shipping port of Cossack not far from Badimia country, some 104 Europeans employed 560 Aboriginal people, seventy-two ‘Asiatics’ and nineteen from the South Seas.<sup>350</sup> By 1886, those left without a means of subsistence warranted for a separate department being established to provide Aboriginal people who were destitute with food and clothing and to school Aboriginal children. The first traveling Protectors were appointed and a Chief Protector based in Perth. Many Aboriginal Elders saw this as spreading control over their people to a new level<sup>351</sup>. This level of control and certainty of their colonial success in Western Australia is indicated by a speech by Lord John Forrest in 1887. Granny was a small child when on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, Forrest’s speech to the geographical section of the British Association’s meeting was entitled ‘Geographical Work in Western Australia, 1870-1887’.<sup>352</sup> He reviewed exploratory expeditions through the Western Interior and drew attention to resources and future development of the North West. He also offered a ‘wonderful’ opportunity for investigations

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<sup>348</sup> Austen 1998:177

<sup>349</sup> Glengoil Ships manifesto Accession no. 503/1884

<sup>350</sup> Austen 1998:90

<sup>351</sup> Austen 1998:89

<sup>352</sup> Crowley 1971:89

into botany, zoology, geology and ornithology, and also into the “*manners and customs of its Aborigines*”<sup>353</sup>. By the following year in August 1888, Forrest left Perth to travel to Sydney to speak at the inaugural meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science about his experiences with Aboriginal people he had seen while surveying the interior including Badimia country.

Such pursuits bore no glimpse of the reality facing the 5,000 Aboriginal men imprisoned between 1841 and 1907 in Australia’s only Aboriginal gaol, Rottneest Island Prison off the Perth coast. By 1900, Aboriginal prisoners were predominantly male and 17 percent were under the age of 21<sup>354</sup>. Haebich<sup>355</sup> writes about the 1904 Roth Royal Commission that showed that “*boys as young as six years being brought in as witnesses (typically against family members) or charged with cattle killing.*” Even though police were given funds to transport and feed prisoners, young boys arrived in towns half-starved and in neck chains. The sentencing of prisoners was at the whim of the local bench often resulting in harsh sentences such as that dispensed in Halls Creek where a ten year old boy was given six month hard labour for cattle killing, or a boy of fifteen given ten months imprisonment for killing a goat. Such high rates of institutionalisation and incarceration of Aboriginal adults and children continued throughout the century. Aboriginal women’s traditional functions were either seriously truncated and pushed to the fringe in a foreign social environment or completely destroyed (like their men) as their communities were decimated and their society and culture dismembered and fragmented.

*During this process the position of black women plummeted from being co-workers of equal importance to men in the balanced use of the environment to that of thoroughly exploited beasts of burden. It fell from that of being valuable human resources and partners within traditional sexual relationships to that of degraded and often diseased sex objects and from that of being people of recognised spiritual worth to that of beings often afforded a virtual animal status in the eyes and the belief-systems of their exploiters*<sup>356</sup>.

Melbin and her daughter remained working on the stations owned by the Oliver brothers. In 1888, when Granny was ten years old, her father and his brothers sold Wydgee station, and moved south to establish Warriedar station, encompassing 72,200 hectares. The brothers had married their non-Aboriginal wives who were sisters from Dongara. My great-uncle George<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Crowley 1971:89

<sup>354</sup> Haebich 2000:210

<sup>355</sup> Haebich 2000:210

<sup>356</sup> Evans 1999:204

<sup>357</sup> Latham 2001:1

spoke of how Granny's father owned a gold mine called the King Solomon Mine and it was here that she was raised in her early life. Despite being considerably older than their spouses, the brothers fathered several children in their respective households. Being married to a European wife would have also increased the status of the brothers within the Irwin district especially considering that their wives were sisters from a prominent family in Dongara, a port town. It is evident that the brothers' fortune had increased over the period up until 1892 when gold was discovered south of Warriedar station at Pinyalling and Fields Find. With eyes on profiting from the boom in population and travellers to the district, Edward and his younger brother Thomas purchased and ran a traveller's inn by the ironically named 'Shadow of Death'. Then fortunes changed for Edward Oliver. His wife, Amy Amelia died in childbirth. Granny was 12 years old and assumed a care role with her half brothers and sisters. My great-uncle George told me that Granny was cautioned by the local police for giving too much brandy in the milk for her charges. Giving brandy was a common relief for ailment with children during this time as medicine was on short supply. This story has always filled me with a sense of what it must have been like for my great-grandmother to have been faced with a policeman for possibly the first time as a young girl without her mother to protect her.

### **Brandy in Milk**

***"What shall we do with you then?"***

The police constable boomed in his woolen blue brass buttoned uniform to the slim sullen chocolate skinned girl dressed in her only grey tattered pinafore.

***"Your master says his children slept all day and staggered around the house!"*** He growled. All the young girl could see was his fat stomach poking from over his leather belt.

The girl is silent looking blankly ahead. She is very tired.

***"You have it really good here. What makes me stop from sending you away to a lockup?"***

He bellowed and he spat as he spoke into her fine black hair and her downy skinned face.

The girl is silent and begins to allow tears to fall.

They fell for her mother away tending the master's sheep. She had made him wealthy.

They fell for the slave work she had done and was yet to do – the hopeless work that would make a grown woman sweat.

They fell for the crumbs she received from her master's plate as he became fat and prosperous on her ancestral lands.

Those tears were for the power the master had to call this blue uniformed monster with his red face.

These tears were from fear that he would do worse than a quick flogging.

He could have sent her away – far away from her mother and her family, from her land.

Brandy in milk worked before. It made them settle into their beds. It sweated out the frequent coughs they got. It was white man's magic. Magic that she obviously knew little about. Magic that had power she could wield when all other power was taken from her.

I embrace her, this girl and know that her eyes were open from then on.

**She wanted freedom and she made them know about it. These were her half-brothers and sisters anyway. She knew her father-boss didn't treat her the same as them simply because of the colour of her skin. She knew that she would one day be free and she would take whatever chance she could to get it.**

As the gold rush in the district was burgeoning, the hotel began to face closure due to lack of forage and alcohol. This pub with no beer or spirits reflected to me the inn's inability to meet demand such was the high number of travellers through the district. Serving them, behind the bar or cleaning tables was my great-grandmother. I have little doubt that Granny was helping to maintain the workings of the inn. Then suddenly, after her father travelled to his mining interest of Baron mine, he fell sick and died possibly of influenza. An epidemic was sweeping the district. It had already claimed the sister of his wife after she had been nursing patients at the local makeshift hospital in Yalgoo. Granny was 16 years old and virtually a woman in the eyes of whitemen. I surmise that she went to live with the family of Edward's younger brother, Thomas, and his wife until Granny met her future husband, Frances Arthur Latham<sup>358</sup>.

Meanwhile, Lord Forrest and his associates felt justified in providing the northern pastoralist with cheap and speedy transport between Geraldton and Mullewa for their wool and stores. He proposed building a farmer's railway in the southwest, a miner's railway in the east and a squatters' railway in the north. These lines would be linked with the private northern and southern lines, forming a radial network which gave all the agricultural, mining and southern pastoral areas easy access to the capital, Perth and its port of Fremantle. Those small-time squatters wanting to make quick money, such as Latham, could do so by shipping Kangaroo skins and other produce such as Sandalwood down on the railway.

*In ten years, Western Australia's population quadrupled, to nearly two hundred thousand in 1901. The gold-driven economy was booming.*<sup>359</sup>

Haebich<sup>360</sup> encompasses the era in which Granny entered into womanhood whilst working in the inn. She states that Western Australia was granted self-government in 1889. Granny was a seven-year-old working with her mother on the farm probably building fences and tending sheep. Haebich<sup>361</sup> continues by stating that the state was "*isolated, vast in area, small in population, parochial, patriarchal and very British*" Frequently referred to as the "*Cinderella*

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<sup>358</sup> Frances Arthur Latham held two previous alias'. They were Arthur Herbert Green and Arthur Groves. It is believed that his original name was O'Shea. He spoke of leaving his family in Ireland as a young man from Tipperary. He was an only child.

<sup>359</sup> Austen 1998:149

<sup>360</sup> Haebich 2000:209

<sup>361</sup> Haebich 2000:209

state” which had struggled economically since foundation, was now riding “*the crest of pastoral expansion and gold discoveries*” boom. The rest of Australia was being devastated by economic depression and droughts during the 1890s. Western Australia experienced “*unprecedented economic prosperity and development, population growth and social change*”. With these changes came new ideas such as “*universal suffrage, party politics, organized labour, a White Australia and Australian federation – a proposal initially not welcomed in the parochial west, geographically isolated as it was from the proposed centres of federal power. Many West Australians remained ambivalent about federalism. Many newcomers who made fortunes, and those who lost all, chose to remain in the west.*”<sup>362</sup>

### **A difficult marriage**

Francis Latham arrived in Perth on 6 March 1895 from Wardonga, Victoria. His profession is recorded as a street sweeper in Melbourne.<sup>363</sup> However, the story told by Uncle George is slightly different. Instead, he writes that his father’s real name was O’Shea. He came from Echuca leaving school to become a school teacher. He then changed his mind and joined the Merchant Navy. In 1892, his ship was traveling across to Western Australia.

*Father was always in trouble, always fighting with the other sailors, and the punishment for this was to be tied to the boson’s wheel and flogged. So when he got to Fremantle, father jumped ship. Then he changed his name to Latham and went north. The road from Fremantle to Perth back then was just jarrah blocks in the ground, he told me, and there was no train line.*<sup>364</sup>

He immediately travelled to Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie to work as a butcher. After making a small fortune he travelled into my Granny’s country as the butcher for the railway camp. This was a very smart move considering the opportunities that arose for a young man once the railway was established. On his travels, he met Granny working in a boarding house. She was 17 years old and it was 1899 nearly the beginning of a new century. The notion of traveling with Latham as his woman would have been an attractive alternative to her life at the time. Black women who made up a sizeable percentage of the northern station workforce continued to slave after sundown in their white bosses’ beds. This was not the life Granny would have wanted. I believe Granny seized her opportunity of freedom rather than being tied to servitude.

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<sup>362</sup> Haebich 2000:209

<sup>363</sup> Department of Native Affairs: Personal Card No. A.869 Frances Arthur Latham

<sup>364</sup> Latham 2001:1

This new freedom for Granny saw them travel into the interior of Granny's traditional country. Together, using Granny's skills of bush hunting and finding water, they established sandalwood camps alongside the railway. Sandalwood became a profitable income when it began to be shipped to India and Europe. It was during this time that Granny gave birth to her first child, Richard in 1900 in Mingenew, closely followed by May near Morawa in 1902, and Frances in 1904. It was in 1904 that tragedy struck her new family. Her eldest son, Richard drowned in a well trying to get a drink for his younger sister, May. Then they moved to Coorow to establish a farm where Granny had another daughter, Violet Elsie in 1905. Latham's decision to remain in Western Australia was especially made sweeter by the government backed initiative to grant generous land and financial incentives to any unemployed diggers to settle families on the land.

The year 1905 also had a significant impact upon all Aboriginal people in Western Australia. The Northern Times' editor called it a "bright notion" to make the Chief Protector of Aborigines the legal guardian of every full-blood Aboriginal person or part-Aboriginal child under the age of sixteen, which practically meant he had unlimited power over them. Austen<sup>365</sup> states that "*any Aboriginal woman found by police to be living with but not married to a white man now would be told: ask the Chief Protector if you can marry (most application were turned down), split up or be prosecuted.*" Haebich<sup>366</sup> states that the legal implications applicable to Granny's situation, as an unmarried mixed-race woman, were "*even more restrictive*" than most other clauses of the *1905 Aborigines Act*. Any Aboriginal woman needed to have permission from the Chief Protector of Aborigines to marry non-Aboriginal men, or those men faced being charged with cohabitation. More importantly to Granny, the Chief Protector of Aborigines became the legal guardian of Aboriginal and 'half-caste' children. Granny would have been forced to make a choice at least for the time being.

There were additional pressures facing Granny at this time. Her husband was beginning to drink heavily and was an aggressive drunk at that. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 1906, the Mingenew police reported the conditions Granny and her children were living under<sup>367</sup>. At 8am on the previous morning, Latham was officially warned by Constable O'Hearn under sections 34, 42 and 43 of the Aborigines Act. These sections pertain to the financial support of the father of a

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<sup>365</sup> Austen 1998:160

<sup>366</sup> Haebich 2000:187

<sup>367</sup> Mingenew Police Station (Occurrence Book) AN5/Mingenew Accession 665/Item 4

half-caste child, that Granny needed to be legally married to Latham with permission from the Chief Protector of Aborigines and finally that Latham was in fact guilty of an offence against the Act for cohabiting with Granny as an Aboriginal woman. In the occurrence book, it states that Granny's three living children aged four years, two years and six months were "*not very well provided for*". Granny is described by the Constable as "*very devout*" while Latham was "*not well spoke of*" by locals<sup>368</sup>. What is disturbing to read in these documents is the final summation by Constable O'Hearn stating that he was convinced that Granny and her young children were "*subjected to some very harsh treatment.*" The details of Latham's ill treatment are not stated, however, the course of events that followed this police intervention is significant in Granny's life.

In the Western Australian state records office, I found a letter written by the Rector of Dongara, J. W. Armstrong addressed to the Chief Protector of Aborigines dated 20<sup>th</sup> October 1906. The letter, included on a file for the Colonial Treasurer's Department entitled 'Aborigines', is to notify that Mary, my great grandmother, noted as a 'half-caste', was about to marry my great-grandfather, Mr Frances Latham, a white prospector from Marchagee<sup>369</sup>.

The rector wrote;

*I have looked carefully through the Aborigines Act and as the woman has not lived with blacks, I believe she is not an Aboriginal within the meaning of the Act that it is therefore necessary to refer the case to you. Please let me know at once if any such reference is necessary, quoting any clause of the Act which I may have overlooked. I have provisionally fixed November 5<sup>th</sup> as the date of the marriage so will be glad of an early reply.*<sup>370</sup>

This letter is revealing to me. Mary had convinced the pastor that she no longer associated with her mother's people even though, as oral history reveals, her descendents know this was far from her reality. Mary spoke Badimia language fluently and practiced its lore until she died. The letter also reveals how much power the Act had upon her life so much so that a pastor, a representative of the Church of England, worked with officialdom to enforce the Act<sup>371</sup> and that he was prepared not to marry her should permission be refused by the Aborigines Department.

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<sup>368</sup> It was reported by the Coorow-Waddy Database 2011 that on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1906 Francis Latham was stabbed by Francis Thomas of Coorow Station. Thomas was tried but found not guilty on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1906. No further details of the incident were recorded.

<sup>369</sup> Marchagee is another small town in the Mid-West district of Western Australia. See Appendix 1: Map of Western Australia Murchison Region

<sup>370</sup> Colonial Treasurer's Department Aborigines *Correspondence files*, Aborigines file number 873/06 p1&2

<sup>371</sup> The Pastor may have also been under legal obligation to work with authorities. A travelling pastor would have been particularly suitable for observing and notifying the Chief Protector of Aborigines of the unions between Badimia women and the colonials. This particular pastor was eventually reassigned as the head of the Swan Half-Caste home for children in 1916 presumably because of his work in reporting on the incidents of mixed marriages in the interior to state and church.

I cross referenced the date of the wedding to the dates of when my grandmother, great-uncles and aunties were born and I realised that Mary was 24 years old and already had four children to Latham by the time the letter was written. Illegitimate children of ‘mixed blood’ were highly vulnerable to removal by the authorities and Mary may have had to make her choices to live within the Act to protect her children. If it meant that she presented the appearance of rejecting her mother’s people then she would do so.

**Pressure**  
**It is sickening**  
**to contemplate**  
**the pressure**  
**she faced.**  
**This time...**  
**This law...**  
**She saw all around her how**  
**others children were being taken.**  
**Taken from their families.**  
**Taken for being mixed-blood**  
**just like her.<sup>372</sup>**

If *The Bulletin* of the period was any indication, the national leading weekly from coast to coast, blared, “*WE MUST KEEP THE BREED PURE. The half-caste usually inherits the vices of both races and the virtues of neither. Do you want Australia to be a community of mongrels?*”<sup>373</sup> Granny and Frances Latham were legally married on the railway platform in Coorow by the Pastor who wrote the letter. In 1907, Granny gave birth to another son, Frederick, her sixth child. With her children, she continued to travel with Latham along the railway line. In 1908, Granny helped Latham build a water reservoir at Latham Rock, a large granite rock about 3km south east of the current town site named after him. He is referred to in descriptions of the establishment of Latham town<sup>374</sup> as an early pastoralist of the region and had established a watering place here for stock being drove through the district. In this early time, Granny was droving with her husband and children in tow. Who knows how many other Badimia people worked with them during this time assisting with the making of profit for Latham and his new bride?

It was also in 1908 that Frances Latham again showed his violent behaviour and this time, it was reported by the Midland Advertiser on March 27<sup>th</sup> in a section entitled Minginew Police

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<sup>372</sup> Personal prose composed 22 March 2011

<sup>373</sup> Austen 1998:149

<sup>374</sup> Palmer 1999:120

Court.<sup>375</sup> The article covered the case of the police versus my great aunts and uncles who were charged with being neglected children. Again, Constable O’Hearn was the prosecuting policeman. This time a sworn statement is recorded from Granny herself. Her statement explains that on 11<sup>th</sup> February of that year, Granny asked Constable O’Hearn to take her away from the station in which Francis Latham owned in Jun Jun. She states that Latham had assaulted her with a leather belt splitting her head open. On March 5<sup>th</sup>, Granny states that she took her opportunity to flee when Latham did not return as expected that evening by loading her horse and cart with her children taking them to Coorow in an attempt to catch the mail train to Mingenew. However, on reaching there she had indeed missed the train. Granny gives account of telephoning Constable O’Hearn to meet her in Coorow as she was in “*great fear of Latham*”. She states that she and her children had nothing to eat and had previously tried to get away from Latham but he had caught her, ill-treated her and made her return with him. The article goes on by stating that Latham never made provision and sorely neglected her during her “*confinements*”<sup>376</sup>.

The article then gives the sworn statement of Constable O’Hearn who under oath states that on 11<sup>th</sup> February he went to Jun Jun station to find that Latham was absent from his property. Granny requested to be taken away “*owing to her husband’s continual cruelty to herself and her children.*” Constable O’Hearn then advised Granny to lodge a complaint with a justice of the peace as he could not interfere between her and Latham by law. He states that Granny told him “*it was impossible to get away from her husband to do so.*” In an almost feeble attempt, O’Hearn then says he told Granny that if Latham did not change and treat her better she was to notify him again. He then notes that in response Granny pleads with him to not warn Latham as she feared “*he might kill her afterwards*”. By the time O’Hearn goes to Coorow to meet Granny, who asked for protection from her husband, she had already hidden her children in the bush. With the help of O’Hearn, Granny went onto Mingenew and was cared for at the Police Station.

It is here that I believe Granny eventually returned to Latham out of fear. By October 23<sup>rd</sup>, according to the Yalgoo Police station report book, Latham had not changed. Granny had run away from Latham again. The report accounts for Latham being “*very cruel to her*”. This time her escape seemed more urgent for she took only one of her children, her clothes, a little amount

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<sup>375</sup> The Midland Advertiser, March 27<sup>th</sup> 1908

<sup>376</sup> Confinement usually referred to a woman’s period of pregnancy

of food, her gun and no money. The report states that Granny waited for an opportunity when Latham had gone to Marchagee for the day. She was apparently travelling towards Ninghan or Fields Find which are both significant destinations in my view. These places were safe to Granny because her family must have come from here and she knew that she would be protected. By this stage the Police Inspector, A Drurey was involved requesting a report by a Constable Jensen. On November 12 1908, Jensen responded to his superior by reporting that Granny had returned to Mingenew and thus returned to her husband at Jun Jun station.

In 1910, Mary's son Albert was birthed stillborn. In 1911, Latham sold Jun Jun station and moved back to Coorow where Granny could live closer to town and Latham's treatment of her was under more scrutiny. There were no further reports of Latham's cruelty to Granny or her children from then on. By 1912 Granny had another son, Edward. Edward or 'Ted' was considered by my Uncle George and my Nana as Granny's favourite son. It was in the following year that Melbin, Granny's mother, passed away. By that same year, the Public Works Department decided that the site of Latham was appropriate for a town site. Such an honour was preserved for the prosperous settlers in the area. Latham's prosperity was evident in his entry in the Western Australian pioneers index 1841-1905<sup>377</sup> which notes his sheep and wheat holdings were over 300,000 acres to the east. He owned land in the Perth metropolitan area and had gold interests. In 1914, another son was birthed, George, in a sacred place called Waddi Forest. By 1916, Granny gave birth to another son, Arthur, and her ninth child. Along with her surviving seven children, she moved to Banna station newly leased by her husband. It was here that my grandmother, her tenth child was born and named Mary after her mother. Soon after my Nana's birth, my Uncle George gives some insight into how they lived with their father:

*In 1919, father went away and bought a block, which he then named Banna station (today it's called Mouroubra station) south of where we used to live at Paynes Find, and he went out and sunk a well and built a bough shed for a house. At the end of 1919 we all went out there, and in 1920 we bought a thousand sheep from Ninghan station and drove them across - about sixty miles. We kept them going for two years, till we left in 1922.<sup>378</sup>*

An indication of the strength of Granny as a woman is revealed when realising that her last child, Dorothy was born in 1921. She was the mother of nine children and still droving sheep

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<sup>377</sup> Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in association with the Registrar General's office 1994:230

<sup>378</sup> Latham 2001:3

for thousands of miles. Uncle Georges writes about his life with his mother at the time and it shows the works that Granny undertook. In this case, trapping Dingos that were ‘worrying’ the sheep they were droving.

*I remember one other incident that happened when I was about six years old. We were trapping dogs as they came near the sheep that we were shepherding on this station. One day mother went down to the place where the trap was to set it up, and I'd toddled along behind her. All of a sudden, this dog came bounding out of the bush straight at me. He was a dingo, caught in a trap, dragging it along with him. I saw him coming, so I grabbed her dress and ran around behind her, but then I saw him coming from the other side, so I ran back around, still hanging onto her dress. Mother knocked me off her dress with her hand and said, 'Get back; stop still!' And she shot him while he was within a few feet of us. Anyhow, he gave us a big fright.<sup>379</sup>*

Granny was 39 years old and an experienced farm worker capable of building fences, living out of a tent with several young children whilst droving horses and sheep thousands of kilometres. Frances Latham was a man of means and more importantly, a successful colonist. He began to travel to Perth more frequently and it was shortly after 1922, he purchased a property in Bassendean, a relatively rural setting in metropolitan Perth. Granny and her children were moved there.

*When we left, the whole family walked the sheep to Ballidu, where father had ordered a special train to take the three thousand sheep. The horses went on the train, we put the spring cart, the dray and the sulky onto open railway trucks, and the lot of us went down to Midland. The sheep were put off there at the saleyard and we went on to West Guildford - now called Bassendean - and unloaded there and went out to Eden Hill, about a mile away. We had a farm there, and that's where we went to school from 1922 to 1924.<sup>380</sup>*

However, her husband's frequent use of alcohol became a growing concern to Granny. When interviewing my aunt Barbara (“Barb”) who is my mother's younger sister, I was able to build knowledge about Granny's life with Frances Latham in these more mature years. She is very blunt about her grandfather's relationship with her grandmother during this period.

Barb: ... and with Granny, well her husband... well, first of all, he used her... in the sense of using the legal system, the act, that was brought in that gave incentives to the women to marry the men in order to get the land...

CD: ... white men, that is...

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<sup>379</sup> Latham 2001:13

<sup>380</sup> Latham 2001:3

Barb: ... yes, and then he was able to then use her skills, as a shepherdess and worker to find the water, find the gold, whatever else they did... and then, takes her to Perth... well here's a woman who is her own boss, is used to running her own farm, goes freely through the town, is well respected... so goes to Perth, and she can't be out after six because of the colour of her skin... she's incarcerated on a farm because of the colour of her skin...

CD: This is in Bassendean?

Barb: This was... she was down here when she was in Bassendean, but she was incarcerated on her farm in Coorow too.

At some point after settling in Bassendean, when her youngest child was four years old, Frances Latham left the family to conduct a scandalous affair with the daughter of a prominent Perth family. In the early 1920s, he fathered a daughter with her and then a son in 1930. Both children were born out of wedlock and yet supported financially and emotionally by their father. This happened while his original family with Granny were facing destitution.

## The broken family

Barb: ...first of all I'm a woman in that era who had no rights to do anything, on top of that I'm an Aboriginal woman who's got less rights than the white woman. Less rights... the white woman was down here, and the black woman was way down here. ...So she's got all these stripes against her, but she still had the courage to say "*No, you guys it's not gonna be like that!*" And then basically Granny did the same by going back to the farm without her husband.

CD: Really... but I thought they'd broken up before then... or did he deliberately take her...?

Barb: Oh I think the marriage was well on the rocks but...

CD: ... but he'd helped her in Bassendean, why? They weren't broken up then...

Barb: No. I thought that he was probably getting to that age where he couldn't be bothered working out in the bush anymore, he had made his money... came down to the city, because it would be easier living in the city, you see? And when he gets here, he doesn't have to give her the respect he had to give her in the bush. Because the men in the bush would have said, "*Hey what are you treating your wife like that for?*" Because they knew her, you see, because she was respected. Whereas in Perth, it was just open slather, he could treat her like he wanted to, and plus you know, live it up and do whatever he wanted... Because that's the way I took it, the marriage was falling to bits anyway, and she just said "*Well I'm off. I'm outta here. I'm not going to put up with this in Perth.*" And

it was very courageous to do that. Because she knew he'd left her... I mean I know what it's like being a single mum, it's scary! And you don't get any support.

The Native Welfare Department<sup>381</sup> shows Granny approaching the Deputy Chief Protector of Aborigines on May 27<sup>th</sup> 1925 to request that Frances Latham pay money to feed and clothes his children. This document was retrieved by my cousins in Adelaide<sup>382</sup> states the pedigree of Granny. It also states simply that Granny's mother was an "*aboriginal*<sup>383</sup> *woman Melbin*" and that "*Mrs Latham's father and mother were not married*". Granny produced her marriage papers to the Department showing she was married to Latham on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1906 at Coorow. The report then goes on by stating that Latham was now farming in Wongan Hills. Granny speaks through this report by stating that she "*lived with him until about two and a half years ago, when he bought her a house in Bassendean allowing her two pound ten shillings per week.*" The report then provides Granny's voice again here by explaining that she "*wishes to return to her husband on the farm, but states he will not have her.*" He would not have her nor their children and although the report says that Latham paid her regularly, Granny was feeding six children including her out of work oldest daughter aged 23 years of age through to her youngest, Dorothy aged four. The report then lists the names, ages and location of their children. The report writer miss spells my grandmother's name as Wally rather than Molly. My grandmother's activities were stated as "*attending school*" while her younger sister was "*with mother*". The report then continues onto describe sentence by sentence the whereabouts and work activity of the older children. The eldest, May, is noted as generally working in the Wongan Hills district as a domestic but due to illness was staying with her mother temporarily. Frank is working on Ninghan Station as a twenty-year-old. Violet (18) and Fred (16) are on the farm owned by their father working for him. The report then concludes with a statement that Granny has her other children permanently and they all attend school. The last statement in this document describes what the purpose of visiting the Chief Protectors office was. Granny was asking for help to obtain "*additional money from her husband for the support of her children*". When I asked my grandmother is two pound ten shillings per week was enough money to feed six children and her mother, she said it was hardly a days' worth of food. In a personal family correspondence written by my grandmother's niece<sup>384</sup>, Mrs Elsie Elliott as

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<sup>381</sup> Native Welfare Card File A868 C.S.O 791/25 attached to file 145/32 (Dated 27/5/1925)

<sup>382</sup> These cousins are Uncle Gary Passmore (Great-Auntie Dot's son) and his daughter, Kiara Passmore who have greatly assisted me by requesting Native Welfare records through the Department of Indigenous Affairs.

<sup>383</sup> [*sic*]

<sup>384</sup> Daughter to Violet Taylor (nee Latham)

such “*He [Latham] paid child support until each child turned 14 years*”.<sup>385</sup> Two of Granny’s children, Ted (13) and George (11) would soon be cut from their father’s support payments. My auntie Barb poignantly gave her account of Granny living in Bassendean in her interview with me.

Barb: Well, she’s all of a sudden treated like a second-class citizen!

CD: Even though she was married to a white man?

Barb: She was married, she had her own property, she had her own funding, and all of that sort of thing... she was a good upright citizen, brought her children up to be good upright citizens and stuff, but no, she still wasn’t good enough... and then she left. So really, she’s left and obviously left without any finances, because she had to write that letter to get him to send funds and stuff...

Again, Uncle George writes about the life they led whilst living in Bassendean without the protection of their father. His account gives a clear indication of how she and her children earn money to survive.

*During this time, when I was going to school at Bassendean in 1922 or 1923, I used to go out and find old jarrah logs and chop a cart load of wood during the week. On a Saturday, I’d harness old Nobby up, and I’d take my mother, down and deliver the wood to people. I’d ask the kids at school if their parents wanted a cart load of wood and I’d get orders that way. Later on I got a push-bike, and I used to ride around and take orders.*

Further on in the account of this time, Uncle George elaborates on this period in his life and that of the family surrounding him.

*Mother and Father had decided to split up at this time – our Bassendean home, which was a little weatherboard house without lining was far too cold for mother. She was used to the warmer country further north and had endured the cold long enough. So father bought some blocks and went off to develop farms on them and mother took us kids and headed north<sup>386</sup>.*

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<sup>385</sup> Elsie Elliott (Cousin) written correspondence dated 2001

<sup>386</sup> Latham 2001:8

### **The Coldness**

**We haven't seen him in weeks.  
He is with her.  
She had his baby  
While his own babies, our babies go hungry.  
But he can do as he pleases.  
He is a man – a white man!  
He is his own master now!  
I chop wood for the fire and to sell to white families.  
The children help me chop and sell.  
I save my pennies.  
I won't spend another winter down here.  
This coldness seeps from him, the people and the land.  
I don't care if the coppers take me to Mogumber.  
I have horses and two spring carts.  
I'm going home to my country.  
My kin with help me.  
I have a good name in Coorow.  
I can work.  
I can clear land.  
I can tend sheep.  
I can birth babies.  
I can make fences.  
He can have his woman and the money we made together.  
I have my babies.  
They won't go hungry or sick anymore.**

Through oral histories, it is known that whilst in Bassendean, several of Granny's children contracted Diphtheria and it was here my Nana survived pneumonia as a small child. Such a dire situation would have forced Granny to make firm decisions for the future of her children. Meanwhile, the Native Welfare Department were doing their own investigations into Latham's property holdings so that he might make provisions for his children. However, when Department wrote to the commissioner of police to report on Latham's "*financial position*" through the investigations by the local police officer in the region of Wongan Hills, the officer's anonymous report included in the memorandum by the Commissioner of Police states that Latham held 2000 acres in the district. Described as "*light land, very little improvements on same*", Latham had only 130 acres under crop last season giving a fair result. This report concludes by stating that the Wongan Hills property was just about to "*change hands*". The police officer apparently tried unsuccessfully to gain more detail into who was buying Latham's property from him. A hand-written note on this document then instructed the Native Welfare Department staff to approach the Lands Department to find out whether the property changed hands because locals would not divulge their business dealings or to implicate one of their own. The investigations into Latham's capacity concludes with a small statement from the Lands Department claiming Latham held no land in his name but had at one time held 22

leases in the region. Then a hand-written memo is written in these Native Welfare documents stating the following:

*I do not think we can do any more in this matter. If Mrs Latham calls the minister may he explain it to her. Evidently she did not wish to have any communication with this department until she had explained it with her white husband.*

From my perspective, this statement shows to me that Granny is preparing for all contingencies. She obviously had a very volatile relationship with Latham and was already in a very vulnerable position with her children. Approaching the Department before discussing financial matters with her husband gave Granny the leverage she needed to plead her case. The Department was hopeful that Granny would drop her pursuit of support from her husband even though the property he held in Wongan hills was being sold and two of his own children were working for him. According to the Coorow-Waddy Database, Latham's holdings were more. He had 5,000 acres in Wongan Hills which he then sold to the Agricultural Department. Latham then went onto develop a series of 5,000 acre blocks each year until he left Western Australia for the Agricultural Department for their research farms.<sup>387</sup>

Without the support of her wealthy white husband, Granny travelled north with her children and belongings piled into two spring carts. I envision Granny travelling along the train tracks shooting kangaroos to feed her family. Shortly after arriving in Coorow in 1925, Granny contracted a life-threatening illness: Rheumatic fever. What followed was a time of apparent disruption and trauma. The authorities intervened to apprehend Granny's children for the first time. Again, Uncle George gives a poignant description of the period:

*Mother took us kids up to Coorow, which took us a week. The winter set in pretty heavy and mother had no house - only a tent. She got rheumatic fever and was taken on the train to hospital in Perth. Eventually the kids were taken away to a convent, and I was supposed to go too, but I didn't. I dodged them and stayed in the camp on my own. Then the police came down on the Saturday morning train from Carnamah, and the old storekeeper, who was a JP, drove the policemen in his old Ford to come and pick me up. But there was a sand patch just up the road from the camp, and every time he came to the sand patch, I'd hear him change the old Ford into a lower gear to get across the sand. So I'd go out the back of the camp and into the scrub, and I'd wait till they left, then I'd go back home. I lived like that for a couple of years.*

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<sup>387</sup> Coorow-Waddy Database 4:2010

Then Granny came back from hospital with her three youngest children. They had been cared for by the Saint John of Gods Convent in West Subiaco. The children started school in Coorow.

*We'd moved into a place that mother and my older brother Fred had organised. This was a place with corrugated iron roof, and the walls were made of Super bags opened up and painted with whitewash.<sup>388</sup>*

For a brief moment, the family began to rally. Granny became well known for doing the work of a man. She would chop firewood for locals and was known as a skilled tracker.<sup>389</sup> Her exceptional abilities are evident in the record of her finding and saving a missing non-Aboriginal youngest, Marion D. Johns who had run away at night and was found by Granny sleeping on the train track just as a train was due into Corrow station. It is also recorded how Granny helped a local farmer named Milton J. Tilly to assist him find stock. She also revealed a poisonous plant that was causing Tilly's sheep to die in large numbers. Her skills were soon sought after by surrounding non-Aboriginal farmers. To round this off, my great grandmother was an excellent shot teaching her skills to all who approached her. Granny soon had enough money to buy a 160-acre plot to the south west of the Coorow town site. In addition to her other occupations, Granny ran a farm productive enough to feed her family. Uncle George explains how he travelled with his mother delivering produce from their small farm when yields were good.

*My mother was a very good rifle shot. ...One time, we were going up on the train from Moora to Coorow, and out on the sand plain, off the road a bit, there was a Bush Turkey. The guard pulled the train up, and she shot the turkey through the neck. In them days, you were allowed to shoot – there were no restrictions on turkeys. When we were kids she taught us to shoot too. I've been using a rifle ever since I was about six years old.*

## **Stolen children**

Then suddenly and disruptively in 1930, Francis Latham paid a visit. When I asked Uncle George about his visit he told me that his father did not like what he saw despite Granny's prosperity without him. Latham felt that some intervention on his part was needed in the way his younger children were to be raised. He was either notified by Coorow town folk or the authorities to address the situation. Uncle George said to me bluntly that he felt his father did not want my grandmother and Great-Auntie Dot "marrying with the town blacks" as Uncle George told me. Latham decided to removed Molly (Mary) who was 12 years old and Dot

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<sup>388</sup> Latham 2001:9 (Once the superphosphate contents had been used up by farmers, the big, empty 'super' bags were in great demand and put to a multitude of uses by the thrifty or the poor.)

<sup>389</sup> Coorow-Waddy Database, 1:2010

(Dorothy) a young 9-year-old to Saint Joseph's Orphanage in Wembley. Granny was legally and physically unable to prevent the removal. She could not read or write. Granny was again gravely ill with a heart condition due to her earlier bout of fever. She let her two youngest children go with Latham hoping that they would receive a good education and learned a skilled trade as was related by my Uncle. Uncle George told me in an obvious older brother view of his two youngest siblings that he felt the two girls were becoming lazy living at home with their mother. The parting was still no less painful for any of the reasons why these children were taken from their home and their mother. Uncle George relates how their father refused to have them sit inside the car's cabin with him on the long journey to Perth from Coorow. My then 89-year-old grandmother cried when I spoke to her of her removal and seeing her mother's face when they left riding on the back of their father's flat back truck.

CD: And how did you feel about going far away from your mother?

Molly: *[sigh]*

CD: Was it something you wanted to do or? It must have been hard, was it?

Molly: Yes! *[Nana starts to weep]*

CD: It was?

Molly: Mmmm *(in affirmative continues to weep)*

Following this traumatic period, Granny's life became silent from my family's oral history and within official records. There is no known knowledge what she did until my grandmother came back into her life. Some of my family members have said that Granny worked her small farm and eventually took on child-minding for non-Aboriginal townfolk such as Mary Hirst<sup>390</sup>

For the next 10 years away from her youngest children, Granny saw them physically on one single visit. One of only two existing photographs<sup>391</sup> of Granny in existence was taken by my grandmother as a young girl of her mother. It is at the train station in East Perth just before her mother leaves from her only visit to them at the orphanage. Whenever I gaze at this photography of Granny, I always see her large heavily veined hands first of all. Her hands tightly hold onto her purse as she braces for the photographer her daughter. She is dressed

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<sup>390</sup> Mary Hirst interview 26/4/07

<sup>391</sup> See Appendix 10: Photograph of Mary Latham (Nee Oliver) taken by my grandmother Molly as a child. East Perth Train Station circa 1930s.

neatly in the fashion of the 1930s with pale shiny silk stockings hanging loosely. Granny looks proud and resilient to me as if passing her strength towards her daughter and to me in this photograph. There is no official record of Granny's visit with her daughters on that day. I think my grandmother would have been in her late teens because she purchased her first camera just prior to leaving the orphanage.

Haebich<sup>392</sup> asserts that of all the states during this time, Western Australia's system of institutionalisation and removal of Aboriginal children was the most separate from mainstream child welfare processes. It was also the most extreme in terms of powers to remove children. She reflects that welfare in the state was in its relative infancy. The problems of huge distances favoured measures that ensured children were quickly removed by local police officers and others such as white parents. Such was the entrenched white racism which pervaded the state. There was no clear definition of 'legal guardianship' either. Under nineteenth-century common law it encapsulated the full range of rights and powers an adult could exercise in respect to the welfare and upbringing of a child. This was a considerable move away from mainstream practices. For white people, parental guardianship was only displaced following the death of the parent or by court order in the 'best interest' of the child. There were no such limits on legal guardianship of Aboriginal children in Western Australia. If a white man divorced his Aboriginal wife, then the children of that union remained the legal 'property' of their white fathers with rights to decide for their future. It is with these rights that Latham drove his daughters down to Perth. The official registrar document<sup>393</sup> for Saint Joseph's orphanage states that Molly was 12 years 4 months and Dorothy was 9 years and 9 months. Their placement at the orphanage was paid for by their father who is noted to reside at 76 John Street, West Perth. This ensured that no detailed records of their care and behaviour were kept by this Catholic institution. The only second entry at the orphanage is the baptism of Molly noted as a convert to Catholicism on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1935. My grandmother was 17 years old. Aunt Dot was baptised on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1937 when she was 15 years old<sup>394</sup>.

Haebich<sup>395</sup> notes that legal guardianship was usually intended to ensure independence from authority for young people who had matured. This was not observed and, particularly for 'half-caste' or 'quarter-caste' girls who, as they matured, were subject to increasing surveillance in

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<sup>392</sup> Haebich 2000:187

<sup>393</sup> Correspondence from Jeannine Heinrichs, Mercy Community Services dated 26/02/07

<sup>394</sup> Personal Correspondence L. Pushong (Mercy Centre Historian) to the Author,

<sup>395</sup> Haebich 2000:187

order to control their sexuality. Molly and Dot were made to stay at Saint Joseph's until they were 21 years old and 19 years respectively. The detail of their time at St Josephs will be described in the next chapter about my grandmother. It is important to state that when I interviewed my grandmother about being taken from her mother, her expression of extreme sorrow was very disturbing to me as I was finally confronted by the wrongs done to my Nana. Even as an elderly woman, I witnessed her lifelong attachment to her mother. Greater forces were at work surrounding Granny and her children. The economy was again demanding Aboriginal workers to build the interests of the wudjula patriarchy. My grandmother and her sister were deemed highly suitable for future employment as domestic servants.

*The scanty records indicate that more girls were taken than boys, reflecting the demand for female domestic servants, concerns to control their sexuality and to protect them from sexual abuse, and the determination to transform them into good Christian wives and mothers.<sup>396</sup>*

Granny's subsequent life was one of solitude and of travelling the district she knew well. She remained on the Coorow farm eventually building a mud-brick dwelling and began to earn a living by doing farm work in the district. Most work was performed using her team of horses, Bonnie and Prince. They were large shire horses and were much loved into old age. Granny's work with her team included clearing land for crops, mustering sheep, building fences and cleaning wool. However, when the world war struck, her movements became restricted. Auntie Barb describes the period as follows:

Barb: During the war there was a rumour that came down that the natives in the Pacific Islands were assisting the Japanese. So all the Aboriginal people were round up and incarcerated. And she [Granny] was... only because she had such a well standing in the community there, that they... she wasn't allowed to leave the farm. And Aunty May had to go into town and get the stores. And if she did leave, she had to notify the authorities of where she was going. It was only an excuse... to once again either move the people off the land and lock them up, or control, you know control her and what she could do there. It was just an excuse... a lie...<sup>397</sup>

In the life of Frances Latham, things were turning in unexpected ways. Two wudjula police constables of Perenjori raised issues in writing to the Minister for the North-West laying claims that they believed Latham was Aboriginal himself. A series of correspondence is recorded in the Native Welfare documents my family have viewed.<sup>398</sup> The file begins with a personal memo

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<sup>396</sup> Haebich 2000:228-229

<sup>397</sup> Barbara Dowling interview 50-51:01/02/07

<sup>398</sup> Department of Native Affairs file 1236 Accession 38.

addressed to the Commissioner of Native Affairs stating that Latham had been interviewed by the minister himself stating he was of the opinion that *“this man is definitely of white blood.”* It continues on by stating that Latham *“admits”* to having married a *“half-caste”*. At the time of their marriage Latham was the Station-Master of railways for Coorow Township. The document then instructs that the police be notified that the Granny’s children not come under the treatment given to half-castes at the time. The message is dated 4<sup>th</sup> December 1939 and within three days of this message the Commissioner of Native Affairs writes to his deputy arguing that Latham *“is a white man.”* The Deputy then responds with his own eugenic theories about the heritage of Latham’s sons. Of whom Edward (Ted) Latham seems to be the focus of the writer’s musing. He writes *“there must be a kink in the blood of the Lathams. ...Edward Latham is white but his brothers “are undoubtedly half-caste.”* The Deputy’s paragraph goes further by presenting his assumptions about Granny’s biology by claiming *“something has directed the colour of her offspring, except Edward Latham, to her own dark colour. I think we might be able to determine the matter if we can ascertain the ancestry of Mrs. Latham’s father, Edward Oliver.”*<sup>399</sup>

The next letter on the file is a letter by the Commissioner of Native Affairs himself writing to Constable White, Policeman for North Canamah and Constable Fiebig, Protector of Natives, Perenjori. This document notifies these officials that the children of this union are *“quarter-caste”*. It goes further by stating government policy that *“it is understood that the children under 21 years of age do not live as natives, they are of course not in any way subject to the jurisdiction of this Department. Such children as are 21 years of age and upwards are not natives in law.”* Then on 15<sup>th</sup> December, a letter is addressed to Latham by the Minister for North West stating that the Constables concerned have been communicated with stating that the minister was satisfied that Latham is a person of *“European nationality”*<sup>400</sup> The letter ends with a patronizing air stating that this information would *“prove satisfactory to you and put your mind at rest.”* The next letter is Latham himself responding in writing to the Minister for North West dated January 8<sup>th</sup> 1940. Latham states that he is satisfied as far as he is concerned because his nationality has been established. What remains of a concern for him is *“the status of my children.”* He continues by requesting the assurance that the names of his children are *“not on the files of the Department of Native Affairs.”* This last sentence is underlined in bold.

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<sup>399</sup> Department of Native Affairs file 1236 Accession 38 dated 7.12.1939

<sup>400</sup> Department of Native Affairs file 1236 Accession 42 dated 15.12.1939

The Assistant Secretary to the Minister then writes to the Commissioner of Native Affairs whereupon the pedigree of the Latham children is made specific. Not only does it state that they are “quadroons” but that at the time of this discussion, my Auntie Dorothy was 18 years of age. It states that Fred, Edward and Arthur Latham are married to three of the Galbraith girls notes as also being quadroons but noting that Frank Latham had married Dorothy Nannup noted as a “half-caste”. The writer then researches and states that there is no record of any of the other siblings to be married. The names of the children appear in their records and states categorically that “*information about persons possessing native blood is invaluable to our records.*” The next memo recorded on file is that of the Commissioner of Native Affairs writing to the Acting Minister for the North-West stating that it is necessary to records the names of Latham’s children with the department just as many white people also appear in their records but that “*this does not imply that a slur is cast upon them*”. The Commissioner then directs that Latham be advised that government records are confidential. In an amazing assertion, the Commissioner then writes that Latham should mind his own business and that “*whether the names of his family appear on the files of the Department of Native Affairs or not is a matter with which he need no concern himself.*” A letter is then addressed to Latham personally from the Acting Minister for the North-West. It repeats the Commissioner’s sentiments from the memo but then also adds that the department “*appreciates the motives prompting [Latham] in this connection, but [he] need have no worries on the matter whatsoever, and, I can assure you that no good purpose can be achieved by pursuing the matter any further.*”<sup>401</sup>

Frances Latham’s response to this letter is revealing about the motives for his original concerns about his children’s surveillance by the department. His letter dated 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1940 states that he has a daughter who is under 21 years of age. He then writes forcefully that “*if through some mistaken idea of the Commissioner of Native Affairs (of whom I have no confidence) my daughter were to be sent to the Moore River Settlement, the consequences might be very serious. Horrible reports have been circulated as to what has happened at the settlement. Details of which you could get from the Leader of the Opposition. The fact that he was deterred by the presence of ladies from telling the House of Assembly, the details indicate that nature of what he had to say. Having given you this reason for pursuing this matter to a finish. I will now ask you a plain question and ask for a plain answer to it and that is what law, the Department of Native Affairs is acting under in retaining the names of my children on the records of the*

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<sup>401</sup> Department of Native Affairs file 1236 Accession 48 dated 18.01.1940

*Department? Give Act and Section? Either your Department is acting within the law or it is not. No person has more respect for the law than myself, and if your Department's actions are legal, I will go no further with the business but I think I am entitled to know your authority. Please answer that question plainly without shuffling and I will thank you.*"<sup>402</sup> What happens next is revealing about the way the Minister handled such challenges by men such as Latham. The Commissioner of Native Affairs writes to the Minister for the North West by stating that Latham should be asked to seek legal advice and concerning the "horrible reports" circulated by the Leader of the Opposition about Moore River Native Settlement be noted. However, the Commissioner simply that to pursue future correspondence with F.A. Latham is "useless". The final letter on this Native Affairs file is addressed the Latham by the Minister for the North-West. It states that the Department "had no further control, and has no desire to interfere any more with either you or any member of your family. Instructions to this effect has been forwarded to the police at both towns of Perenjori and Carnamah, so that I have given you all the protection you have asked for."<sup>403</sup> Now in the face of this, you again raise the question of your family which has already been straightened out, as you should agree if you will again read my correspondence of 15<sup>th</sup> December last. I wish you to understand that I do not intend writing to you any further on this subject, but if you so happened that you desired to personally interview me when next in Perth, you are welcome to do so."<sup>404</sup>

By 1940, Chief Protector of Aborigines A. O. Neville and his drive to 'make black go white' lapsed with the shift in public concern to the arena of war and the drain on resources and manpower for the war effort. When the war ended, public exposure of Nazi eugenic-based race atrocities turned local attitudes against Neville's vision and policies for social assimilation of Aboriginal people grew support. Neville's determination to 'breed out the black' remained part of departmental practice until the end of the 1940s and left a painful legacy for the 'quarter-caste' children in Western Australia who were part of his experiment in social and biological engineering.<sup>405</sup> Apparently, my grandmother wrote to her mother from the orphanage on several occasions. However, it was difficult for Granny to reply because she had to ask someone to write for her. In 1946, Molly got married and along with her husband (my grandfather, Robert Dowling) they attempted to make a living in Perth to support their growing family.

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<sup>402</sup> Department of Native Affairs file 1236 Accession 51 dated 03.02.1940

<sup>403</sup> Author's emphasis

<sup>404</sup> Department of Native Affairs file 1236 Accession 55 dated 16.02.1940

<sup>405</sup> Haebich 2000:279

## **Granny's final 'walkabout'**

The next public account for Granny's life was found in the Mirror newspaper<sup>406</sup> in 1951. The title of the article was 'A Mother of Nine Went 'Walkabout', and began with a poem of unknown origin. The poem said "*She had a dark and flashing eye, and her hair hung down in ring-e-lets. She was a nice girl, a dusky girl- but one of the d-roving kind*". The article then begins by stating that this "*was Mary Latham's form.*" The author states that Granny would cook, drove, prospect and '*do most things, in short, so long as it was in the bush*'. This surprising article continues giving account of Francis Latham petitioning the court for a divorce from Granny. Latham's lawyer, Fred Curran asserts that Granny had personally given him some small gold nuggets once. The presiding judge, who ironically named Justice Virtue, looked at the record of the Latham marriage stating that he could not believe that Granny was a restless wife. He stated "She brought up nine children. She couldn't have been THAT restless!" Latham then assured the judge that Granny "*had native blood and she went walkabout when the moon was full.*" I find this to be such an amazing description of my great grandmother. The article then continues with the judge stating how odd it was that Latham and Granny were married on the railway station in Coorow. Latham states "Well, there wasn't anything else there." Latham then asserts that Granny went 'walkabout' in 1925. This year corresponded with her fleeing the Bassendean property to return to Coorow and to establish her home on the outskirts of town with her children. It was also the year she contracted life-threatening rheumatic fever.

The article in the Mirror newspaper then concludes by stating that Granny had come knocking on Latham's door a second time in 1944, all be it briefly. She had given him '*peace offers*'. However, this lasted a week before she '*went walkabout again.*" The article then concludes that Granny had 'deserted' her husband. It is interesting how the journalist then named him 'Frank' Latham stating how he was given an order nisi (divorce) on the strength of his argument. I believe Granny was not present at the court case but rather living on her property in Coorow. Mary Latham was now free of her violent and exploitative husband.

In 1955, Granny got someone to dictate a letter to her daughter, my grandmother. The letter reads of Granny's continued ill health and her desire for Molly and her husband, Robert Dowling ('Bob') to come to Coorow to help run her farm and find work. This is the only letter

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<sup>406</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1951, 'A Mother of Nine Went 'Walkabout', The Mirror Newspaper, page 4.

that exists of Granny's corresponding with her daughter. The letter is dated 16 November and reads:

*Dear Daughter*

*Just a few lines to let you know that I am going up to the hospital at Three Springs. I saw the Doctor yesterday and he asked me to go up to the hospital. I have not been too well for some time and I don't know how long I will be away. The Chap that has been staying here with me, he had promest [promised] that he will do his best to look after everything for me. Bob has been talking to this man so he can tell you more about things. I will send you a wire from the hospital to let you know how long I might be in hospital. I am wrighting (writing) on behalf of your Mother<sup>407</sup>*

It was shortly afterwards that my grandmother, her husband and then five children travelled to Coorow to stay on Granny's property. Auntie Barb gives a description of the way Granny related to non-Aboriginal members of the town of Coorow that she witnessed when she and her family lived there as children.

Barb: And now, I can see. I can understand. She's even to be more admired for what she would have had to put up with, as in the racism in the town. And just the way she would have had to survive to support herself. Because when we lived there, we weren't financially supportive of her, she had to cart her own water from the well physically, every day. No running water, no electricity.

CD: So did you ever see any of the town folks engaging with her?

Barb: No.

CD: No?

Barb: We weren't allowed to have visitors, we were told not to bring any of the children home from school. We never interacted with them, and I never saw my Granny interact because I never went to town with her. She would go to town, she must have walked to town I suppose - I never saw her. Or whether she went with a horse and cart, I don't know.

This interaction with the towns' people was described by Mary Hirst (nee McGilp) as being one of caring for the children and infants of the non-Aboriginal women in the town. This would have forced some strong alliances with the non-Aboriginal women in the town.

Mary: Well it would be in the fifties, 1952 and 53, she was definitely friends with (*withheld due to confidentiality*) because that was when she used to baby sit their babies.

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<sup>407</sup> Mary Latham correspondence 16/11/1055

- CD: For who?
- Mary: Well they lived at the back of me.
- CD: Oh right, this is Granny.
- Mary: [It was] Granny. And if they wanted to go out to a dance or anything, then she would baby sit the kids.
- CD: Oh really?
- Mary: So I think I was one of the ones she used to baby-sit for.
- CD: Oh right!
- Mary: Yeah, she did lots of little things, she was a very caring person, you know.

Auntie Barb discussed her own impressions of her grandmother whilst living so close to her in Coorow. She speaks here about Granny's demeanour and how even as a child there were questions about her grandmother's positioning in the town.

- Barb: Whereas Granny was approachable. But you had to approach her with respect, yes, and it was just unspoken... that you did.
- CD: Do you have any vivid memories of your time with her that you'd like to talk about?
- Barb: I remember her digging holes for fence posts, squattin' on the ground, digging the hole to put a fence post in. I remember her driving the horse and cart. I remember her stretching the skins out, the kangaroo skins, and she dried them. And feeding the chooks, I remember her with the chooks sitting on my lap, and she would put her emu oil on their heads where the fleas were, to stop the fleas. And then we'd sit in her little bail shed when it was hot. We were allowed to go in there when it was hot, and she'd water the bail shed and water the ground, and it was cool in there. And we used to go once a week to her place to listen to the radio. It was something, I can't remember what it was on the radio, we used to sit and listen. And it was a real... I suppose, a nice family, quiet atmosphere. It was nice.
- CD: In your own opinion, was Granny a black woman, or was she finding it hard to fit in either a white or Aboriginal society?
- Barb: I had no idea of anything like that at that time. I didn't know... she was just Granny, we just didn't question her. Who she was, you know,

she was a black woman... *“How come a black woman had her own property and stuff like that?”*... you didn't think to question it.

However, Auntie Barb did question as to why her Grandmother as an Aboriginal woman was able to lease a property when the times were so discriminatory to her own mother and extended family. Mary Hirst recounted the persona of Granny in the town with the non-Aboriginal residents.

CD: ...As far as the town folk were concerned, she was well respected in the town?

Mary: Oh my goodness, yes! Yes.

CD: As what sort of woman was she known for?

Mary: Very kind, very caring, and she'd help anyone. Yes, she was very respected.

CD: Did you know anything about her family at all? When you were there while she was there, were you aware of her brothers or sisters or anyone like that?

Mary: I only knew her and a few of the boys. And one of the children, one of the girls came down, and I don't know her. Was it Molly?

After living most of her adult life in and around Coorow, the townsfolk did respect Granny for her ability to work with them and for them. However, familiarity of her family was limited. My grandmother worked for Mary Hirst looking after her children while they lived in Coorow. My grandmother Molly worked in the hotel cooking and washing for the majority of the time her growing family lived in the town.

By 1959 Granny's health deteriorated mainly due to her weakened heart (a remnant of her bout with Rheumatic fever). She left her farm and went to the hospital in Three Springs again. While she was there, as family stories go, the nurses tried to have her remove what they thought were her false teeth. Granny explained to them that they were all her own teeth and they were surprised at how perfect they were. Living mainly on a diet of bush foods and brushing her teeth with charcoal and a small stick, her teeth were perfect. Granny was also well known to smoke a pipe with tobacco making her teeth on the left side worn away from biting down on it. She wore a purple beret on her head whenever she dressed up to travel. It was her signature

hat. She can be seen wearing her hat in the second photo in existence of her<sup>408</sup>. She is an old woman looking over her young granddaughter Janet.<sup>409</sup> She bears little resemblance to the strong woman she was at the East Perth train station. Instead she is soft and ‘grandmotherly’ as her family would have remembered her in later life. Only two years after moving to Coorow from Perth, my grandmother and her family learnt that Granny had passed away in her sleep at the age of 77 years from heart failure at the North Midlands Hospital in Three Springs on 28 April. Her record<sup>410</sup> states that Granny was a pensioner and that Anglican burial rites were performed by another Rev. Armstrong<sup>411</sup>. Auntie Barb describes this sad period of her family’s life and the disruption that followed from Granny’s passing.

Barb: I remember, she went to hospital, and she just didn’t come home.

CD: Mmm.

Barb: *[Beginning to cry]* And I remember... I couldn’t understand why they put her in a box, and they dug a hole and put her in the ground. Why did they do that?

CD: Mmm, so you went to the funeral, did you Aunty?

Barb: Yeah, and then we were with Uncle Ted, and then after the funeral we went to the pub, and we had to sit in the back of that truck, in the back of that ute. And we were sitting there all day - we had nothing to eat and nothing to drink. And we had to sit there while he was in there drinking. We had to sit there in the sun, the heat, and then mum ended up going inside and saying “Could you take us home?” We had to wait until he took us home. We sat there all day, because mum didn’t drink and dad didn’t drink either.

CD: So dad and mum were out there too?

Barb: Yes, and we were all sitting in the back of this ute, and it was hot. And then, we lived there for about, I think a year after she died. Oh and when we got back to the house, Uncle Ted and Aunty Kath were living in Granny’s house, and all I remember is Uncle Ted standing at the front door of Granny’s house, with his fingers in his braces. ...And we were just there by ourselves then, for ages. Mum had Granny’s chooks to look after, and her pigs, two pigs. The sheep were gone, the horses went, but there was two pigs and then they were stolen, and someone kept coming and stealing all the chooks. Mum had the police come in there lots of times, and nothing ever happened. And then finally we got put on a train,

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<sup>408</sup> See Appendix 11: Photograph B of Granny as an older woman.

<sup>409</sup> Janet was the daughter of Edward (Ted) Latham.

<sup>410</sup> Carnamah Historical Society 2008: [www.rootsweb.ancestry.com](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com)

<sup>411</sup> The same name as the Reverend that married her to Frances Latham.

and we travelled down to Perth on the train. It was a long way. I remember that really quite well.

Any of Granny's remaining possessions were sold off or stolen. Any mementos for her daughter Molly or her children merely disappeared. My mother told me that she remembered that Granny owned steel trunks full of Irish linen and glass jars of fine gold dust in a row on her fire mantel piece. All of these things disappeared after her death. Molly left Coorow with four black chickens as an inheritance from her mother. All that remained of her were memories of her life and her impression upon her children and grandchildren.

### **What Granny represented to her descendants.**

*Indigenous women continue to demand and struggle for the return of our lands, the right to our intellectual property, cultural heritage, religion and spirituality, and the right to learn and pass on our morality, attitudes and world view. Self-determination for Indigenous people includes cultural practices derived from knowledges that are outside the experiences and knowledges of patriarchal whiteness. Yet we experience cultural oppression in the form of the erasure and denial of Indigenous cultural knowledges by white people as part of our everyday existence; we must participate in a society not of our making under conditions not of our choosing.<sup>412</sup>*

The story of Granny has been fragmented within my family mainly because there are so many memories and stories about her. Most of those stories have always centred on her being a heroic and strong woman to be proud of. However, her life as an Aboriginal woman has been fraught with tensions created by assimilationist policies and imposed ethnocentric ideologies. She was subject to legislation affecting the thousands of other Aboriginal people of mixed heritage during her time. Native Welfare documents and correspondence to the Chief Protector of Aborigines attest to the intense surveillance and scrutiny she lived under. As her descendant and as a researcher, it has been sobering to discover that many of these original records had been destroyed. Such legal procedures were built on the privileges and benefits produced by colonisation. It implicitly and explicitly acknowledges and reinforces white race privilege by making it invisible and normalised through the process of 'protection' of Aboriginal people such as Granny and her children. March<sup>413</sup> discusses the systematic destruction of files and the consequent loss of family information as having an enduring significant, particularly to those who were removed from their families, and their country. It is central to issues of identity and connection with family, community and place.

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<sup>412</sup> Moreton-Robinson 2005:66

<sup>413</sup> March 2003:127

For example, Mr Norman Harris, a Noongar elder, worked for the Native Welfare Department under Commissioner Middleton<sup>414</sup>. As a junior officer within the department he was ordered to burn personal files of Aboriginal people from throughout the state in what he believes, on reflection, was a government cover-up. Mr Harris stated, "*We had an incinerator out the back, actually it was a 44 gallon drum, and there were two of us throwing the files in...*"<sup>415</sup> Not all the files were destroyed because Mr Harris and his non-Aboriginal colleague decided such an act was morally reprehensible. They contact the WA Museum and the documents were taken by them for historical significance. What records that remain today are due to the actions of these two men. What is needed now for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal historians and researchers is to acknowledge that the surviving documents<sup>416</sup> cannot automatically be the most important part of the documentary evidence of the past. An awareness of missing sources is indispensable and historians must avoid disproportioned attention on the past. That is why oral histories are incredibly important because they provide an analysis of the gaps these 'ghost' files may have said.

A key point about my family and their relationship with Granny's story is that we all view her life as being a lesson about exploitation. It is evident to us that advantages are accorded to those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination. Such profit especially comes through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations. Even though Granny assisted her non-Aboriginal husband to accrue a tremendous amount of wealth and prestige, she and her children received little or no enduring security. Instead, they received the odd photograph and enduring stories of those women who struggled under racist regimes to keep their families together and to raise their children. Granny's story is an incredibly large resource of the stories told within my family. It provides many valuable lessons about how to live a good, honourable life.

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<sup>414</sup> Chief Protector of Aborigines, S.G. Middleton (served 1948-1960)

<sup>415</sup> March 2003:127

<sup>416</sup> Some of which family records I have referred to in this chapter about my Great Grandmother.

## Manifestations of identity

There is a story in my family about my mother's cousin Elsie Elliott<sup>417</sup>. Elsie was working in Boans<sup>418</sup> department store as a shop attendant. One day, an elderly Aboriginal woman approached her and said "Hello Elsie, I am your grandmother!" Elsie was shocked because she did not know that she had a grandmother let alone an Aboriginal one. This description details the ways that Granny's Aboriginality was not discussed or focused on by her own children. Her grandchildren were taught that this was not a positive element to embrace and was a cause for shame. Haebich<sup>419</sup> says that at the very heart of the notion of what made up an Australian citizen was at the forefront of such behaviour within my family. The Australian citizen was thought to be simply a "native born or naturalised" person who was not an "aboriginal native". The key boundary marker in Australian citizenship was, in other words, the 'Aboriginal native'.

CD: So do you think there was a connection... was it a strong connection between you as granddaughters and Granny?

Barb: You tried, you tried, you tried, but you weren't allowed to. You were told to go home at the right time, you'd start getting into that feeling... and you were supervised, sort of, when you visited Granny. It wasn't like, just go and knock on the door... Liz [*youngest* sister] did, when she was little, she was able to go and knock on the door. We were never allowed to do that, we would have been screamed at, yelled at...

CD: By whom? Nana?

Barb: Mum, yeah. "*Oh don't you go over there unless you are asked. I'll take you over there. You don't go over there, and you don't go bothering Granny!*" But I think Granny would have liked us to have gone over there. Granny should have been given a choice to say yes or no. As she did with Liz. Liz said "*I knew when I got there, I'd say "Hi Granny", and if she didn't feel up to seeing me she would say go on, bummer off home.*" And Liz would go home. It never hurt Liz.

CD: There was this underlying thing going on there, but you just never questioned it?

Barb: We knew there was something, we weren't quite the same as everyone else. But there was no-one else we could ask about it. There was no-one else we could say "*What is this? What's wrong with us, or what was missing? or whatever...*" It was just there, and you didn't know how to find out the answers, who to talk to. Because the only people that were there really was Mum and Dad. Uncles and Aunties would

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<sup>417</sup> The daughter to Great-Aunt Violet. My grandmother's sister.

<sup>418</sup> The equivalent to Myers department stores today. An up-market chain of department stores.

<sup>419</sup> Haebich 2000:163

visit, but you never had the time to ask them, and get to know them, and talk about things like that.

Being kept away from her Grandmother by her own mother reveals much about the fears that Nana had for her children. She felt that Granny's innate Aboriginality was a problem to their ultimate assimilation. Nothing is more revealing than when a mysterious figure of an old Badimia woman who used to visit Granny at her Coorow farm. The negative and fearful reaction by her daughter, Molly, was to prevent her children from witnessing their interaction together as women elders.

Barb: Well they could be related, we don't know. But then Granny never had anyone from there visit either, I don't believe. I don't think that lady lived there, that used to come...

CD: She obviously used to come a long way.

Barb: I think so. Veronica [*older sister & my mother*] didn't know who she was, I don't know, but mum would have known.

CD: And how old was this lady?

Barb: I remember thinking that she was a similar age to granny, a fat little lady...

CD: So she would have been in her 70's?

Barb: Possibly, yes. Whatever age Granny was at that time I think.

CD: Wow. Did she look anything like Granny?

Barb: I don't remember what she looked like, just that it was like "*oh da da da...*" you'd hear her, and then you'd see her from the house to the gateway, but it wasn't... I don't know how far away it was, maybe four or five hundred metres. So it wasn't close enough to see her features...

CD: And probably, there was all that commotion of your mother...

Barb: "... *Get inside, hurry up*"! [*imitating her mother's voice*]

CD: Yeah? so when you did go inside when your mother did that, did you feel weird about that?

Barb: We were just conditioned so much, we just...

CD: To listen to your mother?

Barb: I did. I just went along with it. It was easier, because if you asked a question you were never answered. You were ignored, or just told nothing, you weren't told any answers, so I gave up asking. At a very early age, you just gave up asking.

Brandon<sup>420</sup> asserts that society controls what an Indigenous woman should look like, say, do, where she should live or if she should live or die. These requirements influenced and continue to influence the identity of indigenous women each day including those within Indigenous families such as mine. We are allowed to exist only in the past or in a certain role within non-Indigenous parameters. Otherwise, she is invisible. Many citizens have never seen or talked with an Aboriginal woman. Is it possible that they walk by such individual every day and do not even know it? Colonisation and assimilation has done its best to kill any reminder of non-stereotypical indigenous women in society. Granny and her old friend were treated in such a way by their kin. Auntie Barb explains what this dynamic creates in her recollections of the old Badimia woman who visited Granny in the following way:

CD: When you were growing up, can you remember in that time you were there with Granny, were there other Aboriginal people that ever came there?

Barb: Only one old lady used to come, and you'd hear her down the driveway, "*oh da da da da*," (speaking the language).

CD: Talking in language?

Barb: Definitely.

CD: And who was she talking to?

Barb: Granny. And they'd yell out to each other before they saw each other. You know, she'd yell out from the gate something, and Granny then would answer. But then we would... "*Quick, in the house*", [*imitating her mother's voice*] we had to go into our house and stay indoors.

CD: And who made you do that?

Barb: Mum.

CD: And why was that? What sort of attitude was that?

Barb: "*Quickly, in here! Just get in here.*" And that was it.

CD: She didn't want you to hear?

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<sup>420</sup> Brandon 2000:31

Barb: Didn't explain. Didn't explain anything, but now I can see that it was because she wasn't allowed to have anything to do with culture, even language. And we didn't even know who that lady was. She could have been a Badimia. We weren't allowed to be speaking to her, introduced to her. "...*In the house, go on in the house, stay there in the house. Stay in there.*" [Imitating her mother's voice]

CD: So you witnessed her speaking language...

Barb: Yes, definitely.

CD: And she was doing things that were openly indigenous. And with Granny doing that, did you ever question in yourself what that was about? Obviously you still remember that..

Barb: No, I thought it was just part of... It was just Granny. That's how Granny did things, you know. I was fascinated by it, but you never sort of... You never had time, or you were never allowed to sit and ask her why are you doing that? What's that all about?

In essence this is the reason why I feel justified in asking deeper questions about these women's stories today. Granny's story particularly reflects a time when Aboriginal women faced a challenging world that directly impacted upon their livelihood, the lives of their kin, the future of their children and their freedom as human beings.

## Chapter Seven

### 'Molly': My Grandmother

*Aboriginal women were not seen as a threat to the white dominant society. Aboriginal women were often taken at a young age and trained to be submissive to both white men and women - usually by missionaries - and then returned to their societies to be used as a weapon against them<sup>421</sup>.*

#### Introduction

CD: Did your Mum want you and your brothers and sisters to live like white people?

Molly: Yeah. *[exaggerated affirmative tone]*

CD: And to assimilate?

Molly: Yes!

CD: Was it easier to live as a white person when you were growing up?

Molly: Yes!

CD: ...rather than living as indigenous?

Molly: Mmmm *[affirmative tone]*

My earliest memories of my grandmother, or 'Nana' as we have always called her, were about cleanliness and maintaining an appearance of acceptability. In fact, my first memory as a

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421 Reed-Gilbert 2000:107

toddler was standing on a chair next to her washing the dishes and her scolding me for not handling them to her very high standards. There was always a sense of urgency and importance in these tasks as if some hidden camera was looking over her shoulder to inspect her abilities to perform as a mother and grandmother. I knew that as I grew that such tension came from her upbringing and her own visions of how a white home should be run. My earliest feelings were of resentment that such an overarching control was placed upon us all. My question then, as is now, is about the origins of such restrictive unrealistic expectations.

Historian Henry Reynolds<sup>422</sup> describes that it is almost impossible to explain to people today how pervasive ideas of assimilation were for mixed-race Aboriginal people and how impossible it must have been for them to counter or even live with. He describes these times as “*incessant, prevailing winds of contempt*”. Mixed-race Aboriginal people, such as my grandmother and her mother were forever prejudged where everyone knew what they were like. Whole communities, even countries and continents, not just individuals were affected by this stigmatism.

For descendants it is even more difficult to gauge the extent of discrimination. There is a general lack of statistical information about the numbers of mixed-race Aboriginal people in Australia up until the final decades of the nineteenth century. It may have been as a result of a fundamental lack of concern but European notice of mixed-race children escalated in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These children from the second and third generation were perceived and judged to be far too ‘white’ – too European – to be permitted to remain with their families.<sup>423</sup> At the time of my grandmother’s birth in 1918, there was a passionate commitment to a White Australia and the concurrent ideology that racial mixture was made unacceptable and menacing. The mixed-blood population was plunged into a distressing and tumultuous place. State governments and their officials became increasingly passionate about passing legislation that restrained the freedom of Aboriginal people and their mixed-race children revoking the rights considered common by other Australians. Despite this, the Aboriginal population went on increasing, and so the mixed-race ‘problem’ proceeded to haunt the vision of White Australia right up to the late 1940s. The existence of this population

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<sup>422</sup> Reynolds 2005:4

<sup>423</sup> Reynolds 2005:103

determined the form that Aboriginal policies took for two generations. This also created much pain and hardship to Aboriginal communities throughout the country.<sup>424</sup>

A few of these children removed to institutions did grow to lead meaningful lives, attended school, and were acquainted with a different way of life. As adults, these few individuals became a vital part of the institution communities. However, this was definitely not predominantly the case. Many children lived miserable lives of neglect while they were encouraged to reject Aboriginal ways and forcibly kept from their families. This was the case for my Grandmother and the trans-generational trauma of this experience has only recently been acknowledged by her children and grandchildren.

### **Early life with her mother, Mary:**

My Nana was born in a field of Everlasting bush flowers. The story of her birth is recounted in my great-uncle George's book, *Copperwire George*<sup>425</sup> and he described how other Badimia women "took us up to where mother had given birth to Molly; it was a clear, sandy edge of a pool or a swamp. They'd swept it clean all around; there was white sand there, and they'd built a fire, and a wind-break right around. There was a four-gallon bucket of water boiling on the fire, and I saw my little sister for the first time." It was a poignant moment for me to read about my grandmother's birth in this way. My own mother described to me how Granny told her about giving birth in the bush while droving with her husband. Granny would take a blanket, a knife, a dog and rifle to protect her and a horse. Often not long after she gave birth, Granny would mount her horse and return to the main camp presumably with other Badimia women. In the case of my grandmother's birth, she was attended by Old Shepherd Dinah from Ninghan station. "That old girl birthed me" my Nana said to me when shown one of the few photographs of Old Dinah.

*We went on and we got down to Waddi, the place where I was born. My brothers and sisters were drawing water for the sheep with the windlass and buckets. My older sister Violet was sent back to the camp to boil the billy for dinner, and somehow or other she set fire to the grass and started a grass fire. They drove all the sheep out onto the self flat, where there was no grass. Us kids went with the sheep, and the baby was left in the shade on a blanket. There was fire all around the baby when my mother picked her*

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<sup>424</sup> Reynolds 2005:107

<sup>425</sup> Latham 2001

*up - she was only about five or six months old. Of course, my sister Violet got a flogging for that.*<sup>426</sup>

The baby on the blanket surrounded by flames was my grandmother, Mary Latham. She was delivered by a Badimia midwife, presumably Shepherd Dinah, at a location near Paynes Find on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1918. My Nana has always maintained that she was born in a field of everlasting flowers as if to affirm that this location meant that she would live a long life. She is the last of her ten brothers and sisters to remain alive. Nana was the second last child of her mother, Mary to be born. As a child she was given the nickname of “Molly” and her younger sister Dorothy was known as “Dot”. The pair became inseparable with only two years age difference between them.

By the time my grandmother was born government officials had already begun to count Aboriginal people and divided them into *“full-blood and half-caste, and often differentiated again between half-caste, quadroon and octoroon.”*<sup>427</sup> At the same time, such counting also noted children who looked fair-haired or European-looking living in Aboriginal camps. The overwhelming reaction to this was to announce that interracial sex was rampant and that there was almost no inclination for white men to form permanent relations with their black lovers.

However, this was not the case for my Nana’s parents. They had been legally married for several years producing many children and establishing several sheep stations throughout Badimia country. Between 1917 and 1919, the district had exceptional rains. The rising demand for wool and sheep at the time meant that *“the pastoral industry was in the box seat”*<sup>428</sup> In Western Australia, nearly 55,000 immigrants arrived from the United Kingdom following the outbreak of the great war in 1914 with 33,000 being assisted by the state government.<sup>429</sup>

When Nana was a baby, her father bought a block naming it Banna Station and it was here at nine months of age, as my grandmother claimed, she learnt to walk. Great-Uncle George gives an account of how his father *“went out and sunk a well and built a bough shed for a house. At the end of 1919 we all went out there, and in 1920 we bought a thousand sheep from Ninghan station and drove them across - about sixty miles. We kept them going for two years, till we left*

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<sup>426</sup> Latham 2000:3

<sup>427</sup> Reynolds 2005:9

<sup>428</sup> Palmer 1999:21

<sup>429</sup> Crowley & De Garis 1969:56

in 1922.<sup>430</sup> Even though she was caring for my Nana as a baby, Granny assisted in droving sheep for her husband. Yet attitudes towards Granny and her children were reflected by Amateur anthropologist, Daisy Bates wrote in the West Australian newspaper in 1921 that “...as to the half-caste, however early they may be taken and trained, with very few exceptions, the only good half-caste is a dead one.”<sup>431</sup> In that same year, Western Australia had the highest proportion than any other Australian state of its state’s citizen’s being born in the United Kingdom.<sup>432</sup>

Great-Uncle George then describes what happened to his family next in the following way:

*When we left, the whole family walked the sheep to Ballidu, where father had ordered a special train to take the three thousand sheep. The horses went on the train, we put the spring cart, the dray and the sulky onto open railway trucks, and the lot of us went down to Midland. The sheep were put off there at the saleyard and we went on to West Guildford - now called Bassendean - and unloaded there and went out to Eden Hill, about a mile away. We had a farm there, and that's where we went to school from 1922 to 1924.*<sup>433</sup>

Shortly after the family settled into the small farm he bought in Bassendean, my Nana’s father, Frances Latham left his family. He created a scandal by having an affair with the daughter of a prominent Perth family whom he housed and supported while his wife and children were facing destitution and sickness.

Molly: ...I got pneumonia.

CD: Oh, pneumonia in Bassendean.? Didn’t some of your brother’s and sisters get diphtheria as well in Bassendean?

Molly: Yep. She got...

CD: Auntie Dot? She got...*[diphtheria]*

Molly: Yep.

CD: Auntie Dot got diphtheria. Phew. That’s tough. And so you had to stop school because you were sick. Did that put you to hospital?

Molly: Yeah and...that there...

CD: And Auntie Dot as well?

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<sup>430</sup> Latham 2000:3

<sup>431</sup> Reynolds 2005:8

<sup>432</sup> Crowley & De Garis 1969:57

<sup>433</sup> Latham 2000:3

Molly: Yes.

CD: And so Granny decided to go up to Coorow.

Molly: Yeah.

CD: Was that because you guys were getting sick?

Molly: Yeah.<sup>434</sup>

There is a story within my family about the difficulty Granny faced trying to retrieve her children from the hospital because of her Aboriginality. The nurses did not believe that her fair skinned children were her own. She managed to convince them to release them.

CD: Cos there was a story about Aunty Dot going to hospital...

Molly: Yes.

CD: Yes, and then Granny went there... tell me if I'm wrong, Granny went there to pick her up, and the nurse wouldn't let Aunty Dot go with her.

Molly: Yes, yes.

CD: Because she said "This isn't your child!"

Molly: (Laughs)

CD: And then Granny said "Come here Dottie!" And then Aunty Dot raced to her, and she said "of course it's my child, you know."

Molly: (Laughs) Mmm.

CD: Yeah, cos they looked so different from each other.

Molly: Mmm.

CD: Was that when you were living in Bassendean?

Molly: Yeah.<sup>435</sup>

By this time, Granny had earned enough money by selling fire wood to pay for her trek by horse drawn carts to Coorow where she purchased a small parcel of land on the outskirts of town.

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<sup>434</sup> Molly Dowling Interview One: 7 March 2007:Page 2-3

<sup>435</sup> Molly Dowling interview 12/09/07:page 7

CD: And it was up in Coorow. Correct me if I am wrong...when your Mum got Rheumatic fever. Is that right? Did she get Rheumatic fever in Coorow?

Molly: Yes! *(tone very serious)*

CD: And she was very sick?

Molly: Mmmm

CD: ...then your father, Frances Latham. Because your Mum was sick...this is what Uncle George told me...that he decided to put you down in Perth at Saint Joseph's Orphanage?

Molly: Nuh

CD: No?

Molly: Nuh

CD: That wasn't the reason because your Mum was sick?

Molly: No!

However, it does appear that while their mother was ill in a Perth hospital, they were placed into care. Uncle George writes about the sequence of events that happened. He writes that in 1925, "...when mother came back from Perth with Mick and Molly (*they'd been in the St. John of God convent in west Subiaco*), Mick, Molly and me started school in Coorow. I was about eleven."<sup>436</sup> My Grandmother at this time was 7 years old. It appears that they had become under the notice of the Native Welfare department because there is a census of their ages and circumstances taken in that same year. The reference card<sup>437</sup> is entitled "Francis Arthur Latham and family" and lists in detail the pedigree of Granny and the ages of each of their children at the time the card was entered. There is not reference as to why such a card was created but it is presumed that officials were notified that Granny was sick and her children needed care. It appears that the children's father may have vouched for his continued involvement with the children.

Shortly before my Great-Uncle George passed away, he told me a story about my nana, Auntie Dot and Granny travelling to Ninghan station to visit relatives. The location of this visit is more likely to have been Coodingnow station to the north of Ninghan. Galeena is known to have

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<sup>436</sup> Latham 2000:9

<sup>437</sup> DIA file reference 145/32

died at aged 30 at the sacred birthing place known as Wardagga Rock. Galeena's mother was Shepherd Dinah and it is believed that Galeena was fathered by Edward Oliver, my grandmother's grandfather. This account provides evidence that Granny's connection to country and kinship ties were strong. Shepherd Dinah remained an influential role model in the lives of Granny's children. Galeena was married to Gus Clinch, a white pastoralist in the district. They had several children together and it is the descendants of these children who form to majority of the Clinch mob considered to be Badimia custodians of the area.

CD: You were only a little kid, isn't that right, a little child. And you were saying that your mum had a sister, is that right?

Molly: I think so.

CD: Yeah, and that you visited her at Ninghan station?

Molly: Yes.

CD: ...you went on the spring cart apparently, that's what Uncle George said.

Molly: Mmm.

CD: Was that your mum's sister?.. Or was it her cousin, or...

Molly: Yes... I can't say what it means.

CD: What it means...um, sister. Was it your mum's sister?

Molly: Yes.

I believe that Granny was maintaining cultural and familial contacts for the benefit of her young daughters who travelled with her. It can also be said that Coodingnow and Ninghan held a particular significant to Granny and she wanted her daughters to learn about this at an early age.

### **Being taken and life at Saint Joseph's Orphanage**

*"Mary and her sister Dot worked at the convent in Subiaco for 11 years. They were both very happy there."*<sup>438</sup>

Despite having purchased the property in Coorow, Granny's autonomy with her children became challenged when her husband visited them in 1929. According to my Uncle George,

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<sup>438</sup> Elsie Elliott 2004:1

their father Francis Latham did not want his two youngest daughters “marrying into the town blacks”. Francis Latham insisted that my Nana and Aunt Dot to be taken to Saint Joseph’s Orphanage in Wembley to received training. His intention was to take George too for him to be educated at a different institution separate from his sisters. Uncle George told me the story of them sitting on the back of their father’s flat back model T ford ute for the entire trip to Perth. Their father did not want his children sitting with him in the cabin. Uncle George told me that he had a difficult time trying to keep him sisters from falling off the back of the vehicle but he himself jumped from the back leaving his sister behind. He did not want to go to an institution. Uncle George became a station hand from then on working throughout the Irwin district.

CD: And Auntie Dot must have been nine.

Molly: Yes!

CD: Oh right. Was your mother ok about your going to Saint Joseph’s?  
She was ok about it?

Molly: Yeah. *[changing to a serious tone]*

CD: And how did you feel about going far away from your mother?

Molly: *[sigh...becoming visibly upset and sad]*

CD: Was it something you wanted to do or? It must have been hard was it?

Molly: Yes

CD: It was?

Molly: Mmmm *(in affirmative and composing herself)*

CD: What was the arrangement that your father made with Saint Joseph’s?

Molly: *(makes sign language of paying money)*

CD: That he would pay. Did he pay for all of your fees? What was he paying for? Your food? Just a contribution?

Molly: *(Shrugs shoulders as if to not know)*

CD: You don’t know? So, how long were you at Saint Joseph’s? How long were you there. How old were you when you finished? Till you were eighteen?

Molly: No

CD: Nineteen?

Molly: No.

CD: Older than that. Twenty? Twenty one?

Molly: Yeah<sup>439</sup>

This exchange revealed to me as her granddaughter and as the writer that there was much to the arrangement where my Nana's father, Francis Latham 'paid' for his daughters to go to St Joseph's. Western Australia at this time was an exception to all other states. It has a system of removal and institutionalisation of Aboriginal children most separate from mainstream child welfare processes and the most extreme terms of power to remove children. This reflected the relative infancy of child welfare in the state, the problems of huge distances which favoured measures that allowed children to be removed quickly by local officers, and the entrenched white racism which pervaded the state<sup>440</sup>. Many white pastoralists took the option of paying for their children to go to Catholic institutions which dominated the institutionalised 'care' of Aboriginal children caught in the grip of assimilationist ideologies surrounding them in Western Australian society. In his book, *Kayang and Me*<sup>441</sup>, Kim Scott draws our attention to AO Neville's own publication, *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its place in the community*, in which Neville explains how to breed out all visible signs of Aboriginality and to cut children off from their people, their country and their heritage. Those deemed 'real Aborigines' were believed to die out soon and those who remained would be "*uplifted, assimilated, absorbed*"<sup>442</sup>. This very influential book of its time became an expression of how every member of the dominant society in Western Australia created no space for Aboriginal people in Australian society. The only future was one of removal or a doomed fate.

**Not good enough for the cabin**  
***Uncle George told me about the day they took them away.***  
***He struggled to keep them on the back of the model T ford truck.***  
***His thin arms held the shoulders of his two younger sisters***  
***As they bumped and shook down the unsealed roads***  
***Past Wubin, Past Minginew, Past New Norcia they road.***  
***The wind made them cold.***

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<sup>439</sup> P3-4 Interview 1 with Molly Dowling 07/03/07

<sup>440</sup> Haebich 2000:p187

<sup>441</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:197

<sup>442</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:197

***Their father said nothing.  
They ate tea and damper while their father had a pub lunch.  
They were hungry and scared and tired.  
He tried to comfort his little sisters, Molly and Dot.  
Then as they reached the Perth hills,  
George jumped off the back of the truck.  
He wasn't go to an orphanage.  
He was going to run away and work on a farm.  
He was 14 years old and nearly a man.  
He never forgot the frightened and tear-filled eyes of his sisters.  
He waved as they drove off, their father unaware of the mutiny.  
Their father sat alone as he drove.  
His children were not good enough for the cabin.***

Upon writing to Heritage Group from the Mercy centre, I was able to have a member of its group research their files in search for records of my grandmother and Great-Auntie Dot. I was informed that the most records kept on girls who were taken to St Joseph's were wards of the state. As my nana and great-aunt were considered 'boarders' and paid for by their father, this meant that the institution did not need to write about or document their time in care there. I found this explanation extraordinary. When I asked about the amount of money that was paid for this to occur, it would have been a minimal fee as long as the girls were able to work within the institution. The first of two records found of my Nana and Auntie Dot was their registration card which recorded that my Nana was aged 12 years 4 months and Dorothy was aged 9 years and 9 months. Their sole parent recorded for contact purposes was Francis Latham who address was recorded in John Street, West Perth<sup>443</sup>. It is handwritten and according to my Nana, her father would bring fruit or small treats for his daughters but this would never reach them but instead nuns would openly eat their fruit in front of them. The alternative to living with their father was not entertained. Especially considering the woman he was not living with had an aversion to his children. Auntie Barbie spoke to me about an experience when they visited their father and his mistress who lived in West Perth. It is believed this incident occurred visiting them soon after they were placed at the orphanage. The woman referred to is Latham's mistress.

Barb: Auntie Dot came running out of the house with her behind her with a broomstick, waving it at Auntie Dot. And mum's there with her father, they were there for the holidays, and he's got her helping him plant grass in this paddock. She said I was working away and the next minute Dot come flying out of the house with the woman after her with the broomstick. And she's saying "oh run Dot, run Dot, don't let her catch you!" And then "father was sitting there

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<sup>443</sup> Personal Correspondence L. Pushong to C. Dowling

and he said *Dot hasn't realized yet, but ##### [mistress's name] has got the bigger end of that stick.*" So that says... doesn't it?...what that's saying to those girls, that's what it means, she's got the biggest end of the stick, in other words she's got more power or more control... you see? "*I'll choose her over you guys.*" Now that's complete rejection from her own father!

CD: Well no protection of her either...

Barb: And certainly no protection, and you're a little girl coping with that!

CD: So with Nana... she would have talked a lot about her experience in the orphanage to you, right? When you were growing up?

Barb: Never. She never said a word about any of those experiences. It was the boarding school, and her father would send money and pay for her to be there, and she would even accuse the nuns of eating all their food. She said father would always send me fruit, but we never got it, it was always eaten by the nuns. Any excuse to say that her father was not made out to be the awful person that he was. Because the father is who she's taking her identity from, not the mother, the white father is who she's relying on.

CD: So where did that come from, do you think?

Barb: Oh well, that was just what she learnt in the institution. To take in, her original father.

CD: And he would make you more, white?

Barb: Yes, exactly. Yes, yes, and acceptable.

CD: And acceptable then...

Barb: Yes, more acceptable, and it never works, it's all a lie, that's the whole point.<sup>444</sup>

Haebich<sup>445</sup> writes that although 'quarter-caste children were meant to be excluded from the Western Australian 1905 Act, the description of 'half-caste' could be read to include them as well. These tangled and bumbling categorisations left a substantial scope for administrators in determining who came under these laws. As Haebich describes "*these classifications lumped together a wide range of people who would otherwise have been categorised by society in terms of non-racial or secular criteria – good/bad, sane/mad, comfortable/destitute, neglected/well*

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<sup>444</sup> P25-26 Transcript with Barbara Dowling dated 01/02/07

<sup>445</sup> Haebich 2000:219

*cared for, employed/unemployed – and treated accordingly. For many, their only ‘problem’ was their race and culture, but, by being included under the definition, they were excluded from benefits, rights and responsibilities accorded to other Australians”<sup>446</sup>*. Basic human needs for Aboriginal people throughout the state came under one management while non-Aboriginal people had hundreds of departments and jurisdictions catering to their privileged position. Of these, several were brazenly antagonistic to the department often refusing to help individuals or to assist its programs. Preferential treatment for these categorised humans could mean that they were exempt from controls over employment, for example, depending on your degree of so called ‘native blood’. These classifications remain parasitic into some Aboriginal value systems today creating a chasm between people of degrees of Aboriginal descent in our communities and even within our families.

My research then shifted to discuss the kind of treatment or the conditions that my grandmother and her younger sister had experienced themselves. Education is a good indicator of how these girls were to be prepared for future life within society outside of the orphanage walls.

CD: Did you do any schooling while you were there? Till you were twelve?

Molly: Nuh.

CD: Coz the ladies that were helping me doing the research at Saint Joseph’s said that if you were going to do high school then you would go onto Mercedes [*college*.]

Molly: Yeah

CD: Was that what was going on for you then?

Molly: No. My...I got...house cleaning.

CD: You did house cleaning?

Molly: Yeah

CD: At aged twelve?

Molly: Yeah<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> Haebich 2000:219

<sup>447</sup> P4-5 transcript with Mary Dowling 07/03/07

In my imagination, I see my grandmother as a twelve-year-old girl cleaning floors. I believed that the issue of education was not entertained by the Sister of Mercy and yet I needed to establish what was filling their existence from the very first day they walked into the grounds. In this excerpt from a yarn with my Nana we use a number chart for her to point to as her aphasia had affected her ability to verbalise numbers. Nana would point to the numbers I had written down for her to express the age or length of time she meant.

CD: That's how you started? Did you do laundry all the while you stayed at Saint Joseph's? Until you were 21?

Molly: Yes.

CD: That must have been full on? Did you have to wash things by hand?

Molly: No.

CD: ...by machine?

Molly: What that?

CD: Using a big cauldron or copper?

Molly: Yes.

CD: So things like sheets and clothes. And starching...what about starching things? What about ironing? Did you have to iron?

Molly: Yeah.

CD: Sounds like tough work Nana!

Molly: Yeah.

CD: Did you start your day really early?

Molly: Yeah.

CD: What time early? Point to the number chart. What time would you start? [*points to chart*] Six in the morning?

Molly: Yeah. <sup>448</sup>

This exchange between my Nana and I points to the incredible exploitation of these young girls. Instead of an education, they washed clothes for others while their intellectual capital was

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<sup>448</sup> P6 transcript with Mary Dowling 07/03/07

neglected. These girls were rigidly kept from all Aboriginal influences while each day they were engulfed in non-Aboriginal behaviours, values and indoctrinated to fear and denounce their own people and their ways. These children's "*minds, bodies and spirits were violated, controlled, disciplined, regulated, monitored and policed.*"<sup>449</sup>

Outside of the orphanage walls, in the early 1930s, there were mass demonstrations and marches by the unemployed becoming a frequent occurrence with clashes between the unemployed and police in Perth saw many scenes of violence. By 1936, a policy of biological absorption was preserved in the new *Aborigines Act Amendment (Native Administration Act)* where the definition of who came under the Act was extended to include children and young people of virtually any degree of Aboriginal descent, thereby bringing under the department controls a whole range of 'near white' children formerly exempted from the Act. This meant that the Commissioner of Native Affairs now had legal guardianship of all legitimate children as well as illegitimate children and the period of guardianship was extended to twenty-one years of age. This meant that any child of Aboriginal descent could be forcibly removed and placed in an institution. It was not their parents who controlled their lives until they reach twenty-one years of age. Upon reaching this age, any person of 'quarter-caste' descent or less were prohibited by law from associating with 'natives'. My Nana was forced to live in the white community, although no measures were introduced to ensure she and her fellow laundry girls were ensured acceptance by that society. All other adult 'natives' remained under the strict control of the Native Affairs Department.<sup>450</sup>

Molly: No...there...in the laundry.

CD: Oh...you started in the laundry. Was there a lot of it?

Molly: Hmmm [*rolling her eyes in agreement*]

CD: Was there a lot of girls starting there? Was there a lot of laundry?

Molly: Yes.

CD: Whose laundry was it? Was it for all the kids? Or was it for the grown-ups?

Molly: No.

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<sup>449</sup> Haebich 2000:376

<sup>450</sup> Haebich 2000:278-9

CD: People who paid for the laundry to get done?

Molly: No!

CD: So whose laundry was it?

Molly: Ah...

CD: Was it for the Nuns?

Molly: Yeah! [*points to me in agreement*] And ...

CD: And the priests?

Molly: Yes.<sup>451</sup>

In WA, the result of this new legislation meant that large numbers of ‘practically white children’ could now be legally moved from their mothers and families, using the expanded power to dish out different treatment from other natives. They were quadroons, just like my Nana, meaning like others her maternal grandmother was black. Neville wrote that “*their father was white and their fathers and forebears of the same race as our own.*”<sup>452</sup> Perhaps in this climate, my maternal great grandfather took it upon himself to ensure that his children were placed somewhere appropriate or it can be assumed that he was urged to intervene as he no longer lived with his wife, Granny, a half-caste in the eyes of society at the time. The inner workings of families cannot be revealed here although it can be assumed that sending my grandmother and Auntie Dot to St Joseph’s may have been seen as a favourable option. The society in which my Great-Grandmother and father lived believed that the reputed characteristic of people of mixed blood was their resentment with their own circumstances and a developing fondness for political activism. Disputes by mixed-race Aboriginal people were immediately linked with crime and destructive behaviour. Such beliefs were strongly held in the United States in this period prescribing the shortcomings of mulattoes.<sup>453</sup> Many British scientists also made correlations between a mixed-race person’s degree of white blood to that which prompts them to be genetically predisposed to seeking freedom. Those without this European genetic ingredient (‘full-blood’ Aboriginal people) were less likely to protest about their lack of freedom. The saving of mixed-race children in Western Australia began with AO Neville instructing the Superintendent of Moore River and local protectors (mainly police constables) to recommend children over the age of two years for placement at Sister Kate’s on

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<sup>451</sup> P5-6 transcript with Mary Dowling 07/03/07

<sup>452</sup> Haebich (2000:281)

<sup>453</sup> Reynolds (2005:41)

the basis of whiteness and he would personally check their suitability for admission to this special facility.

I soon discussed with my Grandmother, the subject of how work was distributed at Saint Joseph's and more importantly to ascertain what did the girls receive in turn for their labours.

CD: How many girls were working with you in the laundry? A lot of girls? Like ten...or fifteen? [*Molly points to chart*] Seventeen. Was it fun working with the other girls.

Molly: Yeah

CD: Was Auntie Dot working with you?

Molly: No

CD: What was she doing?

Molly: In the kitchen.

CD: That explains a lot. That makes sense because she was a good cook when she grew up. So she started that way.

Molly: Yes.

CD: Wow. What made them decide that you were good in the laundry and she was to go to the kitchen?

Molly: They started me in the kitchen.

CD: They started you in the kitchen..but you were no good? [laughing]

Molly: [laughing]

CD: But Auntie Dot was?

Molly: Yeah

CD: Did they pay you for working there in the laundry?

Molly: [laughing]

CD: Was it for your food and that...for your board?

Molly: [silence]<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>454</sup> P7 transcript with Molly Dowling 07/03/07

At the time in the early 1930s when my Nana was in the orphanage, European and American scientists and sociologists held a linked belief that the primitive mind was unable to comprehend moral, intellectual and aesthetic concepts and was therefore incapable of accepting civilisation. For those living in Perth, St Joseph's provided the labour to keep the Catholic Church expanding and spreading throughout the state. The philosophies held by most institutions in the city that had Aboriginal people in their 'care' were based on the premise of 'man's inherent sinfulness' and the injunction of 'he who spares the rod, ruins the child.' These were then fortified by beliefs that Aboriginal children were steeped in evil and needed to be morally purified. They were predisposed to adopt rigid and punitive regimens and punishments to break the children's self-will and transform them into humble, self-denying and God-fearing servants.<sup>455</sup> Most of these children came into these institutions with some familiarity with Aboriginal society – a diverse blend of customary ways of doing things and of European customs filtered through Aboriginal traditions. Even very young children arrived with Aboriginal ways of understanding, formulating and interacting with the world instilled in them through early socialising processes. These children had been immersed in their parent's feelings about and responses to non-Aboriginal people. Those now in charge of these children had an arrogant indifference about this upbringing, which created overwhelming problems for their 'civilising and Christianising' quest. They saw the camps and living arrangements from which these children came as being rife with depravity, lawlessness and degeneration with no logical social order. These children were merely empty vessels whose previous life was to be forgotten.

At the same time, Aboriginal people played an important role for white society during this time. They were the measure where all civilising could be gauged, validating the existence of evolutionary advancement. They represented humankind as it once was in an earlier evolutionary era. It was their world from which more 'developed' races had broken free. By demonstrating such progress further advancement could be promised. This supposedly guaranteed for those who were the leading races of mankind a glowing future. However, for children such as my grandmother and her younger sister this meant the severing of ties with their mothers and siblings.

CD: There is a photograph of Granny that you told me that you took of her at the Perth train station.

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<sup>455</sup> Haebich 2000:376

Molly: Mmmm

CD: It is only the one photo other than another one we have got of her as an old lady. Did your mother visit you a lot at the orphanage? How often did she visit you?

Molly: She couldn't read.

CD: She couldn't read. Yes. She visited you...?

Molly: Once.

CD: Once. Ok?

Molly: Mmmm

CD: And did you write to her?

Molly: Yeah

CD: Yeah? And when she visited you that one time, how old were you and Auntie Dot?

Molly: I don't know.

CD: You don't know.

Molly: Mmm

CD: Was she happy to see you?

Molly: Yeah. *[in an obvious tone]*

CD: And did your father visit you at St Joseph's? Did he visit you?

Molly: Yes

CD: How many times did he visit you? Once or twice?

Molly: [silence]

CD: Did any of your brothers and sisters visit you while you were there?

Molly: Nuh

CD: No?

Molly: Nuh<sup>456</sup>

Completely cut off from their mother and extended family, my Nana and her sister began life at the orphanage working long hours. My Nana worked in the laundry beginning her day at 6am and not finishing till late into the evening. When I would ask my grandmother about life in St Joseph's she would rarely go into detail about her work there. By chance I got to interview, Ms Marilyn Elkington whose mother and father grew up in West Leederville only streets away from St Joseph's orphanage. She recalled her mother talking about how she met Aboriginal girls who had fled from the laundry at the orphanage.

ME: She never said a number. She just did say that there were every now and then she saw girls. ...They all appeared to have burns or some sort of injury. Minor nothing major but most had burns and she did find out that they were girls that worked in the laundry where they used coppers over fires underneath and they [had] scolds or burns. ...Scolds probably more than anything....

CD: Were they content with living at St Joseph's or?

ME: She didn't get that impression because when she came across them a lot of them tried to run away or they were hiding which was when she encountered them at Monger's lake down around reeds and stuff where they run away to get away. They all evidently went back because they had nowhere else to go I'd imagine. They were doing a bit of an escape when she saw them. ...It was her perception that they were not allowed out otherwise.<sup>457</sup>

From our discussion together, Marilyn revealed that her mother was born the same year as my grandmother. Whilst one girl grew up free to walk in this working-class suburb surrounding the orphanage walls, the other girl was labouring inside, secluded by force from the outside world. We yarned together about the social context of the orphanage to those non-Aboriginal people in the local area.

CD: Was there anything about St. Joseph's that your mother actually spoke about other than that experienced with the girls? What was your mother's impression of that place? What sort of impression did it make on the people who lived around it?

ME: She didn't really say but I got the impression that it was forbidden territory. They weren't encouraged to be anywhere near it.

CD: Why? Was it ominous?

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<sup>456</sup> P8-9 transcript with Molly Dowling 07/03/07

<sup>457</sup> P1-2 Interview Marilyn Elkington by Carol Dowling 12/2/09

ME: There was a...how would you put it...maybe a social barrier between the people from the outside with people on the inside. I can't explain it.<sup>458</sup>

In our discussion, Merrilyn said that her mother would not betray the mixed-race Aboriginal girls who had escaped from the orphanage because she felt that their life was already miserable enough. Merrilyn felt that as a young girl, her mother, had an unconscious complicity to protect these girls who were the same age as her. It can be said that this story has been passed down through Merrilyn's family and the impression of these distressed and desperate girls have remained and are now part of my story.

Again, the only official document detailing the life of my Nana and her sister, my Auntie in St Josephs appeared as their baptismal records. My grandmother is listed as a convert to the Catholic faith and baptised when she was 17 years of age. My nana took the name of Mary Agnes. Two year after her sister's baptism, Auntie Dot was baptised and renamed Dorothy Bernadette when she was 15 years old. Both girls had non-Aboriginal godmothers and had been living at the orphanage for over five years. Generally, during this time, there were scant records kept on mixed-race children in institutions. Those few children whose living conditions were recorded show that more girls were taken than boys and reflected the high demand for female domestic servants. It was also driven by concerns to control these girls sexuality and to protect them from sexual abuse with the ultimate aim of transforming them into good Christian wives and mothers. Within my own family, there is a belief held by extended family that Nana and Auntie Dot were somehow more privileged than their older siblings. In particular, there was an assumption that these two girls were receiving a better start regarding education and work skills than their sisters and brothers. I spoke about this perception with my Auntie Barbara about her mother's time at the orphanage and the persona she presented about her experiences there.

CD: So why do certain members of our family view Nana's experience in the orphanage as being the privileged life? Or her having received better treatment than other members of the family?

Barb: Well that's only because it was a lie. They were all told that they were at a boarding school and their father was providing for them, and paying for them, and sending food, and paying for this and that and everything else. Whereas, he wasn't. But that was what the family was all told, and that was what their mother was told. I don't think she would have left them there if she knew the truth. But there

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<sup>458</sup> p3 Transcript with Merrilyn Elkington 12/02/09

was no way the girls could have told her. No-one would have told her, the authorities wouldn't have told her...

CD: Do you think Granny was in the position to even get them back?

Barb: I think she would have certainly tried, I think that's the sort of woman she is. Why would she have taken all her children and left her husband, when they lived in Perth, and took them back up there? Because she knew she could get work there, and she could look after them, and she wasn't going to let anyone fight her for them. So she had the guts to do that! I reckon she would have had the guts to do something about those girls.

CD: Mmm, yes.

Barb: So that's what it was, it was just a lie that was told, and how it came out. Mum was that conditioned. She didn't want to tell the family what happened. It was too hurtful for her. *[Crying]* Look at me...I'm blubbing away here talking about it. Imagine what Mum would have been like, trying to tell her sisters and brothers what happened to them in that orphanage...what she felt like. Cos by that time her emotions would have been so hardened, in a sense, or whatever happens, to shut down, that she would have felt like she'd gone mad!

CD: There are these tiny little photos...*[of Nana and Auntie Dot visiting their older sister Violet]* but what you can see of Auntie Dot and Nana is how Nana was just the most prim and proper young lady in those photos, and so is Auntie Dot to a certain extent. But, you could tell that there was a real difference in the way she perceived of herself with her family... and that in lots of sense whenever nanna - when I was growing up, talked about those times in the orphanage, she always made out that she got so many benefits from that experience. That it was somewhere she was taught discipline, hard work, and that was something that I should emulate too. She used to say "You think it's hard for you now?", and she used to go into that, talking about it.

Barb: Mmm.

CD: Do you think nanna had a bit of pride about that experience, to you? Or how did she talk about it?

Barb: That was the way I suppose she coped with it, by looking at the benefits rather than the... I think if she really sat down and went back over it, I don't think she could cope to do that.

CD: Yes, to face what it was really like.

Barb: Because everything's a façade. It was all a façade. Because then you don't have to deal emotionally with what's going on. If you've bottled up your emotions for so long... and Dot would flare up and get into trouble, and Mum was always saying "*Oh don't get into trouble, you'll get us into trouble. Oh don't do that*", you see? And cos Mum was the one that was responsible then, she was the one that got the whippings. If Aunty Dot hurt herself.*[for example]* Instead of looking at it that Aunty Dot was a little bit of a rebel and got herself into that trouble, Mum was always the one that got it. ...The idea was that the older ones look after the younger ones.

CD: Yeah, and as far as respectability was concerned, about being acceptable in society and whatever, I think she used the church experience that she had at the orphanage to influence her own family.

Barb: Yes, keeping in that straight and narrow path... "*Go to church, come home, do this, do that*: It's all this rigidity, you know..."<sup>459</sup>

## **Working and the war effort**

*In the case of institutional training for the children 'assimilation' meant preparation for a life of menial servitude at the bottom of the social hierarchy either in the institutions or in state-arranged employment outside*<sup>460</sup>.

From her first admission to St Joseph's orphanage at 12 years until she was 21, my Grandmother worked in the laundry. When she reached maturity, the Catholic church organised suitable work and accommodation for the girls who were able to leave the orphanage grounds. I yarned with Nana about her entry into mainstream society.

CD: So when you left there when you were twenty-one, what happened then?

Molly: I got my...

CD: First job?

Molly: Yeah

CD: Was that at Aquinas *[boys catholic college]*

Molly: Yeah.

CD: Was that your first job?

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<sup>459</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Barbara Dowling 01/02/07 p23-24

<sup>460</sup> Haebich 2000:163

Molly: Yeah

CD: Really? And so you were...tell me if I'm wrong...that you were a house mum? Or house...you know you looked after a group of boys? Was that right?

Molly: No.

CD: What were you doing... were you in the laundry?

Molly: No

CD: or in the kitchen?

Molly: No.

CD: [giggling together] I'm really enjoying this Nana. I'm really getting insight into what life was like for you. It's great. Just tell me when you need a break. So at Aquinas, were you looking after the boys that were staying there?

Molly: No. No.

CD: What were you doing?

Molly: Getting the...

CD: Cleaning?

Molly: Mmmm

CD: Cleaning where they lived?

Molly: Mmmm

CD: Picking up after them. How long were you there? How many years were you there?

Molly: I don't know.

CD: It wasn't long would you say?

Molly: No.

CD: You were living there at St Joseph's until you were 21, and did you go and live somewhere else after you left there? Or were you living still at the orphanage?

Molly: No

CD: Because I remember you were telling us that you got a house with the other girls. Remember how you got a house together. Was that straight after St Joseph's? Because I think you told me that the house might have been owned by the church?

Molly: No

CD: It was a private rental.

Molly: Yes.

CD: In West Perth?

Molly: Yes. I could have bought it.

CD: With the amount of pay you were getting?

Molly: Hmmm

CD: So while you were at Aquinas you were living with these girls?

Molly: Yes

CD: Yeah. And that was with Auntie Dot as well?

Molly: Yes

CD: Did Auntie Dot stay there until she was 21 or did she leave earlier. You know how you stayed until she was 21 because she is a couple of years younger than you. Did she leave earlier or something? What did Auntie Dot do? She got out earlier?

Molly: No

CD: So that was a house that had Auntie Teenie in it. And who else was there?

Molly: Yes

CD: Who else was there?

Molly: [silence]

*[at this point Nana gave a long pause. She did not want to say the other girl's names. I continued on with the interview]*

CD: So all you girls had all different jobs to do?

Molly: Mmmm

CD: Coz I remember you were telling us that you used to have a box on the mantel piece and everyone put their share of the rent in that.

Molly: Yes.<sup>461</sup>

I prefer to consider the time that Nana worked at Aquinas College as an experiment to see if she could manage to live independently in white society within the capacity of a cleaning woman. Her next job was at a proper job within the white community of Perth. She left Aquinas Catholic College for a private hostel in Cottesloe. It was here that travellers could stay for short spells. While speaking with my Nana it seemed at this point in our discussion she seemed to show pride at this achievement.

CD: Right. And what were you doing there? Cooking?

Molly: Nuh

CD: Cleaning the rooms?

Molly: Yeah.

CD: And what happened after that? What happened after that? It must have been nice working near the beach. Was it near the beach?

Molly: Mmmm

CD: Oh. And after Cottesloe what happened then? Tram-conductress?

Molly: Yes.

Haebich<sup>462</sup> describes how during this time period, white interests dominated all jurisdictions controlling Aboriginal needs. The various Acts had powers that were all encompassing over Aboriginal lives. This dominance was aided by the ‘discretionary scope’ that officials had to write policies so general that public servants could be swayed by powerful interest groups. This meant that policy and practice could be shaped so that economic interests in land and Aboriginal labour would speed ahead. In addition, any racial anxiety could also be pacified. In many places in Western Australia, segregated Aboriginal communities provided a low-priced and dependable state-regulated source of domestic workers. It is during this period that the lives of mixed-raced Aboriginal people became totally “*enmeshed in the optimism and failures*

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<sup>461</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Mary Dowling Interview One 07/03/07p10-11

<sup>462</sup> Haebich 2000:163

*of government*<sup>463</sup>. My Nana was a non-citizen without rights whose entire being was the responsibility of bureaucrats both government and church run.

In my Nana's private letters I came across several letters kept together in a neat condition even after 60 years or more. They were the letters of recommendation on my Nana's working ability all written around May 1943 shortly before she gained employment. I believe these letters were required for my Nana to apply for the position of Trolley Bus conductress during the war period. The first letter obtained was from St Joseph's orphanage stating that Nana had "*at all times proved herself trustworthy, capable and willing.*"<sup>464</sup> What is interesting is that the nun who wrote it stated that my Nana could be recommended to "*undertake anything within her scope*". The next letter is from the Christian Brothers at Aquinas College where she is said to have worked as a waitress. The letter states that she showed herself as being "*competent, was obliging, respectful and reliable*". This description of my Nana's demeanour was grateful, humble and faithful which are all highly desirable traits for a mixed-raced girl to possess especially one wishing to work in a white world. The reference that eventually secured my Nana's employment with the metropolitan transport department of Perth was the letter written by Mrs D. M. Melvin of the Hostel Manly in Cottesloe. She wrote that my Nana was always found to be "*most reliable, trustworthy and conscientious*"<sup>465</sup>. The letter then goes on in glowing terms that she could "*with confidence recommend her to anyone requiring her services.*" Such a letter would have demonstrated that a private employer found my Nana to be suitable for working in white society. In a society that saw its white civilians having to accustom themselves to carrying identity cards, to acute shortages of most goods, to extensive food and clothes rationing and to severe price controls. This coupled with the rising casualty lists placed a grim reminder that many Western Australians, conscripts and volunteers, were losing their lives in New Guinea and in other theatres of war close to home. A O Neville's determination to "*make black go white*"<sup>466</sup> continued to be enacted in departmental practice until the end of the 1940s. Haebich<sup>467</sup> asserted that this "*left a painful legacy for the 'quarter-caste' child in Western Australia who were part of his experiment in social and biological engineering*".

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<sup>463</sup> Haebich 2000:163

<sup>464</sup> Personal Letters of Mary Dowling dated 31<sup>st</sup> May 1943

<sup>465</sup> Private Letters of Mary Dowling dated 29<sup>th</sup> May 1943

<sup>466</sup> Haebich 2000:289

<sup>467</sup> Haebich 2000:279

CD: Was that right in the middle of the war time. So all the blokes went so there were a lot of jobs around?

Molly: I was on the trams.

CD: You were in the trams straight away. Gee you must have been there for a while. From the time you were 23 up until you met Nanpop when you were about 26.

CD: Nana is looking through paper work to drag something out to show me. Are you looking for your photograph? *[She hands me the photograph]* Ah, the famous photograph of you in your uniform. How long were you there?

Molly: All of there...*[hold up three of her fingers]*

CD: Three years?

Molly: Yeah

CD: Did they keep you there as a tram conductress the whole time or..?

Molly: Trolley Bus....conductress.

CD: Conductress and that was during the war time?

Molly: Mmmm<sup>468</sup>

## **Marriage and six children**

The story of how my Nana and “Nanpop” met is a romantic and miraculous one. In his RAAF uniform, Sergeant Robert Arthur Dowling had recently returned from active duty in New Guinea stationed on a strategic island of Morotai in the South China Sea. Morotai Island is famously known for the site where the Japanese surrender was signed. Not widely known is that it was also the site of the only military mutiny by Australian troops during World War two. Known as the Morotai Mutany, several RAAF and infantry troops refused to continue duties. This insurrection was chiefly centred on the lack of urgency by military officials to quickly remove Australian troops when ordered to evacuate them. Delays in responses took troops to the brink as half of the island was occupied by Japanese troops. My grandfather would tell stories of there being speakers located in the palm trees where the front line was maintained over several long weeks of hand to hand combat. The loud speakers would broadcast Japanese propaganda materials announcing that Japan had invaded Australia and that many Australian women had

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<sup>468</sup> P12 transcript with Molly Dowling interviewed 7/03/07

Japanese husbands or that female relatives such as my Grandfather's mother and sister were now under Japanese power. Thoroughly convinced that Australia was no longer his home, my grandfather boarded an American aeroplane when the evacuation finally happened as the Americans advanced. My Nanpop had served his duty as a senior mechanic on Spitfires and Kittyhawks keeping them airborne. His crew were in charge of salvage duty extracting bodies and seriously injured crews from crashed aircraft on the island. The aircrafts salvaged or repaired were also worked upon by his crew. Morotai was also the island that the only Aboriginal pilot, Douglas Saunders was based at the same time as was my grandfather. There is little doubt that they would have been aware of each other because of the work my grandfather did in repairing aircraft.

Traumatised and exhausted, my Grandfather returned to Perth after he was placed on an Australian troop ship. He returned to live with his parents, his younger brother Jack and his younger sister, Joy who was 14 years old. His family were in the textile industry having made some profits during the war period. They owned several houses and land holdings to which my Grandfather was to inherit. My grandfather was a Trinity boy having excelled in his studies before the war. He was what white society in Perth would view as a source of pride. He could marry any respectable girl in Perth society. Then on one sunny day, he boarded a trolley bus that took him throughout the city and out to suburbs such as Leederville and West Perth. He saw my Nana and simply fell in love. As the story goes, he spent several shillings to keep travelling on the tram so that he could by chance speak to Molly, the ticket collector.

During this time, the Commissioner of Native Affairs could determine that mixed-race Aboriginal people marry lighter rather than darker skinned people. There were prohibitions on mixing of adult 'quarter-castes' with 'natives' making them only seek out near-white marriage partners. This was designed to make sure that 'mixed-race' Aboriginal people could be eventually bred out following the scientific principles of biological absorption. This provided an ultimate solution to the problem of there being too many mixed-race children. The ultimate goal was that their descendants would become fair skinned and genetically absorbed.

CD: I remember you used to say all the time... “you take the nationality of your father.”

Mary: Yep.

CD: Can you tell me who made this rule up? Who said that was important to you? Where did that come from? Was that something you were brought up to understand?

Mary: Yeah.

CD: When you were growing up into your early twenties, they used to classify people into “half-caste”, “quarter-caste”, was it important for those girls to marry white men?

Mary: Mmm

CD: Was it important for them to marry white men?

Mary: [*silence...nodding her head*]<sup>469</sup>

This was also a period in Australian history where ‘half-castes’ were considered to inherit the worst qualities of both races. They were considered degenerate and unstable meaning they were rejected by all. There was no need for proof to be required with such truisms. By merely asserting such beliefs without proof was adequate enough for their lives to be controlled. The ideal of interracial mixing was not a popular one in any case. The Swedish sociologist, Gunar Myrdal stated in 1941 that white opposition to intermarriage was almost universal. This belief was held ‘*commonly, absolutely and intensely*’<sup>470</sup>. Those that held even cosmopolitan cultures in none out of ten European countries expressed a definite view against miscegenation. Despite this whirlwind of abhorrence, my grandparents’ romance began.

Molly: My husband, he was on the trolley bus and he wanted to get his tobacco.

CD: He was smoking his pipe?

Molly: He was there...

CD: He was on the trolley bus..

Molly: Mmm

CD: And he liked what he saw?

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<sup>469</sup> P21 transcript Molly Dowling 07/03/07

<sup>470</sup> Reynolds 2005:43

Molly: Yes. [giggle] I said...I said "is it ok to go?"

CD: Asking if it was free to go to your driver?

Molly: Yes. Bob [*my grandfather*] said "My mother and my sister...they are driving me mad".

CD: Oh. He said that about his mother and sister?

Molly: Yeah

CD: They were driving him mad. I see

Molly: [*after a long pause*] It was the end of my shift.

CD: It was the end of your shift? Oh...I see. And you said "let's go and have a cuppa tea".

Molly: Yes. And I got my...

CD: Gave back your ticket machine?

Molly: Yes...

CD: Then have a cuppa tea. And where did you have your cuppa tea? Just around?

Molly: Yes..

CD: Did you have many boyfriends before him?

Molly: Nuh.

CD: So that was it...hook line and sinker?

Molly: Mmmm. I said "Come and have a cuppa tea with me." Well...

CD: You said..

Molly: No. "After", I said "-you can go back to your wife!"

CD: You can go back to your wife? Did he get wild with you?

Molly: Yes.

CD: That's a very cheeky thing to say. I suppose you gotta find out I suppose hey?

Molly: And he said "oooh."

CD: So he was in his uniform and so were you. Both looking prim and proper?

Molly: Well, he said “You can ask my sister...”

CD: “Get my sister to tell you that I’m not married.” Is that what he said?

Molly: Yes. Then we played cards a lot.

CD: So you played games of cards to get to know him?

Molly: Yes.

CD: You were saying that he couldn’t stand his mother and his sister. And how were they when that he was going..he was going to get married. Were there any difficulties with that? His sister was only young wasn’t she?

Molly: Yes.

CD: She was in the bridal party. Was there any difficulty..any problems with you two getting married?

Molly: *[silence...nodding her head]*

CD: Sort of?

Molly: *[silence...nodding her head to agree]*

CD: You didn’t worry what people said and you just went ahead?

Molly: Mmmm<sup>471</sup>

According to Cousin Elsie Elliott, my Nana and Nanpop married three months after they met in 1946<sup>472</sup>. My Auntie Barbara gives insight into how her parents handled this period

Barb: My father was a very good and loving husband, but also too because of the racism of his mother, he also went along with racism against his own wife and children... and his father’s racism as well.

CD: Yes. But in a sense, Nanna, by marrying Nan-Pop, was actually doing exactly what the government wanted?

Barb: Yes, yes.

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<sup>471</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Molly Dowling 07/03/07 p13-15

<sup>472</sup> Elsie Elliott private family documents undated page 2

CD: I'm not saying whether she agreed to that, I'm just saying that...

Barb: Everything that has been done, everything that they have been through is to no avail at all. That's three generations of women...up to Nana, that's three generations of women that have compromised themselves, hoping that that would...provide acceptance in white society.<sup>473</sup>

On their certificate of marriage, my grandparents were married on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1946 at St Joseph's church where to rites and ceremonies performed were placed under a special license and it was not mentioned that Nana's parents were divorced but were noted as living together in Perth. It was known that her father was residing there with his mistress now his second wife and Granny was alone on her property in Coorow.

Auntie Barbara describes in detail some of the tensions her mother expressed about the time they married and the trepidations she felt at their future together.

CD: So do you think that by marrying Nan-pop... I mean, I know Nan-pop was wonderful, I loved him. But I want to know why... do you think her marrying Nan-pop was something that gave her a bit more freedom, do you think, or what was that about?

Barb: I think that might have been love. I think it was love, because I think she was not going to do it, because she told us stories about how she...

*[It is here that Auntie Barb stops and starts to cry...]*

CD: Breathe. (*Deep breathing in unison with Barb*)

Barb: (*Sigh*) Ahh... (*Fighting back tears*) She was walking down the aisle, he was waiting for her. She said "I got there and then thought I can't do this." And he stepped back and grabbed her arm and said "It'll be alright mate!" So he knew what she was going through. He could see her hesitate. Why else would he say that to her? Say something like that?

CD: And who told you this story, Nana?

Barb: Yes

CD: And when did she tell you that?

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<sup>473</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Barb Dowling interviewed 1/2/07 p51

Barb: Oh, might have been just after he died, not long after he died.

CD: Yeah, you say a lot when they go...

Barb: She started talking about that then, yeah.

CD: So she was hesitant about marrying him. The legend goes that he was disinherited for marrying her, and there was a lot of tension there...

Barb: Definitely. He was cut out.<sup>474</sup>

### **Returning to her mother**

Haebich<sup>475</sup> describes mixed-race Aboriginal people such as my grandmother as “culturally white in a society that perceived them as Aboriginal.” Any person of ‘quarter-caste’ proportion was barred by law from engaging with Aboriginal people of a higher proportion. This was about Nana not seeing her mother and her extended family in Coorow. Now that she had achieved a relatively high degree of acceptance in White society it meant my Nana had nowhere to go. This was also the position of many young women that my Nana knew and lived with in that little West Perth rental. Haebich<sup>476</sup> asserts that there was an indelible impression of this time in Perth as one of “generalised white complicity at all levels” when it came to the treatment of Aboriginal people in the city. It would be naïve to believe that the government was solely responsible for such widespread treatment.

My Nana was now a married woman with children arriving rapidly. My mother was their first born and named Veronica Mary, whose name Mary continued a line of the name, was born on 8<sup>th</sup> February 1947 at King Edward Memorial Hospital. My grandfather was not given any assistance from his wealthy parents even with her arrival. My Nanpop got some menial work around the city. Then their second child, Robert Jnr (1949) was born. Nana and Nanpop then wisely decided to return the mid-west district for a change of lifestyle. My grandfather moved his family to care take a station called Narratarra, north of Geraldton. My Nana stayed at home with their children maintaining the homestead while her husband did the farm work. This early time was very happy for this young family as the photos we have shown. Meanwhile with a growing family like many other returned servicemen at this time, life became a struggle of coping with injury, trauma and a return to peacetime life in Australia. The Repatriation

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<sup>474</sup> Carol Interview with Barb Dowling interviewed 1/2/07p26

<sup>475</sup> Haebich 2000:287

<sup>476</sup> Haebich 2000:287

Commission gave out a land allotment to my grandfather located on the banks of the Swan River in Riverton. Across the water they could see the white towers of Aquinas College. They lived in tents until my Grandfather built a small wooden house. There was no electricity or running water. Water was pumped from the river using a bicycle peddling system to irrigate their vegetable garden and to be boiled for drinking. It was from this small oasis, my mother would be taken by her father and walked to school in Victoria Park every day in her blue uniform. Two of my Aunts, Barbara (1951) closely followed by Patricia (1952) were born while they lived in Riverton. Suddenly, with now four young children to care for, they were thrown off their land by the commission. Nanpop's parents had complained to the Repatriation commission about the lack of amenities on the block. His parents were not going to make their lives easy while living in the city. In complete desperation faced with homelessness, my Nana turned against the law governing her freedoms of association and decided to return back to her mother after such a long absence.

CD: So when your kids were young, you went to stay with your Mum in Coorow.

Molly: Yes.

CD: And why did you have to do that?

Molly: What?

CD: Why did you have to go to Coorow? Was it difficult getting work in Perth or?

Molly: No.

CD: Why did you have to go to Coorow?

Molly: My mother was there!<sup>477</sup>

My grandfather started showing signs of serious illness with recurring bouts of malaria followed by anxiety attacks. These would sometimes escalate to psychotic episodes believing he was still fighting in New Guinea's forests.

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<sup>477</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Molly Dowling interviewed 07/03/07 p15

As part of the City of Gosnells Aboriginal Oral history project, my mother gave an interview to Dr Mary Ann Jebb about her life and spoke about this period of returning to their Grandmother and their traditional country.

***Did you ever meet your grandmother?***

*Yes, I spent three glorious years with my grandmother. We went up like I said before Gosnells area we lived across from the railway station there and the bowling club in a little rented house and I went to Saint Munchin's which used to be where this beautiful library is at the moment and I made my first holy communion and a couple of days later we went up to Coorow, which is on the Brand Highway going toward Geraldton, to stay with my grandmother to help her because she was getting a bit poorly. She had a heart condition you see. And we went up there and we stayed up there from 1954 to 1959 until we had to come down when my dad got sick from post-traumatic stress from the Second World War*

***So who went up?***

*The whole lot of us.*

***And can you tell me who that is please?***

*There was me, mum and dad, my brother Robert, my sister Barbara, my sister Pat and my sister Liz, no Lizzie wasn't born then that's right. We all went up there and everything came along behind us on the train. We went on the steam train, which I love, steam trains. We got up there and everything got off loaded and we had to trek it over to my grandmother's place, which is about two kms out of the town, to the little forty (40) acre plot. Dad had already gone up months before and built the 'Barbie' house and it was made of corrugated iron, which I hated because it got so hot and it was just like a square box with a slanting roof. He eventually built my room on one end of it in chaff bags, and I used to undo the chaff bags and wave to my grandmother at her house every night and then seal it up and go to sleep, that was so cool.<sup>478</sup>*

This interview with the Western Australian Oral History Association interviewer, Dr Mary Ann Jebb has shown the experiences of my mother as a seven-year-old forging the beginnings of a memorable relationship. This was her Badimia grandmother or "Granny" as she liked to be called. They continue by discussing what it was like at Granny's place in Coorow.

***Can you tell me more about that place? What was your grandmother's house like?***

*It was made of...what looked like gravel stuck together with cement stuff in big blocks, and it was so cool inside, dark and everything it had a tin roof, my uncle George who's passed now, had pitched the roof on it. She had the main kitchen dining room and a bedroom she never slept in, though she sleep in a tin annex to it. It was just away from the window you see? It was enclosed with a little fence to keep the sheep that she used*

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<sup>478</sup> Knowledge Centre Gosnells Oral History interview Ms Veronica (Ronnie) Dowling 04/07/08

to get there some times. People used to give her sheep and that. Everyone liked her in the town because her husband was a Freemason in the local mob that was there, and he has his name up on the big hall that got built, but Granny was the one who used to be the local midwife for the area, and everyone knew her.

**What about your grandmother did you have a lot to do with your grandmother?**

Well my grandmother was... stern, very strict. What I used to do was help her with all her chooks. She had a lot of chooks, chickens and turkeys and geese and ducks, and she had them in a big enclosure and what I used to have to do was go and clean them all out - all the poop and everything and feed them in the mornings with the water and stuff.

She had two big Shire Clydies [Clydesdale] horses you know...those big things with the feathery feet, and I had to help groom them as well, and get water out of the well for that. She had a fresh water well and a salt water well, and the fresh water well was over there in a big paddock with the horses and it used to have a tank which was cut off and you used to pump the water up - stick it in the tank. They used to drink it all and go off and fool around in the paddock until it got planted up for crops. The guy used to come down in the (aero)plane and go zoom, zoom and that was it, but she used to get enough wheat and stuff for all her animals to get fed - all her chickens and everything to get fed. She used to sell the eggs. She used to put them in the trays and take them up to town and get money for that, or she used to exchange it for - she was great for that - for bread and butter and jam and tea and stuff like that. Very simple, very recycling which I've sort of carried on with my life.

**Was your grandfather around then?**

No, he'd gone before we came up there; this wasn't his place this was hers. She'd been given it to her by the town council for a peppercorn rent, because of all she had done for them you see. She had a peppercorn tree growing on the property actually and half way up they had a branch cut like that [indicates with hands]. I used to sit up in there and you couldn't see that we were up there, your legs would hang and no one would know you where there. That's what she said she used to pay a peppercorn rent every month or so, that was in her will and she had it.

**What sort of work was your father doing then?**

He was working on the railway lines, a ganger. You know, he put the sleepers down and put the rails on and all that stuff and then he got 'troppo' which was frightening to watch because he was such a lovely man. He was a real pacifist, he didn't want to go to the War [World War two] but he signed up.<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>479</sup> Knowledge Centre Gosnells Oral History interview Ms Veronica (Ronnie) Dowling 04/07/08 page 5

When discussing this period with my Auntie Barb she spoke about what happened at school in the town and the house that their father built on Granny's block.

CD: So, you're saying that you went to school there, was there some sort of tension there, when you were going to school there? As far as with your family, and non-Indigenous people?

Barb: Yes, we never mixed with all of the children there, and we did mix with some of the people, but only the ones that Granny had worked for at different times. I don't remember mixing with all of them, as in... I always thought it was because we were poor, I didn't think it was anything else. I just thought we're poor, our parents didn't pick us up in a car. We had to walk all the way home and stuff. We didn't have interesting lunches like all the others had. Sometimes we only had pancakes with butter on it.

CD: Can you describe where you were living at that time in Coorow? What were you living in?

Barb: We were living in a house that my father made. All I remember was that we had to go up steps to get into it - it was up off the ground on stilts. And us girls slept there (Gestures), and at the end of the house, when you came down the steps, there was like an enclosed area with a Hessian bag. And in that room was a tin, like a drum or some sort, and there was a fire in there in the winter time, mum used to put the fire in there.<sup>480</sup>

Noongar writer, Kim Scott<sup>481</sup> writes about his personal journey of his ancestor's stories as a mixed-race person. He writes about his stupidity in not fully comprehending how skin colour was a way of dividing society and how being fairer skinned gave you advantages during these times. When discussing this factor with my Auntie Barb she went deeper into small town dynamics for her as a young child. It is also the introduction of the story of Shepherd Diner visiting Granny in Coorow. Auntie Barb provides her memories of how they their mother and grandmother approached their Aboriginality.

Barb: But there was a group of Aboriginal people as well that lived... we had to pass... you know, fringe dwelling type houses and things on the way to school and so fourth. But we were told never to go there and associate with them, and even the Aboriginal children at the school, we weren't encouraged to sit with them or talk to them or anything.

CD: And who told you that?

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<sup>480</sup> P6 Transcript with Barb Dowling interviewed 1/2/07

<sup>481</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:178

Barb: Mum. “*Stay away from them, stay away from there, just stay away!*.” [She’d say]

CD: Yes.

Barb: Well they could be related. We don’t know. But then Granny never had anyone from there visit either, I don’t believe. I don’t think that lady lived there, that used to come...

CD: She obviously used to come a long way.

Barb: I think so. Your mum didn’t know who she was. I don’t know, but my mum would have known.<sup>482</sup>

When yarning with my Nana about this mysterious visitor to Granny’s house, I was amazed at how adamant she was in not revealing any details about who she was or even if the visits occurred.

CD: Auntie Barb and my Mum they spoke about an old woman who used to visit Granny from time to time in Coorow. They remember her coming to the house and when she spoke to Granny she spoke in an Aboriginal language and she spoke together in that language. Do you know anything about that?

Molly: No.

CD: Was she a friend of Granny’s your mum or was she a relation?

Molly: I don’t know.

CD: You don’t know or you don’t want to talk about it?

Molly: [silence]

CD: Because Mum and Auntie Barb they remember it. The old woman used to wave and let Granny know that she was coming there and then I think that was to make sure that the kids were not around while she was there so that the kids were not around. She is a bit of a mystery and I would like to know who she was? Mum remembers her and she remembers seeing them doing sand paintings together in the ground. They were putting their fingers in the ground and making symbols and things. It was very interesting.

Molly: [silence]

CD: But you don’t want to talk about it?

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<sup>482</sup> P8 Interview with Barb Dowling interviewed 1/2/07

Molly: Nuh!<sup>483</sup>

While in Coorow, my Nana worked at the local hotel as a cleaner and washer woman. Considering how busy this small wheat town was the food on the menu sounded exceptionally refined for such an establishment. I found a card with the Hotel logo stating “Coorow Hotel” with an E. J. Bradley listed as the Proprietor. The menu card was printed by Geraldton Newspapers Limited and was handwritten possibly by the cook or by Mr Bradley himself. Written on the back is the list of profits for the day totalling 36 pounds written in pencil on the card. The takings for the day was in my grandmother’s personal documents with the handwritten menu They were able to serve luncheons beginning with an entrée of soup offered was vegetable while the entrée was described as Potato pie. The main was cold meat which usually came from a roast prepared and cooled. This was served with a garden salad. However, it was the desserts or ‘sweets’ as described on the menu card that demonstrated my Nana’s flare for cooking. Sweets were Rhubarb and Ice cream or Baked Macaroon Custard. This lunch would then extend into afternoon tea where she offered Shirley Toffs and pots of tea. My young Aunt Elizabeth who was only four years old would come with her to work while her other four children went to the local school. My mum gives more account of life in Coorow for her family.

***So we’ll go back to when you were young and when you were living near your grandmother.***

*We went to the state school which didn’t go down well with my mum because she is a strict Catholic, but I didn’t like it there for that, the school, the fact I had to go and walk two (2) kms into town every day*

***What didn’t you like about it?***

*It was racist that town. It was so bad, I mean when I went back for a visit I had a lot of the white people coming up and apologising. We didn’t realise..., these were kids that used to throw stones at me you know, anything else that they could get hold of they’d chuck it. And swear and carry on, and I used to get the kids and walk them in front of me - my sisters, my brother I’d say ‘just keep moving’, and I’d feel it all on my back. Big boondies<sup>484</sup> of gravel stones pitched at my back, and nasty names called out.*

***What were the issues, what names were they calling you?***

*Half-cast, was one of the biggest ones, and boong and all those things - derogatory names. When I’d gone back for the visit when we were going up for that Land Council thing, we stopped off at Coorow and we went to the church and the people that were there who used to throw stones at me were very apologetic; they apologised for what they’d done, the ones that*

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<sup>483</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Molly Dowling interviewed 7/3/07 p17-18

<sup>484</sup> Large lumps of solidified sand and rock

*were Catholic anyway. I said 'I didn't give a shimmy about it anyway', that was the times, the 50s was very racist. They've got a bit more tolerant now. Because I didn't retaliate to them - if I'd turned around and said 'if you do that again I'll belt you one'; which I'd do now.*

***How many kids were in the class, do you remember?***

*About twenty (20), twenty five (25) and they used to chuck us at the back, put us at the back and because my eyes were going then I couldn't see the board.<sup>485</sup>*

I also yarned with my mother about how the children at the school treated her and her siblings. It was their experiences that revealed the true sentiments of their parents and the racial divisions occurring around them.

RD: At Coorow State School yeah. They were nasty little shites.

CD: What would they say?

RD: They'd call "ya boong" and you know...half-caste and all this stuff. But I used to get the kids in front of me and I'd be getting hit in the back with all the stones and I'd say "Let's get going". And we'd go off home. They'd stop after a while.

CD: So you'd never retaliate?

RD: No. Never did that.

CD: Did they eventually stop?

RD: No!

CD: They just kept going?

RD: Kept doing it. Mum used to work for these people too, for their parents, you know? Really weird! Racist town I think.<sup>486</sup>

It seemed that my grandfather's mental condition deteriorated rapidly while they lived on Granny's property. He lost his job working for the railway because his 'spells' or psychotic episodes increased. This meant that Nana had to take on any available work in the town. One of those women who employed my Nana was once someone that Granny had looked after, Mary Hirst who had now just had her first child. I think from our discussion that my Nana was paid a small amount to help her and that Granny had made the arrangement. Granny was known

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<sup>485</sup> Knowledge Centre Gosnells Oral History interview Ms Veronica (Ronnie) Dowling 04/07/08 p6-7

<sup>486</sup> Carol Dowling Interview with Mary Hirst 206/04/07 p4

to also look after white children whose parents were out socialising in the district. She was the ‘black nanny’ who watched over their children. My Nana also assumed this role to support her growing family.

Mary: When I came home from hospital after having Nicola my eldest one, Granny arranged for this girl to clean the place up a bit and help me get back on my feet a bit.

CD: Right, and what year was that do you think?

Mary: That would be about 1957 I suppose.

CD: Oh right.

Mary: I think she was living with Granny and I think she had children that went to the school.<sup>487</sup>

Granny tried to assist her daughter by shooting kangaroos for meat and trading her eggs. There was also the monthly food parcel sent by Auntie Dot who was now living in Perth with her new husband, Mr Les Passmore, a white working class builder. However, one morning Granny was suddenly taken to Three Springs hospital. In a few short days she passed away. My Nana’s brother, Uncle Ted was made executor of her will. The children stood and watched as all of Granny’s possessions were sold. Uncle Ted said that Nana had to make Granny’s property viable in a year or they would have to move.

*I remember the last year was very bad because from ‘54, ‘55, ‘56 up to then my grandmother was alive and she was a big influence on the town. They’d be nice, but the last few years were quite horrendous. We practically starved except for the bush tucker stuff we used to get, which she used to teach us how to get you know, because around there it was quite prolific – the stuff we could eat like from kangaroo shooting and stuff.<sup>488</sup>*

I spoke with Nana about his time and as she spoke her face visible dropped with a look of despair.

CD: ....And while you were still up there your mum passed away. I remember talking with Auntie Barb she was saying that when old girl passed away that it was harder to get a regular feed and it was a bit harder...was that right?

Molly: Mmmm <sup>489</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> Carol Dowling Interview with Mary Hirst 26/04/07

<sup>488</sup> Knowledge Centre Gosnells Oral History interview Ms Veronica (Ronnie) Dowling 04/07/08 page 7

<sup>489</sup> P15-16 Transcript with Molly Dowling interviewed 7/03/07 p15

Kim Scott<sup>490</sup> speaks about how the structure of wider white society for mixed-race Aboriginal people in Western Australia suggested that my Nana and her children were not wanted and that there was something about you (your culture and identity perhaps) that had to be removed or fixed. These experiences tended to breed shame with many institutions such as St Joseph's deliberately setting out to achieve this.

With her sudden death came the demise of a stream of knowledge about our culture and language and the beginning of a painful period of their lives. My Nana had lost her mother after only a few years of reunification. In the interview with Dr Mary Ann Jebb, my mother speaks about the beginning of a clandestine method where Granny taught her grandchildren about Badimia culture and lore.

***Do you think history is more important to Aboriginal people?***

*Yes, it's the lynch pin, because history is how you teach the younger ones what's right; how to behave, how to do this and do that, and the cooking and all the herby things and everything else, or hunting or whatever. That's what my grandmother was trying to teach me when my mother used to call us away, she'd say 'no' so gran used to wait until she'd gone to work at the hotel and she'd teach us stuff (laughs). She taught me all these herb things I've forgotten most of them, you know how to heal things and stuff like, what do they call that stuff, the Murran bush, the cancer fighting tree.*

***And your grandmother was pointing these things out to you when you were young?***

*Yes she did, if I got stranded, if the world went crazy - not that it isn't - and I went in the bush, I would survive because I know where to look for food.*

## **Leaving Coorow and state housing in Perth**

*He used to go and sit in the middle of the paddock, the wheat paddock and he'd point down to the ground and he'd be talking the whole time and I sneaked up behind him. One day I was bringing him a drink of water and listened and he was telling the guys back on Morati how to put all the bits that were on that sheet of canvas in the plane and if they didn't go in the plane, that plane wasn't flying and you'd have to undo it all, and put it all back together again. And he was quite calm about it and everything; I used to give him the drink of water and walk off. He really did, he really went quite 'troppo' it was frightening to watch <sup>491</sup>*

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<sup>490</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:118

<sup>491</sup> Knowledge Centre Gosnells Oral History interview Ms Veronica (Ronnie) Dowling 04/07/08 page10

Granny's property in Coorow had now passed into the hands of her executor, Uncle Ted Latham. Uncle Ted having declared that my Nana, her ailing husband and their five children were to be homeless. The only place left for them was to return to my grandfather's mother's house. There was a cold reception as the family were forced to live in her chicken shed. Soon after arriving in August 1960, my Nana gave birth to her last child, my Uncle John named after Nanpop's brother Jack.

Barb: And then when we came down after my granny died, and we came to Perth, we actually lived in my grandma's place. We weren't allowed inside the house, only for meals. ... We ate, and then we left the house, we walked outside. She put us to sleep in what was a battery hen shed, which had been used for battery chooks. And it was a concrete floor, and Mum made mattresses up out of straw with blankets on them, and we slept there. We were not allowed in the house, except for meals. We had to stay outside. And then we came home from school one day, and my mother was being pushed back out of the fly-screen door. My grandma had thrown a teapot of tea in her face, and I distinctly remember my grandma... I believe we'd come in for a meal, and my mum was feeding my little brother. And whenever she fed the baby she always laid down with him, and fed him, and there was something about Grandma saying she's just a lazy person. "*A lazy lay-a-bout!*" My mother? She called her that? And I thought...well...she's only feeding the baby, and I remember thinking that and I was only eight. And you pick up the tension in the house, even when you're sitting there for meals. You know, you pick up that tension.

CD: And you thought that was a racial thing, or...

Barb: Definitely. Now, that house that we lived in was owned by my grandmother, but she never lived there. She used to live in Mt. Lawley. She had a house in Mt. Lawley. But when we asked to go and live in there, instead of her just letting Mum and Dad have the house with us children, to live in, she moved back in there. She already had that house in Mt. Lawley, there was no reason for her not to live there.

CD: So how long were you living there?

Barb: Only about three months. And then the inspectors came, and Mum showed them where we were sleeping and that, and then they got us a house. They realized we needed a house.<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>492</sup> P27-30 Transcript with Barb Dowling interviewed 1/2/07

My Auntie then described the wonderment of having light switched to turn on when they eventually moved into their State Housing home in Redcliffe. This was before the Tonkin Highway was passed through and the Perth airport was only beginning to become used more frequently. Separating the airport from their house was bushland with freshwater pools brown with tannin from the Melaleuca trees surrounding them. This was Noongar country with Djulgees (Freshwater crayfish), Long neck tortoises and an increasing number of introduced rabbits that were quickly destroying habitat. This was a wonderland for my Aunties and Uncles and my mother. My Auntie Barbara spoke of the screaming and jumping around their new three bedroom home as they turned on their first electric light. Their only livestock remaining from their trip to Perth was three black hens, a goat and a Border collie dog named Rocky. It was 1960 and the photographs that remain of this early time are almost magical.

Barb: I believe mum had to pay for our train fare down by selling the chooks as we went. She had to sell them at each station stop to pay for our fare to get down. And then all we had left was a little goat. Oh no, we did have some Bantoms left, that's right, but we ate them eventually, but the little goat died, it was poisoned...

CD: So, back to Nanna, in your own opinion, did you feel that she looked down to Aboriginal people?

Barb: Yes. In one sense, yes, not so much looked down but would not associate. There was an Aboriginal family just down the road three houses away, and she never went to see them, but if they ever came to the house, she would always give them something to eat. I do remember her giving them food because I thought we haven't got enough food for ourselves, what is she giving it away for? I didn't think that was fair, you know, giving it away to other people when we didn't have enough. But now I can see that she was probably thinking the same, it could be a relative, and it could have been.

CD: So in a sense, she was also looking out for Aboriginal people in that sense.

Barb: Yes, looking out for them and helping them if she could, yes.

CD: Yes, yes.

Barb: So there's that quandary going on in her mind.

CD: Yes. So, I have gotta say this, did she look down on Wudjula culture, white culture?

Barb: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. She was very much into get an education, get a good job, and work for the government. That was the big goal in life, work for the government.

CD: Work for the government?

Barb: Yes. So it's sort of tied up with that who looked after you... the Catholics and the government, it was all tied in there together, wasn't it?

CD: So the last question about nanna is would you say that nanna got along with white people generally? Or was she treated differently by white people when you were growing up?

Barb: A lot of times, mum covered down a bit to them.

CD: And it was evident?

Barb: It was evident that she was.

CD: So you could see it.

Barb: Some people... some very good friends she had, you could see her relax and be herself, and laugh and joke and stuff. But others, you could definitely see this covered down, you know, like appeasing yes, and all that with neighbours and things like that in particular.

CD: Right. To convince them that she was a good person.

Barb: Yeah, that she was good enough to be there. So she obviously still had that very lack of self-esteem, and yet she could have been anything, my mum, she was so clever. She could have been anything. Her whole life almost wasted, in a sense.

CD: Because of those external oppressions?

Barb: Yeah, and no opportunities. They weren't given to her. She was denied the opportunities to try anything else, or do anything else, she was denied them. There was nothing she could do. All that stride, but she could not do... denying her parentage, denying her Badimia side of her life. Doing everything to deny it, get away from it in a sense.

CD: Yes. That must do something, do you think, to people? What does it do to a person when they have to do that? What do you think it does to them?

Barb: You are denying who you are yourself, you're trying to make out you're someone else, and you're not. But you're not, and you'll never be. You might be good enough, you certainly are good enough, everyone is equal. But because you deny that, you can't be

your full potential. You can't have your full potential, because you've denied your identity. Who you are. And not accepted by either side then, because you don't accept yourself. If you don't accept yourself, no-one's gonna accept ya.

Such exchanges with my Auntie Barbara really strengthened our knowledge together of what her mother, Molly had experienced and the way she adapted her behaviour to enable her children to survive in a predominantly white society. My mother discussed these issues to Mary Ann Jebb about leaving her Grandmother's country by stating *"We had to leave. I hated leaving. I didn't want to come down to Perth. It was terrible."*

The children began to go to school at the local Catholic primary school named St Maria Goretti where a lot of children from migrants were attending. Down the road from their house there were low income apartment buildings. These were built to house the overflow of migrants and their family who arrived from European countries flowing after the war. However, the reception and success of the children at school and high school was hampered by the family's poverty.

CD: Oh. Was there any feeling of guilt imposed upon the family because... was there any racial stuff going on there, do you think?

Barb: I think there would have been. I can't pin point it and say yes, this. But you were always made to feel - as we did when we went to school, you were the poor ones. You owed some sort of... you owed the church something... for treating you like a human, and helping you. But they didn't help us. Saint Vincent de Paul, which was a separate organisation [*helped us*]. Some of the men that were in that went to our church, yes, and were members and all that. But they were the ones that actually gave us food. I remember we didn't go to high school one morning because mum had no breakfast to give us. So when we went the next day, she wrote a letter, and must have written that in the letter. Well the nuns called me back in after school, and you know what they did, they gave us two bags of clothes. And someone said [*at home*] *"Well what do they think we were? Moths?"* Moths would eat the clothes as food. Instead of getting us some food or some money to buy food, they gave us two bags of clothes! Which in the end I suppose mum sold, I don't know. Whether they went to see mum and something else happened, I don't know, but I just remember them calling Pat and I in, and saying *"Your mother said she couldn't give you any breakfast the other day, and that's why you didn't come to school,*

*so we want to give you these clothes.” And we came home with a bagful of clothes over our shoulder.<sup>493</sup>*

My grandfather, Robert Dowling now needed extensive treatment for his mental illness diagnosed as schizophrenia. He would go for electro shock treatment at Hollywood Hospital returning home in a zombie like state. This ‘treatment’ made Nanpop very weak meaning that he could only tend to a vegetable garden in their back yard and to trap rabbits for food. He could not work and the Repatriation commission refused to provide him with a pension. Their children were growing into adulthood however dysfunction began to creep into the family. My Uncle Robert began to terrorise his family with very violent behaviour. At the age of 19, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia also and placed at Graylands Mental hospital where he remained. My mother was asked to leave high school by Nana and being old enough to find work as a domestic servant in the bush she would leave and bring her pay home to the family. Then one day, she brought home two newborn baby twins, born out of wedlock in 1969. One of these babies was me and the other was my sister Julie. Our first two years were spent in the little house in Redcliffe surrounded by our family. Then suddenly, when my sister and I were six years old, our Nanpop died of a heart attack at the house. Nana was left to be the sole parent of her six children. She went onto a pension to support her and her remaining children at home, my aunt Liz and Uncle John. My mother, my sister and I moved to state housing for single mothers in Armadale. My Aunt Barbara got married and moved away while my aunt Pat moved to South Australia to be with Great-Auntie Dot who had moved there with her family. It was not until 1982 that Nana was granted a War Widows pension and was welcomed to attend Legacy with other widows of returned soldiers. It was here that she was respected for her journey and Nana made many friendships as the Legacy ladies went on trips to the south-west.

### **Losing her language – keeping her story**

Then in 1992, Nana suddenly suffered a massive stroke leaving her permanently paralysed in her right arm and leg. She also had brain damage resulting in a severe speech delay called Aphasia. The hospital declared her a miracle woman because of the rapidity of her relative recovery from the stroke. She returned to her small house to live to the present day. Although Nana has speech difficulties she was able to pass on information about her life to her grandchildren and stories about her own mother and grandmother. My family rallied around

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<sup>493</sup> P22 Transcript with Barb Dowling interviewed 1/2/07

her. My sister, Julie took a year and a half from her career as an artist to live with Nana while she became independent again. Over the last two years, myself and my Aunt Liz began to provide consistent in-home care to Nana. However, when my Nana was 90 years old, she went to live with my Aunt Liz and Aunt Pat in Maddington as she could no longer live independently. She still kept her house in Redcliffe. This is the same house she has lived in since 1960 and she would visit the house to reminisce about her life there. I would bring my children to see her and my Aunties nearly every day. I looked forward to giving her a back massage with emu oil every night so that she could sleep. I wrote a poem about this intimate connection with my Nana as a frail old woman.

### **My Nana's Back**

**Oh how I will miss her.  
This is all I hear my mind say  
Everytime I put the emu oil onto my palms  
Warming the oil before I spread it over her naked back.  
She lies there silently.  
She groans when I work the right spot.  
Massaging her weathered muscles and spine.**

**Her skin is dotted with large moles  
I've seen these before on old black women.  
But this is the back of my grandmother.  
Frail, vulnerable and helpless as a baby  
I spread the oil over her skin and see it glisten.  
It smells good as I push my hand firmly but gently across  
her body giving her relief.**

**I am her oldest grandchild.  
I have always believed this to be an honour and a responsibility.  
When she goes, I will know that she knew I loved and cared for her  
To the very end.  
I look at my white hands on her dark skin.  
But in those fingers I can see her fingers.  
We share the same hands.  
We share the same love.  
This is food for my soul.  
Some things will last forever.**

Our family all agreed that Nana should remain surrounded by her family in her final years. My Aunties worked tirelessly to give Nana every comfort but quickly after living with them she became bedridden. My Auntie Liz, who is a highly qualified nurse, managed Nana's care and ensured that she received physiotherapy, round the clock nursing and appropriate food. Nana was treated with much care and was visited by her relatives from far and wide. In October

2011, my Nana contracted a chest infection that would not budge and was sent home from one of her many hospital stays. She could not swallow food and drink which saw her quickly decline in condition. The medical professionals said that it wasn't going to be long before she would pass. We all made sure that Nana was surrounded by her family the night before she died and I am glad I told her how much I loved her and what a wonderful grandmother she was to me. More importantly, I thanked her for all that she had given to me as her oldest grandchild. Nana just held my hand and looked deep into my eyes. I saw love and honour in her expression as I kissed her for the last time. Her touch and face will stay with me forever.

My grandmother passed away in the arms of her youngest daughter Liz late that night at the grand age of 93 years. My Aunties said that she did not want to go and fought her death but when it came her last words were those of love. She is sorely missed by our family and extended family as the last of Granny's nine children to have lived. It was a privilege to have known her for so long and I will be indebted to her forever for the knowledge she shared with me for this thesis project.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **“Mum”**

**Ronnie Dowling**

#### **Introduction**

It is not unusual for any child to talk with their extended family about the story of their coming into the world. They first speak with their mother and then to extended family about the beginning of their own story. At very early age I would ask about my story and what was told revealed the kind of woman my mother was when she conceived my twin sister and I as a 20-year-old. From the moment she knew that she was pregnant, my mother was confronted with a family and society that was hostile towards her. As one of a few single mothers who had decided not to marry, her decision was not welcomed by her staunch Catholic family. My mother's decision to not adopt us out (many of her family pressured her to do so) was the ultimate act of a rebel. It was this trait that I most admired because throughout my own childhood, I felt that my mother believed that my sister and I were her greatest achievements. She treated us like precious investments in which our education and our sense of resilience she tended to like a garden on a daily basis. I admire her courage and resourcefulness in the way she was a parent and as a woman because she coped with the limited tools she had. My success and achievements in life are hers and I believe that in anything I do in this life will be my gift back to her.

In compiling this chapter I was able to investigate several contexts to my mother's life as well as to discuss these directly with her and conversely with my twin sister Julie. I have also discussed these with my mother's younger sister, Auntie Barbara. My mother's journey is one of struggle out of poverty and cultural alienation. Despite this she is a storyteller and it is these precious stories that prompted me to write about my Badimia women ancestors. I think it was Kevin Gilbert who best described her predicament by stating that part-Aboriginal people dropped into white society are not able to '*obliterate themselves in the mainstream*'. He continued by aptly describing how Aboriginal people like my mother "*still clearly carry the scars of their origins and their 'whiteness' has sat uneasily on their shoulders*"<sup>494</sup>. Such identity issues prompted my mother to openly identify as Aboriginal later in her life. She was the first person to do so in our extended family. Her journey to that point signals the tremendous changes in Australian society through this period between 1947 to the early 1980s. Along with her 'rebirth' as a Badimia woman she insisted that my twin sister and I too should enjoy such freedom. Such freedom was not enjoyed for three generations of women in our family up until that point.

Yet this act of choosing to be Aboriginal is not a choice at all. My colleague Jean Boladeras wrote in her article entitled 'The desolate loneliness of racial passing' that implying that a choice was made says that a fair skinned Aboriginal person could comfortably select their racial preference whilst discarding any unsavoury historical legacies without consequences. Choosing to identify is a "*political, social and economic act that may be carried out for any of a multitude of reasons*".<sup>495</sup> She asserts that there is a perception by mainstream Australians that such identification as Aboriginal is to be jealously guarded by them as the colonising culture while remaining acutely aware of who has a 'touch of the tar-brush'. This is evident in the newly established departments that came into existence in the mid-1970s to deal with social issues and other 'problem communities'. During the time I was a child, what really occurred was that these bureaucracies gave the appearance of pulling us as Aboriginal people into the sphere of modern care and welfare although remaining predominantly colonial in essence. In other colonies such as India and Africa, they had adopted new systems that were structured to rule using already functioning Indigenous systems of governance, the Australian public policy model worked to support a settler society.<sup>496</sup> As a recipient of this institutionalised control, my

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<sup>494</sup> Kevin Gilbert 'Living Black'(1977:203) in Boladeras J (2007:8)

<sup>495</sup> Boladeras 2008:15

<sup>496</sup> Haebich 2000:216

immediate family, once we identified, became increasingly under bureaucratic surveillance. This engagement with these relatively new systems of control was witness by me and my sister as our mother struggled for financial support.

The process of identifying as Aboriginal was an easy decision to make for my mother. It was an unthinkable option for us to pass as white as the cost would have been considerably high. We were prepared to celebrate our attachment to family and culture; to seek the acceptance of and adherence to a minority group that is very often marginalised and widely held in contempt within Australian society; the obvious racial, economic and social disadvantage also was worth enduring. Passing as white was a road that would cause alienation, identity confusion, and potentially damage ourselves psychologically let alone what it would mean for family and friends by the denial of our own history. Disengagement with our blood relatives and the constant threat of exposure was not a path my mother wanted to travel nor did she want her daughters to ever have to experience her own obvious wrench from her ancestral stories or even holding pride in who her grandmother and mother were as Badimia women even if they themselves felt they could not.

### **Early life with her family**

My mother or 'Mum' was of the generation known as the Baby boomers, born just after the Second World War. Australia was experiencing a strange shift in consciousness with a mixture of conservatism while at the same time having a sense that society wanted to move its ground to a new era of advancement. However, it was not so impressive for Aboriginal people including my grandmother. During the war she worked in a relatively respectable position as a tram conductress. After the war, when she had met and married my grandfather, his subsequent disinheritance for marrying her, my Nana was forced back into conditions of poverty and escalating unemployment. Administrative controls over Aboriginal people were put back into place. Once again, rather than utilising creative initiatives devised by Aboriginal people themselves, administrators became organised in an effort to regain their former powers and to push the battle to bring about Aboriginal assimilation. This meant that the family unit became the goal for Aborigines to aim for and the unit itself was subject to continuous government interventions. The 1950's saw the assimilation program being under funded and lacking political will to bring about any substantial improvements for Aboriginal families.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>497</sup> Haebich 2000:420

My mother was born on 8<sup>th</sup> February 1947 and was immediately determined to be a ‘cotton wool baby’ meaning that she was sickly requiring specialised care from the moment she was born. She was christened Veronica Mary Dowling so named after my grandfather’s mother, Vera Curtis and my grandmother’s mother, Mary Latham. In her own words my mother said that she was named so that Nana’s mother-in-law may have looked favourable on her first grandchild. This was not forthcoming as both my grandfather’s parents had struck him from his substantial inheritance. When my mother was 22 months old, she was cared for by this grandmother for two months while her mother recovered from the birth of her brother Robert. In her interview with Mary Ann Jebb for the City of Gosnells Aboriginal Oral history project, my mother explains how the dynamic within her family changes once her brother was born. *“I’ve seen baby pictures of me and I don’t look very happy...from then on my mum used to call him the eldest and I’ve had that hanging over my head. Even now, when they ask her to recount how many kids she’s got she says “Six. The eldest is a boy!”, and I say ‘No he’s not! I’m the eldest”. But see to her, her generation, the boys are up here and the girls were preferably on the floor sort of thing. That’s the way they thought in those days.*<sup>498</sup> The further I discussed this dynamic with my mother she explained that her mother was very driven by the Catholic church and that having work was the most important thing. She described her mother as tough and religious. Mum was also aware, as a young child, the manner in which her mother behaved regarding her Aboriginality.

CD: Was she living a double life where...?

RD: Make believe life.

CD: A make believe life?

RD: Only to put makeup on to make her look white!

CD: Fairer.

RD: Yeah... and gloves. She always insisted on the gloves.

CD: But it’s also about...having a clandestine life, isn’t it? You know like, she had this identity but it was all...it was an embarrassment, do you think?

RD: Yeah because... she used to put her mother’s portrait in the cupboard and have her father’s out there. You know, I mean it was so weird. So I went and got a photo of Granny and blew it up and put a nice frame

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<sup>498</sup> Jebb 2008:15-16

with it and she decided to put it up there on the wall after all, in the lounge room.<sup>499</sup>

When my mother was born her parents took her to live at the same house as Auntie Dot and her non-Aboriginal husband in Bassendean. As a returned RAAF mechanic, my grandfather was granted land in Riverton where he built a shack and began to feed his family on the vegetables they grew. It was here that my Mum started her primary schooling at Saint Joachim's Catholic School having her father walk with her the several miles to attend each day. This was short lived when her father's mother, Vera reported the living conditions on the property as being unsanitary even though they had a working toilet system and its own carved wooden seat made by my Nanpop. My grandfather's persecution by his own parents meant that they had to sell his land for a minimal price and for my grandfather to find work on the railways.

My Grandfather and his small family moved to Gosnells which was still a relatively rural setting and then two more sisters were born into the family. Barbara was born in 1951 and Patricia in 1952. The need for a larger house became important. Mum recalled to Mary Ann Jebb from the Gosnells Aboriginal Oral history project how as a young girl she stole 20 cents of the rent money from her mother's purse.

*I thought I'd treat the girls, because I didn't get on with my brother at all, twenty cents worth of lollies from the shop down the road so I got the twenty cents out, not knowing that was the rent, that was rent money for that week. And I'd gone down and got twenty cents, two shillings worth of lollies came back and started sharing them out with the girls and then mum came home. That was my first big belting. She tanned me from my butt down to my legs just like that. She just went berserk I couldn't sit down for a week.*

***With a belt?***

*Oh yes with a belt. She was great for that slap to the back of the head kind of thing, or she'd send you to Coventry, which was like not talking to you, not feeding you, not giving you nothing. She'd totally ignore you, pretend you weren't there.<sup>500</sup>*

The little rented house in Gosnells was directly across from the railway station and my mother attended Saint Munchin's Catholic school which was a considerable distance from their home. My Mum describes this time as peaceful except for her mother's violent discipline. The children would play near the river making little boats out of leaves and sticks to watch them

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<sup>499</sup> Carol Dowling Interview 2009:9-10

<sup>500</sup> Interview with M Jebb July 2008:9

float off down the river. There were no other family members around. Then after three years, Nana announced that they were not going to stay there long and that they were going to go somewhere else.

*I thought, "Oh I'm sick of moving!" He (her father) was working up country so he must have transferred to do the Geraldton line you see. We went to Coorow. He went where the work was, replacing wooden sleepers, that's what he was doing, stupid really because he could have had his own garage and everything he was so good a mechanic.<sup>501</sup>*

A couple of days after her holy communion at Saint Munchin's, my mother and her brother and sisters journeyed to Coorow with their parents on the train. They were leaving behind their Auntie Dot and their cousins to be with their grandmother. Up until this time, my mother had never met her grandmother and she remembers that everyone was excited about their meeting.

### **Coorow and Granny**

CD: Who was she in your eyes? Granny? You know from the time you knew her.

RD: Kind of like a hero. Didn't want to be like her exactly...but I think some of her rules were quite good, I thought. As I was growing up, I noticed I used some of them...but...yeah a hero.<sup>502</sup>

My mother remembers being told that she and her family were travelling to live with Granny because she was "getting poorly." She had a heart condition and needed help in managing her farm in the Coorow. It was 1954 and my grandfather made a house of corrugate iron with Hessian bags as doors for his family. He began to work on the railways for long stretches of time and it was then that he began to show signs of mental breakdown. It was then that the Native Welfare department paid a visit to them. My Mum recalls how her father saw them off with a shotgun and they never returned. It was after this incident that my Mum believes that the dynamic of the Grandmother/Daughter/Granddaughter's engagement with each other changed considerably.

Granny, with her tobacco pipe permanently wedged between her worn pearly white teeth, would pull my mum, who was the oldest of her daughter's children, to her side to teach her about Badimia language and lore. I questioned my mum about why this happened.

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<sup>501</sup> Interview with M Jebb July 2008:9

<sup>502</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/2/08 p3

CD: What was Granny's attitude in teaching you language and all that? Was she very serious about it?

RD: Oh yeah. She was quite serious about it.

CD: It was important to her.

RD: Yes it was. I think so because...probably because we were captive sort of there and it's an audience for her...you know. Maybe she just wanted to pass some on because nobody else was there. Nobody else came really that much except for Uncle George and me.<sup>503</sup>

My mother began to work for her grandmother and was her chief helper at this time. Mum became the keeper for a vast array of chickens, turkeys, ducks and geese. As a young seven year old, my mother cleaned out pens, feed and water them as well as treat them for parasites such as ticks and fleas. This also included feeding kangaroo dogs and avoiding one very strong semi-wild dingo male dog chained to a tree. Only Granny fed him and used him when hunting for game. She'd also tend to Granny's two large Shire/Clydesdale horses named Bonnie and Prince. Grooming these horses with feet as big as large dinner plates was a monumental feat for a child making sure they had feed and water. The water was drawn from a deep artesian well that Granny would open from time to time with a stick of dynamite. When seeding time came, my mother helped to manage the crops and watched her first aeroplane zoom overhead as it dusted the small crop field on her grandmother's farm. The wheat crop was enough to feed the poultry and the chaff to feed the horses. Granny would sell her eggs in trays at the town shop exchanging it for bread, butter, jam and tea. Nothing went to waste and all the while Granny was teaching my mother about her ancestors and the land on which they walked.

In her own words my mum describes Granny as being large character with considerable impact upon her life then as a child.

*She was so huge that woman. She was a big woman, very tall and she always wore a blue and white flowered dress with a big wide belt. I've got the belt, and a big brass buckle on the front and a little hat that squooshed [up], a knitted hat that sat on her head with a little brim with a flower on it, and big boots. I remember the boots because I used to have to wash them and clean them. She was very strict. No fools. If you treated her right, she'd treat you right. She'd go beyond doing things.*

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<sup>503</sup> Carol Dowling Interview with Ronnie Dowling 2009:3

***What did she call you?***

*She didn't call me anything – “Hey you - Hey you make sure you feed them animals, get the water down there. Go and brush that Bonnie, get that tail. Go and clean it up. Get the feet done, don't forget the feet!” Have you ever tried and leaned against a two tonne horse and lift its leg and scrape out the foot, terrible?*<sup>504</sup>

When I discussed the impression of Granny with my Mum she said that Granny was very stern and strict. She was even more strict than my own grandmother. Mum also revealed that at aged seven she was being taught Badimia culture by her grandmother as soon as they arrived at the farm. Mum says “*She tried to teach us language and stuff, and stories and that but Mum wouldn't let us learn because it would be useless. It wouldn't be worth learning all that stuff.*”<sup>505</sup> My Mum would travel with her Granny in a cart to a local lake to hunt. I remember my mother telling many stories about these hunting trips with her Grandmother.

***Can you tell us a bit more about how you used to go out and get that?***

We used to go duck catching and fishing and the kangaroo shooting of course. And if there were any emus around or swans we used to get them nice eggs. Emu eggs were good of course. The food thing was, like the vegetables and that. Well you'd get that around there as well. I always hated the taste of that sort of like an onion thing... a bulby plant, the foulest thing I've ever tasted. But then of course Mum used to get cheap veggies from the hotel, parsnips and turnips I cannot eat, there is just something chemical in them, I'm hyper-allergenic as well, and it's just oh foul. I loved the kangaroo stew though. I didn't like emu much it was a bit too greasy. I used to like the feathers on them though, they used to make nice pillows, but the kangaroo meat was the best, and then we used to make rugs, little squares to keep us warm and things like that.

***How did you do that, by sewing them together?***

You had to tan them first you know, you strap them down over the thing and put all the alum on the too. The water - we used to hook up this old truck that granny had there, it was from one of the blokes that used to work there. It was so rusted we thought it would fall apart, but dad got the engine going because he was a motor mechanic you see, marvellous. We got it going and we used to put the big tin tank on the back and go up to the dam and fill it up and bring the water back, because the well use to run out sometimes.

Granny's property and the house where my mother lives with her family did not have running water or electricity. Food was hard to get at times but every month white cardboard boxes

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<sup>504</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p21

<sup>505</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/12/08 p2

would arrive from Perth with biscuits, jam, condensed milk, sugar and tea. Corned beef was also one of the main food stuff send from Auntie Dot in Perth. One fateful day, my Mum made an error of judgement going to school.

*One day I was going to school and I had left mum. She was standing at the gate watching us go, and the others had taken off and there was this big farm truck. What he used to do, the guy, he used to put his bees on the back of the truck, park the truck and let them go into the gumtrees and get the pollen and stuff and then come back. And he'd go off to the pub and come back and get the truck and drive home. I didn't know that, I never knew that, no one ever told me. So white boxes, I thought instantly "Oh Aunty Dot. She must have bought all them for us!" So I got level with the truck and the entire truck load [of bees] (and I'm talking a big truck load) swarmed on me. I was covered from head to foot in bees and they stung. My mother screamed and dad came running, and they had to put kerosene on me first and then pick carefully off every inch of my body these bee stings. I mean they got up my nose, in my ears, in my eyes and my eyes went like a Michelin man and I blew up like a, oh it was terrible - no doctor there. The closest one was in Three Springs Hospital, so what they did, dad went up to the town and called from the hotel to the doctor and the doctor said at the hospital "Just shave all the hair off her". So that was all the hair went instantly, and "Make sure you've got every sting and then start soaking her in salt water". They got a forty four gallon drum, chucked a bag of salt in and stuck me in it up to my neck and kept bathing, of course the swelling went down and everything. That was one of the worst parts of being up there. Now if I get a bee sting, and I only have to get another one and I'll die. So I carry around this little blue pill to help if anything happens.<sup>506</sup>*

It was these walks to school that also revealed other hazards. Like many other small towns of the time, the 1950s saw the return of conservative views. Haebich<sup>507</sup> speaks of the assimilation image and the fifties as being inextricably linked. Conformity, complacency and comfortableness were images often portrayed in the media of the time. Assimilation was explained to the public as being the road which lead to all Australians, regardless of their race, class or ethnic background to a so called satisfying goal – the suburban family home with modern amenities. If we look closely at the road to this dream it is unstable pushing those onto it in unknown directions. For the 80,000 Aboriginal people across the nation now cast out of institutions, pastoral stations, camping reserves and fringe camps into the suburban ideal there were many places where parochial concerns were far from what the federal government strived

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<sup>506</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p9

<sup>507</sup> Haebich 2000:218

to see adopted to meet new international standards of human rights.<sup>508</sup> In a small town like Coorow, as a mixed-raced child, my Mum soon learnt how forward thinking the town was.

*It was racist that town. It was so bad. I mean when I went back for a visit I had a lot of the white people coming up and apologising. "We didn't realise" they'd say. These were kids that used to throw stones at me you know? Anything else that they could get hold of they'd chuck it. And swear and carry on, and I used to get the kids and walk them in front of me - my sisters, my brother I'd say "just keep moving", and I'd feel it all on my back. Big boondies of gravel stones pitched at my back, and nasty names called out.<sup>509</sup>*

The children that treated my Mum and her siblings so badly were the children and grandchildren of the same townsfolk who employed or worked with my Grandmother and with Granny. Granny, in particular, was held with some respect in the town because of her valuable assistance to them over the years she had lived in the district especially making fences, birthing their children, shepherding, training sheepdogs and clearing land.<sup>510</sup> Haebich<sup>511</sup> explains how Aboriginal families during this period were legislated to be assimilated because they were viewed as "empty slates" or as "impoverished 'would be' whites". Such was not the case for Granny and her family. Like many other Aboriginal families throughout Australia, despite limits imposed that constrained them politically and economically, many individuals made room for themselves by negotiating with employers so that they continued with their strong cultural skills, values and resilient family structures. A kind of "social invisibility" was made that vetoed external interference into their family life.

However, there was external interference in the form of my grandmother's style of teaching compared to that of her mother's. My Auntie Barbie explained it best by how she and her siblings were treated different by their mother. She believed that it was a result of Nana being educated in the orphanage to be competitive for food and attention.

Barb: Well, unfortunately there was a lot of, I think, divisions put in our family because you had to compete with each other for your food. If you weren't quick enough to eat your food, (laughs) it would be grabbed off you. And mum would say, "Well your sister did better than you!" Instead of it being an incentive, it was a dividing situation. But that was the sign of the times too, because that was a patriarchal training that you put up a challenge to out do each other. Because men are very good at challenges. They like challenges. If it was said to a woman, it's not. It's a

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<sup>508</sup> Haebich 2000:418

<sup>509</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p6

<sup>510</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/12/08 p6

<sup>511</sup> Haebich 2000:513

put down. You're not good enough. Why that is I don't know, but that's how I see it anyway. And so mum was trained to do it. That's how she would have been treated, you see.<sup>512</sup>

When my Nana went to work at the Coorow hotel doing their laundry, Granny would take the opportunity to teach her grandchildren about Badimia culture. There was a clash between what Nana and Granny thought was important for the children to learn. Mum explained to me how Nana was placed in this dynamic.

CD: So, Granny tried to teach you sand painting?

RD: Yes! She tried to teach us some of that stuff and that's another thing that Mum was mad about too. She said "No, no, no, no, no!"

CD: So do you think that Nanna used to look ... she looked up to white society, white culture?

RD: Well, from what I have been told, being in that orphanage and that, they sort of biased her against black fellas so...she probably, you know, looked up to them as she didn't have any other reference... points, you know? She didn't! White with all their principles and stuff.

CD: Would you say that Nanna got along with white people generally or was she treated differently by white people when you were growing up?

RD: Well, she was still cleaning houses and stuff.<sup>513</sup>

They put my mother, her siblings and all the other Aboriginal kids in the back of the classroom at the local school. Mum explained to me that her eyes were not good and she could not see the blackboard so her marks were particularly low compared to others in the class. She said that Nana didn't like the school because she would have preferred a Catholic school for her children. She felt that Catholic schools were a little more accommodating.

RD: The only time that we...we felt weird...was when we went to town and we used to get stoned on the way home from school every day. We never told Mum about that or she would have hit the roof.

CD: This is at Coorow?

RD: At Coorow State School yeah. They were nasty little shites.

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<sup>512</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Barbara Dowling Transcript 1/2/08 p31

<sup>513</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling Transcript 10/12/08 p11

CD: What would they say?

RD: They'd call ya boong and you know...half caste and all this stuff. But I used to get the kids in front of me and I'd be getting hit in the back with all the stones and I'd say "Let's get going". And we'd go off home. They'd stop after a while.

CD: So you'd never retaliate?

RD: No. Never did that.

CD: Did they eventually stop?

RD: No.

CD: They just kept going?

RD: Kept doing it. Mum used to work for these people too, for their parents, you know... really weird. Racist town, I think.<sup>514</sup>

In the classrooms throughout the state, assimilation within state education worked to push aside Aboriginal values replacing them with those of mainstream society. Methods of testing discounted any cultural differences or disadvantages in education. Aboriginal children who were let into the classrooms during the 1950s, experienced schools that were often unwelcoming, overcrowded, without adequate resources, often conservative, regimented and ultra-disciplined.<sup>515</sup>

My Nana was working in the Coorow hotel for a considerable time and the work in the laundry was described by my Mum as being "*pretty harrowing*". Nana insisted that every Saturday night her family would go to the movies. The entire town would congregate there to watch whatever film was playing.

*I was the one that was carrying the lantern, the kerosene lantern and I'd hold it up like that all up the two kilometres into town. Then you would get the street lights, then you could get to the hall that used to have the theatre. And we used to sit right down the front - which was really cool, so you could sit right there and watch the movies. She was great on that, every Saturday night she insisted, five cents [six pence] we paid, five - a little thing to get in. Mum used to clean these people's houses as well.<sup>516</sup>*

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<sup>514</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/12/08 p16-17

<sup>515</sup> Haebich 2000:487

<sup>516</sup> Ronnie Dowling Interview with M Jebb July 2008:9

It is important to note here that most Aboriginal people during this time were expected to be seated to the front of any audience where the races were mixed. This is where my Mum's family were expected to sit along with other Aboriginal people. In 1956, another sister was born to the family and she was named Elizabeth. My Nana and my mum travelled down to Perth for the birth. On this visit, my Mum got her first pair of glasses. When they returned, my mother immediately showed signs of improvement in her studies at school and also showed talent as a fast runner. Considerable controversy occurred when Mum would beat the principal's daughter at foot racing carnivals. However, this short period of accomplishment was dramatically overshadowed by the sudden death of Granny at the Three Springs hospital in 1959. The family was now expected to make Granny's small farm holding work and the previous support from the townsfolk was no longer forthcoming.

*We practically starved except for the bush tucker stuff we used to get, which she used to teach us how to get you know, because around there it was quite prolific – the stuff we could eat like from kangaroo shooting and stuff.*<sup>517</sup>

My Mum and Auntie Barbie speak about this time as being very difficult especially because their father was no longer fit to work. The children would go hungry and began to obtain work in town in an odd array of ingenious ways. Mum and the younger girls collected golf balls from the neighbouring gold course. My mum would baby sit children even though she was a mere child herself and practically ran the farm while her mother worked. Despite all their efforts to continue living in this once paradise, the family were forced to move back to Perth on the train. Their entire possessions in several wooden sea chests, four black hens, a sheepdog named Rocky and a heavily pregnant Nana.

During the 1950s and 1960s, most discriminatory legislation was gradually repealed meaning that Aboriginal people were expected to live lives indistinguishable from other Australians. The situation varied from state to state but everywhere Aboriginal people were vulnerable to state interference and as well as neglect. Control and intensive observation by the state was disguised as the state taking responsibility in preparing Aboriginal people for assimilation.<sup>518</sup> My mother's family were now returning to Perth which now was dealing with a large influx of migrants from southern Europe placing them into temporary residential apartments and new tracks of state housing was being built in the southern suburbs. However, the destination for

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<sup>517</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p7

<sup>518</sup> Pettman 1992:20

my Mum and her young siblings was not one of these new houses straight away but the concrete floor of a chicken shed owned by their paternal grandmother.

RD: She hated her. She didn't like my Mum to marry my Dad.

CD: Why?

RD: Because of who she was, Aboriginal.

CD: Because she was Aboriginal.

RD: Yes.

CD: That's the only reason?

RD: That's the only reason. Just did not want her to marry my Dad and she cut him out of her will and everything...and the same with his Dad. He cut him out of his will.

CD: For marrying Nana?

RD: For marrying Nana.

CD: And then Pop still said "No, I'm not changing my mind. I love this woman".

RD: Yeah, told 'em to get stuffed.

CD: Really. So when you guys were staying there, was he already cut out of the will?

RD: Yeah, yeah, effectively yeah. She was quite wealthy. She could've helped us. She could have given us a house...you know, rent free and all that stuff but she never did. Chicken shed is good enough for you guys.

CD: Chicken shed? And this is with Uncle John as a newborn.

RD: Yeah.<sup>519</sup>

Grandmother Vera's house was in Wattle Grove and the family settled into the house while waiting for the new baby to be born. A baby brother was born in 1960 and shortly afterwards Grandmother Vera's treatment of the family dramatically changed. Despite having at least two other houses in which she could live, she decided to live in the Wattle Grove house. As Mum describes her, 'Grandma' turned nasty and told them all to go live in her chicken shed. The

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<sup>519</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/02/08 p14

shed only had three walls and the family had no bedding or anything as all they possessed was still sitting in train carriages near the East Perth railway platform. My Nana contacted the State Housing department to come and inspect their living conditions and they were offered a government house in Belmont with the move in date to happen in several weeks. They had lived in the 'chook shed' for a month when the tension between Nana and her mother-in-law erupted. My mother was a witness to the incident and recounts what happened.

RD: One morning me and Mum went down the tank, the water tank near the house to get some water for a kettle to...you know...have a cuppa tea in the morning and we got there and we were just about to get the water out of the tank and Mum was bending down and Grandma run round behind the tank with a dirty great bread knife and aimed it at her back. Mum swung up...I screamed and Mum swung up the kettle and the knife went right through the aluminium kettle.

CD: How old were you when that happened?

RD: I was eleven.

CD: Eleven.

RD: I had just turned eleven.

CD: And that was just before you guys moved.

RD: Well...when that happened, Uncle Jack came out of the house, that's my Dad's brother and took Grandma back inside and Auntie Joy, that's his sister. Dad was back at the shed, you see while this was going on and he heard the scream and he came running up. Mum turned around with the kettle and said "We're leaving, right now. We're leaving!" So we got all our stuff and put in sheets, you know...we put all our clothes in our sheets and the kids were still half asleep...and we got a taxi from there to the house. We had to break in the back door to get into the house and then explain to State housing why we came so quickly.<sup>520</sup>

The experience of moving into their new home was not like anything the children could remember before. Turning on a light switch or flushing a toilet was a novelty. They had no furniture and my Mum says that they went to the local church and asked Saint Vincent De Paul's if they could help them. It was a happy time when a refrigerator, beds and mattresses and other household items would be delivered to their doorstep. They began school at Saint Maria Goretti Catholic primary several kilometres away which they walked every day.

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<sup>520</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/2/08 p12-13

## Scholarship and Domestic Service

My mother attended primary school for her final year at Saint Maria Goretti Catholic primary in Belmont. It was here that she showed artistic promise so much so that she was offered the 500 pounds Baton Powell Scholarship in Art to attend Saint Joseph's Catholic Girls school in Perth. This school would eventually become Mercedes College today. My Mum told me that every weekend she would earn money to pay for going to high school on the bus by taking on baby-sitting jobs. She says "*I had to do that because we didn't have enough money, not much money at all.*"<sup>521</sup> In fact, the state government had introduced the controlled distribution of child endowment to mothers at this time. In Western Australia, there was a strict process of watching and controlling families that had the effect of threatening families with the separation of their children should conditions not meet non-Aboriginal standards of the time.<sup>522</sup> My mother recalls how her mother became increasingly aware that her neighbours and other non-Aboriginal people scrutinised her family as to whether they had assimilated or not. My mum vividly remembered Nana hosing a woman who lived on the street who would spread racist comments about their family. The humorous part of it all was the profuse apologising by my Nana to the women whenever it happened as she passed their house in the afternoon. Rowley<sup>523</sup> highlights that at this time the question of acceptance of 'assimilated' Aboriginal people by their suburban white neighbours was never deeply honest. He found parallels with middle class Jewish families forced to assimilate in nineteenth-century German society. The conclusion for this example was that assimilation is a 'no win game' which never leads to unconditional acceptance by the dominant group. Despite the apparent difficulties living in suburbia for Mum's family, the family was optimistic about the future for first time in many years.

My Mum's success at high school began to show. The only limiting aspect was her very low scores in maths which were still at a grade six because she felt that numbers were associated with "*the death of Granny, Dad getting sick and having to leave the country which I didn't want to do.*"<sup>524</sup> When she entered high school her competency in other subjects proved to be at a second-year high school level. However, following a visit to the school from Nana, other students began to discriminate her because of her Aboriginality.

RD Mum turned up with my lunch one day because I didn't have it and she was going to bring it to me anyway. These group of girls

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<sup>521</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p15

<sup>522</sup> Haebich 2000:449

<sup>523</sup> Haebich 2000: 457

<sup>524</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p13

said “Who was that? The maid?” I said “No, that’s my mother”. Then life went from nice to hell... and the Reverend Mother used to take me into her office all the time when they’d start. I spent a lot of time copying from the huge volumes of religious paintings and text, you know...all the pictures around. She’d make me copy and...

CD: Why? Why was that?

RD: To keep me away from the other kids.<sup>525</sup>

In her interview with Mary Ann Jebb, my Mum spoke about this time in a different way. The Reverend Mother Mary stood about three feet tall and used to wear the full habit of a Sister of Mercy. It was she who intervened when some of the non-Aboriginal mothers noticed when Nana came to give my Mum her lunch one day. It was they who had asked “*Is that your maid?*” and when Mum proudly claimed her as her own mother, these women were shocked. Mum recalls how “*every time I wanted to go to the toilet they’d be in there trying to belt me up and everything, and I used to belt them back you know?*”<sup>526</sup> The type of ‘school’ work my mother did on her scholarship went from mundane secretarial skills development to work resembling a copyist for the Mother Superior. She spent her next two years cloistered at the top of the convent located within the school grounds looking through ancient bibles printed onto parchment that had come from Ireland reproducing scroll work as practice. All the work produced during that time was kept in a locked cupboard. In her second year of studies, my mum made the decision to leave school to help her family by working. When she wanted her work back from the nuns she was shocked at the response.

*They kept it all. They kept all that. I know when I left in the second year in September I couldn’t stand the racial taunts. I really couldn’t stand it anymore. It was just so sickening you know? I had that when I was at primary school in the country. So I said ‘Ok can I take some art work?’ and she said ‘no!’. She took her big fat bottom, this horrible Sister Augusta, and stuck it in front of the cabinet and said ‘No, we’re keeping all these!’ I said ‘Why do you want to keep them nobody else’s is going to want them’. She said ‘We’re keeping them!’ Unknown to her I had taken home a couple of A4 things I’ve still got it. One of this Australian soldier and another of Hiawatha, that I’d done in water colours, took it home before and stuck it in another book you see. That was a weird, weird time.*<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/12/08 p17

<sup>526</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p12

<sup>527</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p12

When I discussed the idea that if all had gone to plan, the scholarship would have meant that my mum could have become a professional artist or at least someone in the arts profession. My mother says that would have been the case if only the nuns had nurtured her artistic abilities. She says that she left high school because she felt that there was a high level of hypocrisy regarding her art education. My mum resented the continual attitude to her art education as being kept mundane and repetitious. She says that she *“didn’t like what I was learning. It was boring...basically boring.”*<sup>528</sup>

When mum left school she began working doing domestic work and babysitting. She explained to me that there had *“never been anything else!”*<sup>529</sup> She had tried working in a potato chip factory in Perth with her first cousin. Both were fired after my mum complained about the unsafe conditions in which they worked. She then gained employment at wealthy homes in Perth and then increasingly farming work. Mum says that people wanted help cooking and cleaning for the shearing season near Christmas time. Pettman<sup>530</sup> draws parallels with Aboriginal women’s experiences as domestic servants with those of black women in other racist and colonial situations such as South Africa and the southern United States. There was a hierarchy of domestic labour which corresponded with skin colour. For example, the ‘darker’ women were domestics and the lighter skinned became child carers. Even in the 1950s Australia, these colonised class relations existed to release white women from women’s work. My mum continued the kind of work that her own mother had performed despite having a high level of intellect and artistic ability. The first jobs that my Mum worked were looking after children and housework for people living in affluent suburbs. However, as she entered her late teens she favoured travelling to the country. She recalls one particular property as being particularly positive in Wyalkatchem which she returned to for two summers. She helped with the cooking for the shearers and maintaining the household with the farmer’s wife. On occasion, she’d escape to the wool sheds to read and to dream of a better life for herself. After every period of work back from the bush, my Mum would hand over rolls of pound notes to her mother to help with the care of her younger siblings. By the time she was 20 years old, my mother was a slim, attractive woman receiving several marriage proposal mainly from the sons of migrants. One proposal was from a young fellow from Portugal and another from Mauritius, however, Mum refused them both. Something else was taking her time. She began to socialise

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<sup>528</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p18

<sup>529</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/12/08 p19

<sup>530</sup> Pettman 1992:31

more with her sisters. As she was over 18, Mum was instantly the 'gooseberry' making sure that her younger sisters were safe. It was on one of these group dates she met my father. He was a tall 17 year old rugby player who often drove his car for everyone to get to parties. They had a brief period of dating before my mum, to her surprise, became pregnant.

### **Young single mother in the 70s and 80s**

When my mum found out she was pregnant, she immediately left for the bush again to Dongara doing domestic work. She decided not to tell her parents or even my father. She wanted time to think about what was about to happen and after long walks on the beach she decided to keep her baby. When her work contract finished she returned to live with Nana who knew immediately what had happened. Despite pressure from older women in her family to have an abortion, my Mum refused. Instead, my Mum gained employment at a home in the affluent suburb of Dalkeith. She worked there up until she was eight months pregnant. Her employer was particularly callous making her clean their home extensively. When the Meckering earthquake aftershocks hit Perth in late 1968, my Mum was in the bottom of an empty Olympic size swimming pool clearing out dried leaves. The earthquake struck making a huge crack down the centre of the pool bursting the main water pipe that ran under it. Water spouted into the air at over 10 meters. My heavily pregnant mum scrambled out of the swimming pool drenched. She told her difficult employer to find someone else to do the job.

CD: You realised that you were going to keep us and raise us and all that?

RD: Face responsibility. Nobody else wanted to.

CD: What do you mean responsibility?

RD: As a mother.<sup>531</sup>

When my Mum was towards the end of her pregnancy, my Auntie Barbie drove her to see my father who had no idea he was going to be a father. His mother would not let my mother see him but she was informed of the situation. Not long afterwards my Dad came to my Nana's house with a wad of cash presenting it to my mother. There was no marriage proposal and my Mum refused the money. She told him that she was going to raise her baby by herself.

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<sup>531</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/12/08 p20

About a month before my birth, my Mum was hospitalised at King Edward Memorial hospital because there were fears for her baby. My Mum has a rare blood type and there was concern that her baby was going to be born prematurely. This was precisely what happened. Apparently, when my Mum was travelling in an elevator on a table, I decided to test the air. My foot poked out and nursing staff went into emergency mode. Then suddenly, my foot retracted and the entire embryonic sack carrying myself and my sister shifted sealing up the birth canal. We were not born then for another month.

My mother had no idea that she was going to have twins. She was put into the delivery room on January 28<sup>th</sup> and nothing happened for two days despite labour progressing slowly. The decision was made to put my mother under anaesthetic which was an error of judgement. During the natural birth, four doctors were called into attend. My mother died twice on the operating table. I was born quickly as a breach birth. My twin sister Julie was born six minutes afterwards following a difficult delivery. She was stuck under my mother's rib cage and was extremely difficult to remove. We were both born healthy but placed into a humidity crib for the first night where we were declared healthy enough to be placed in the general ward by morning. When my mother awoke from her ordeal, we were presented to her. She closed her eyes as if to surprise herself. On each of her raised knees were placed my sister and I. When she opened her eyes she saw us both looking at her. My Mum always told me that when she saw us for the first time, her first statement was that no one was going to take us off her. "Over my dead body" she would say to us as we grew up.

While still recovering in the hospital, various representatives from the welfare department came to see my mother to convince her to place us up for adoption. Haebich<sup>532</sup> gives account of how young Noongar girls having their babies at King Edward would frequently be visited by Native welfare officers encouraging them to sign adoption papers. I believe such treatment to be reprehensible considering the vulnerability of the girls after giving birth with many still heavily medicated and often traumatised. Unmarried mothers were faced with an increasingly punitive attitude deeming them as deviants rather than victims. Such women were considered less attached to their babies than married mothers. Haebich<sup>533</sup> notes how the young women's families who labelled their daughters as immoral often pushed them into giving their babies away. She writes that "*adoptions in Australia peaked in the 1960s, after that, changing*

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<sup>532</sup> Haebich 2000:551

<sup>533</sup> Haebich 2000:542

*community attitudes, the introduction of reliable birth control and the advent of welfare payments to single mothers drastically reduced the numbers of babies available for adoption since the 1970s.”*

When my sister were a few weeks old, the hospital decided to release my mother. We immediately went to live in my Nana’s house. It was a small three bedroom home and very crowded. The girls room into which our cots were crammed already had three Aunt living there in it. The addition of my mother and two small babies were extremely cramped. In the next room slept my 10-year-old uncle John and my Uncle Robert who was showing signs of mental illness as a 19 year old. He would have violent outbursts at night requiring my Aunts and my Mum to barricade the door from him.

*Well the girls didn’t like it much because we were in their room. There were four of us and two babies crammed in... I thought stuff this, I’m going. And then Barbara got married, Pat went to South Australia to stay with Auntie Dot and... that’s when...I said “I’m not staying. I’m getting out.”<sup>534</sup>*

When my sister and I were still under a year old, my mother decided to take my father to court for child maintenance. This was a hard-fought case where my father’s family argued that my mother was a promiscuous girl and that I was the child of my father and my twin sister was fathered by another man. The case was laughed out of the court especially when the four doctors who attended our birth gave their evidence. My father was ordered to pay \$50 per month for our care. After the verdict was handed down, my mother had the opportunity to finally talk with my father and showed him our photograph. He was appreciative and promised to do what he could to support my mother even though he was very young at only 19 years old.

However, the situation at my Nana’s house was becoming increasingly ominous. My Uncle Robert was having more violent outbursts towards those in the house. Fearing our safety after he physically threatened my Mum, we were packed up and stayed at a women’s refuge for some months until he settled down. My mother called upon the State housing department to assess the situation by paying her a visit at Nana’s house. She was granted emergency housing but several kilometres away in Armadale.

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<sup>534</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/12/08 p21

At the age of two and a half, our entire possessions fitted into a half of a truck, my Mum and my sister and I were bundled off to our new housing commission flat. Armadale was very rural with very few houses around. The flats in which we were placed resembled a mini-projects section as seen in New York. Those who lived there were drug and alcohol addicts with many of them single parents. Our mother became extremely security conscious and would not let us out to play for the first year. Instead she would put us into our pram and take us for very long walks. Mum really enjoyed the fact that she now had her own little family of three and she felt that the time we shared was her first chance of having fun in many years. In 1973, the single mother's pension was introduced at a minimal amount of \$50 per fortnight. With little money left after paying rent, my mother would take us by train every weekend to stay at Nana's house.

By this stage, my Uncle Robert had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and was placed in Graylands Mental hospital indefinitely. My Grandfather was receiving electroshock therapy for the same affliction and it weathered him considerably. Some of my only memories are of him tending to his garden, chopping wood or making onion and garfish sandwiches. It was also a great time to meet extended family who came to the house frequently on the weekends. It wasn't so comfortable for my Mum because as she explains "*the older generation like my mum's; her and her two sisters used to get together and sound me out. But people think differently now, they don't wear white gloves any more darling*". The sounding out as she described was unrelenting ranging from topics as minor as the length of her hair. If my mother's hair was too long then she was working as a prostitute or if she had gained weight that she was pregnant again to another man. Once my mother had decided to keep us then we were deemed to be morally corrupt both she as a woman and us as her children. As we were extremely vulnerable to our Nana for a top up of food and money on occasion, we were expected to weather such scrutiny. My sister Julie describes this situation as a child as a sad feeling concerning the relationship between our mother and our Nana. She says "*I think it was because my Mum wasn't married and my Nana disapproved of my Mum and what happened with me being here.*"<sup>535</sup> Julie observes that Nana showed a confusion or a split between the discipline and moralizing position of the catholic church in which Nana was brought up and the more organic, loving and accommodating Indigenous side of her character. Julie felt that it was very difficult for her to understand as she was a young child seeing her Nana come to terms with her illegitimate granddaughters.

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<sup>535</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling 3/6/09p9

Outside of our immediate family, my Mum had to manoeuvre the requirements of a relatively new bureaucracy designed to assist single Mum. Attitudes towards her as a woman reflected wider society's negative opinions of single mothers. My sister and I were witness to how this manifest in our lives by how staff behind counters or members of charity organisations treated my Mum in front of us. Pettman<sup>536</sup> explains that many minority women experience the state through the engagement with white women as either health workers or social workers. Even if these workers held feminist or anti-racist approaches, it was the often ambiguous and contradictory relations with us as clients that we were frequently presented with. The structures and policies in which they worked were seldom flexible enough to accommodate our individual situations. I still vividly remember seeing my mother arguing with counter staff when her pension was unexpectedly cut of several times. Often reduced to tears of frustration because of some administrative error, which occurred frequently especially in the early years of the pension being granted, meant that Mum would be reduced to seeking food parcels from charities until our pension was granted to us again. Charities themselves were also difficult places to approach because there was no regulation about the level of intrusion into your lives once they knew you were needing assistance. When asked about that time, Julie says that you can measure *"how corrupt a society is by how a society treats it's most vulnerable. We were not treated very well at all in lots of ways. I felt that I got that opinion from when we got help and then the attitude we got was that we didn't deserve it or we didn't have an idea of the situation in which we were in. That we were dumb and I really hated that. I was because we were women or we were kids or it was because we were Aboriginal. That was usually it all together. Because our files were usually kept by everybody and they knew our stuff."*<sup>537</sup> All around us where we lived in state housing, we saw Aboriginal people, including our family, having intense and frequently damaging relationships with the state. Many regarded it with suspicion for its policies and legal system. Yet at the same time, we all were especially dependent on the welfare money, the services provided and the development of policies that recognised some of our status and rights as Aboriginal people. My sister recognised in our discussion that some of the difficulties that our Mum faced were not just how to obtain food, clothes and safety but respect. My sister Julie states that most of the time was witnessing our mother *"dealing with other people's opinion of her"*<sup>538</sup> and most often that opinion was negative simply because she was not married. While we were at primary school in Armadale,

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<sup>536</sup> Pettman 1992:87

<sup>537</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling 3/6/09 p13

<sup>538</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling 3/6/09 p10

Mum started to wear a wedding ring that she had bought at a second hand shop so that she would stop being asked why she was not married.

All around us during the 1970s we were aware of an enormous boom in the economy in Australia and yet none this translated into our lives as welfare recipients. Instead the daily operations of the labour market were not capable of coping with how severe disadvantage was within our communities as Aboriginal people. Everything about our lives with our Mum during our early school years seemed intense because like most single parent families, as children we were also party to the struggles our mother faced. There was seldom a separation between mother and daughters because we felt that her struggles were our struggles as a family. It became clear at an early age that Mum was very concerned about our need to gain skills and to be educated. As Julie states, our Mum was “110% information. It was like.. ‘Read this, look at that, touch that, see this...’ ...that sort of thing”.<sup>539</sup> Attending Catholic primary school was a necessity as our Mum felt that the standard of education was better especially considering that Julie and I initially needed specialised education. We moved house four times during our primary schooling and each location meant we attended Catholic schools. Each state housing flat we went to was in complexes with fellow tenants with chronic alcohol and drug abuse issues. As we grew older, Mum applied and campaign for us to be moved to a safer location. We eventually were given an Aboriginal spot purchase house in North Perth. It was such a change to finally live in our own house rather than in cockroach infested apartments. Our neighbours on the street in North Perth were Greek and Italian migrant families and they would help us with food and encouragement as they saw us go to high school every day.

## **Her achievements and dreams**

In our second year of high school, my Mum began to become increasingly aware of the need for us as young Aboriginal girls to learn correct behaviour within our community. Julie noted this in our discussion about her decision to apply for financial assistance for us to attend Saint Joachim’s Ladies College.

CD: So education?

JD: Not only Wudjula education but Aboriginal lore and stuff. Mum would always show us something and like she’d read or we’d read something and then she’d tell us what she’d been brought up with.

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<sup>539</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling 3/6/09 p10

It would be totally different or even better...something that Granny had told her. It made us think that our choices were at home as much as it would be in society. That our opinions at home were safe with Mum. That's why it still is like that.

CD: We started to identify as Aboriginal when we were 14 years old, what prompted Mum to get assistance for our schooling based on our Aboriginality?

JD: I remember sitting down with Mum and seeing stuff in the newspaper about...Mum had been collecting things in magazines about Aboriginal culture and people for years and I remember Mum sitting reading something that made her really angry and then she'd blurt out that well "my Mum was this...my granny was this". The questions we asked her were getting too big and she wanted us to see more and be more out there.<sup>540</sup>

Julie and I remember filling in the forms with our mum and taking them into the Department of Education. It was a tense process because it was the first time that our little family was going to claim something because we were Aboriginal. We were all conscious of the fact that none of our extended family openly identified as such except for our Nana's brothers children up north. We were the 'city mob' who has managed to pass into white society thanks to the efforts of Nana. At the same time, it was a feeling of trepidation and excitement about what we were about to do together. I remember Mum was armed with all the photos of Granny and our great-uncles. She also had a hand-written family tree to assist in explaining our connections.

Julie recalls that time as being particularly scary and that Mum showed great courage. Julie remembers Mum's attitude was basically about "*claiming our rights. She believed that we were owed that money. She really believed that our family had been disenfranchised. Mum was talking with us about Granny and when we got there there was two signs. One pointing to Austudy and the other to Abstudy. Mum said 'we go this way' and we turned towards Abstudy. It was a bit scary at the beginning because no one else that we knew of...Mum said 'no one else was doing it but I am the oldest...' I'm going to do it.*"<sup>541</sup> Like many other black families in Britain and North America at the same time, representations presumed that women were dependent on men. In reality, Aboriginal women (and black women too) were often heads of households, responsible for the financial as well as emotional survival of their families as primary care givers. Most were welfare dependent, subject to state surveillance and

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<sup>540</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling 3/6/09 p11

<sup>541</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling 3/6/09 p11

interventions concerning their household memberships, control of children and who their sexual partners were. Many of their children are taken into care. Often working within appalling circumstances, they are seen as survivors who act to handle most crises or sometimes are the cause of their own problems. 'Black matriarchs' are blamed for their children's learning problems, their teenager's delinquency and taking away their men's masculinity or positions of authority. What is ignored is the enormous emotional and physically costs they bear with increasing vulnerability to violence, including from their own male family members <sup>542</sup> Along with my grandmother (who lost my Grandfather when I was six years old), I view them both as black matriarchs. They handled many crises during my upbringing and did so while facing tremendous financial hardship and lack of resources.

It was not until Julie and I were in our third year of high school that our Mum decided to return to education to get her year 10 achievement certificate by correspondence. Mum forged friendships with other women at this time and one of them strongly encouraged her to apply for Aboriginal tutorial assistance whereby a tutor would be paid by the government to come to our state housing flat in Karawara. The tutor, Patricia O'Brien eventually became a strong influence upon us all regarding education assisting me as my own tutor at university. Mum gained her certificate and immediately applied to study the Aboriginal Access course at Leederville TAFE. Yet her approach to her identity proved to be difficult issue to navigate especially when she eventually started mainstream TAFE courses.

RD: I never told anyone, even when I went to TAFE and stuff, that I was Aboriginal.

CD: Why?

RD: Unless they said something which was wrong. And I'd pull them up on it real sharp.<sup>543</sup>

My mum's first course was in Print making at Perth TAFE where she was told that she had a 'printer's eye'. She did the course for a year and a half before she branched over to another arts course. Mum excelled at ceramics at St Bridget's School in Northbridge. Eventually specializing in Raku pottery she nearly completed her course when an opportunity presented itself to attend the Aboriginal Health Worker Course at the Marr Mooditj Foundation being

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<sup>542</sup> Pettman 1992:65

<sup>543</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/12/08 p17

given at Clontarf Campus. She viewed Aboriginal health as being a priority issue and she wanted to do something hands on to bring about change. Mum views the work at this course as akin to “*walking across the bridge and seeing all those things down there fowling up the water*”.<sup>544</sup> The eventual outcome of the course was to work in remote areas or in metropolitan hospitals acting as a medical buffer between Aboriginal people seeking treatment wishing to have an Aboriginal person present to make the medical institution seem less intimidating. My mum specialised in the treatment of eye trachoma. She travelled into the Great Sandy Desert with the Fred Hollows foundation team treating and documenting the spread of the condition. She also worked at Fremantle hospital, Princess Margaret Hospital for Children, and Royal Perth Hospital for her training. Then she made a shift in her study focus to looking after aged and disabled Aboriginal people. She did her final training at the Autumn centre which cares for Aboriginal elders in South Perth. Mum would report back to us at the end of her day there as being horrendous there. When the Aboriginal staff found out that she was placed there by the Marr Mooditj Aboriginal Health Workers college they argued that she wasn’t Aboriginal enough. She recalled that “*they were really nasty there. They bloody treated me like crap.*”<sup>545</sup> It was one of the first times that my Mum ever felt that her own people did not accept her for being fair skinned. After leaving the course incomplete, my Mum then enrolled and completed a Certificate 2 in Community Service specializing in Aged Care at Thornlie TAFE.

## **Daughters and grandkids**

All the while my mother was trying to educate herself and gain a qualification she was supporting and encouraging my sister and me to achieve our university degrees and to develop our respective careers. We were brought up with numerous family interactions and visits with extended family due to our Mum orchestrating these important stages in understanding and appreciating our culture and identity. Sometimes, however, these also showed the many divisions between and across cultural groups even within our own family. She also attended and encouraged us to become active members of the Noongar community which now extends to a more national landscape.

At all our family gatherings, funerals and meetings we were presented with opportunities for the reiteration of our place within the family. As we were introduced by our mother to aunts, uncles and extended family, we were told who that person was in relation to ourselves. As we

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<sup>544</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p 17

<sup>545</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p18

grew up, with the constant oral reinforcement, we were present with a canvas by our mother on which the family history could be painted over and over again. By the time we were adults, everyone knew the intricacies of family relationships and were able to place anyone they met in the context of our very extended family. What is often ignored is how Aboriginal women are frequently active and heavily responsible in families and communities. Mothers are central in many local campaigns and strategies, for health, in schools, for their children's security, and in wider mobilisations such as the Committee to Defend Black Rights that spawned the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

After witnessing first-hand the situation of Noongar mothers having their children taken off them and placed into state care and the increasing crisis of there not being enough Aboriginal carers resulting in children being shifted from placement to placement, we realised that direct action was needed. It was as a family, living with my sister and my Mum that we decided to become foster carers. Despite all that had happened to our family, we still maintained a line of strong women who managed to raise their children to adulthood with little government intervention. In a sense, we still maintained a sense of family capable of caring for children. Suddenly in 2004, I became a foster mother for the first time taking on a 14 month old baby boy and my mother became a grandmother. In mid-2007, we were hastily given the 7 month old brother of my first foster son. Both children are thriving and although being raised as Noongar are strongly positioned within our Badimia family. 'Our' two boys will remain in our care until they are 18 years old. Then in 2017, we took in the youngest brother of our two oldest boys. Little Tyron was only 5 months old and he has brought great joy to our home. My mum is now called 'Nana' and is the oldest member of our family and is respected as such by us all.

## Chapter Nine

### Findings

#### "That Old Girl Birthed Me!"

Your silence was your protection.  
You were trying to protect me  
from the pain of inferiority.  
All in your head, drummed into you  
that your mother's people and  
your grandmother's people were  
the source of shame, pain and rejection.  
But in that phrase to me this changed.

When I held that photo to your eyes  
of that old woman,  
that tiny old black woman  
holding a Wandji in her weathered hands,  
you said "That old girl birthed me!".  
Using these words you revealed a lifetime of mystery.  
Your origins explained.  
Your mother was not alone in the bush when she birthed you  
and your sisters and your brothers.  
No! She was helped by her sisters.  
You were welcomed into this world 93 years ago by black hands!  
Badimia hands that cleaned you  
and placed you into your mothers arms.  
"Be careful when you walk through this land  
Because a child was born here and a child was born there."<sup>546</sup>

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<sup>546</sup> Poem written June 2010 quoting Lyrics from Archive Roach song "A child was born here".

This worldview expressed in this thesis is not a timeless, finished product. The stories of the women in my family are mere fragments in an evolving process. Their stories are at once individual and social products. They require personal memory and, recalling emotions, as a record of their consciousness shaped within a cultural discourse and is given life in the context of telling the story itself. Their stories do not claim an ungendered point-of-viewlessness. They exhibit integrity and are subjective documents. Therefore, narrative analysis provided a broad sweep of findings to reflect what knowledge was imparted and gained from these women and from myself as an insider/outsider to the inquiry. This chapter is about appreciating and understanding how themes were developed and their relevance to the practice of auto-ethnography. These themes were grouped into two categories. Firstly, the category of what knowledge women spoke about during the research process and secondly, the impact of the research process and storytelling upon us as women together. In the first category of the knowledge shared during research revealed from analysis to include knowledge about the experience of shame and sexual domination, assimilation in action (including all its guises), and the lived encounters of their identity (Aboriginality) being challenged. The second category of the impact of the research process and storytelling fundamentally outlines how the participants took ownership of the story and how the story manifests in their lives today.

### **The legacy of shame and white male domination**

*Insanity, intemperance, epilepsy, immorality, and delinquency have been produced by this hybridising of diverse races, amalgamating the bad qualities of each of them. As mongrels among horses, dogs, sheep and cattle, are worse than useless, so are the mongrels among men.<sup>547</sup>*

Writers representing the views of the dominant culture were analysed by Henry Reynolds to demonstrate the kinds of overt bigotry that Aboriginal people of mixed- raced heritage had to endure in Australian society. There is a legacy of shame that was passed down through my family and is evident in the retelling of the life stories of my women ancestors. My Auntie Barb was conscious of it when talking about her grandmother known as ‘Granny’.

CD: Who was she, in your eyes...

Barb: Oh, she was just my Granny, and she was great. She was a little black lady that I just thought was fabulous. And I wasn’t ashamed of her, never ashamed of her.<sup>548</sup>

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<sup>547</sup> Reynolds 2005:89

<sup>548</sup> Transcript with Barb Dowling interviewed 1/2/07:4

In sharing and creating this knowledge together there are many different outcomes. By reading into the lives of our women ancestors, we all learnt how there were once blatant programs to crush racial consciousness and to eradicate our people by consecutive British colonial and Australian governments. These legislated acts controlled every aspect of the lives of Badimia girls and women because they, as human beings, had become categorised scientifically and socially as breeding stock with the potential to ‘breed out the black’ and to ensure a White Australia. Each consecutive generation of these women in my family have life stories that reflect the change in such policies since the Gascoyne was colonised. Their stories speak much about how ‘mixed-race’ girls were cruelly monitored and their dreams crushed by harsh eugenic inspired government policies that closely controlled all aspects of their lives.

The stories of my women ancestors were also often about the nature of white male domination over their lives specifically. Making particular relevance to how my women ancestor’s story and their positioning to white Australia during the times they lived, Stoler<sup>549</sup> poses questions about the nature of sexual dominance within the colonies. She asks if sexual domination was a “*graphic substantiation of who was on the bottom and who was on the top?*” This author proposes that perhaps the sexual relations between white colonial men and Aboriginal women may have predominantly “mean” something else. The sexual symbols of power and the politics of sex, according to Stoler, ran “*throughout the colonial records – as well as through contemporary commentaries on it.*” The use of sexual control, she writes, was “*more than a convenient metaphor for colonial domination. It was a fundamental class and racial marker implicated in a wider set of relations of power.*” Quoting Foucault<sup>550</sup>, Stoler points out that the family was not treated as a haven from the sexualities of a dangerous outside world but more the site from where it was produced. Foucault claimed that colonial authorities knew this well and were not just obsessed with moral, sexual and racial affronts to European identity in prisons, school and hospitals. The site where colonial power had most equivocal control was in the home. In the home, a culture of whiteness was manufactured and cordoned itself off from the native world. The ‘native’ world was from where my women ancestors found their strength.

What Granny represents is how, with the onset of white colonisation, Badimia women’s customary functions were either severely truncated or rendered marginal. In a reconstituted

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<sup>549</sup> Stoler 2002:44

<sup>550</sup> Stoler 2002:153

social environment (or utterly destroyed like those of Badimia males) and as their populations were decimated, Granny's society and culture was dismembered and fragmented right before her eyes within her own family. Yet despite these Badimia traditions being lost simply because Nana and Granny disagreed as to the 'usefulness', there is a story about a world of women – black women who are strong and capable. Women who have made a hard-earned knowledge learnt from coping with bigotry, poverty, violence, dispossession and injustice that was slowly taught to me. It teaches us, the next generation how to survive. It has taught us that frontier interracial sexual relations occurred largely within a context of un-freedom, exploitation and terror. Initially, a small degree of attempted cooperation happened between white men and Badimia people. During this process, the position of black women plummeted from being co-workers of equal importance to men in the balanced use of the environment within their customary lore to that of thoroughly exploited beasts of burden to the margin of white male colonial structures. It fell from that of being valuable human resources and partners within traditional sexual relationships to that of degraded and often diseased sex objects. From that of being people of recognised spiritual worth, Badimia women became beings often afforded a virtual animal status in the eyes and the belief-systems of their colonial exploiters.<sup>551</sup>

Noongar author Kim Scott<sup>552</sup> says that within Aboriginal communities, there is an accepted belief that being Aboriginal means being at the bottom of society and that everything about being Aboriginal means being everything that is not white. According to these beliefs, being a 'real' Aboriginal person is someone who is itinerant or downcast living on park benches. Julie challenges such perceptions by painting the strength and beauty of our people rather than as holding a human right to be miserable, imprisoned (both literally and metaphorically) and to die prematurely. Scott says that such an identity does not mean that you cannot achieve or succeed just because this is associated with white hierarchy. If a person declares that they are Noongar (or Badimia for that matter) then the first commitment is not only to have negotiation and participation with your community but also about their level of commitment to that community as both men and women. Making strong declarations of identity is not enough and this is not an easy or uncomplicated pathway.

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<sup>551</sup> Longley 1992:204

<sup>552</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:190

## Assimilation in action

In writing the stories of my women ancestors and my foremothers, there is a significant change that occurs in their telling. When there is an increased discussion of racial formation, rather than shying away from it as a non-material reality, I believe these voices have contributed to a truly human solidarity. It can be said that when we accept these kinds of life stories they are all stories about race. This can be seen in the story about my Nana who passed away just prior to the completion on my thesis. Her story is triumphant because the sentiments held by those in colonial power during her formative years and into her adulthood did not succeed. As Reynolds expressed that racial mixture was “*undesirable at best and positively dangerous at worst, threatening the strength and imperative purity of superior races.*”<sup>553</sup> My grandmother and her siblings were seen, at the very least, unfortunate victims of implacable biological laws and probably “*dangerous misfits and malcontents*”. The way she spoke about how she was treated as a child demonstrated the tremendous fear held by non-Aboriginal society for mixed-race Aboriginal individuals but even more so for her as a member of an unwelcome, “*ill-starred group*”. My grandmother survived such discrimination and racism by developing her own methods of racial passing and her motivation was often for the protection of her children. The legacy of such trauma is now widely being discussed by authors such as Kim Scott<sup>554</sup> who ponders whether it is possible for descendants to maintain connection with an Aboriginal heritage or a connection with ancestors whilst trying to function “*in a world overwhelmingly hostile to such ideas?*” He goes on by asking questions as to whether historical events such as massacres or other genocidal practices can be spoken about within one family when its members identify with either “*perpetrators or victims*”? Scott argues that when the infamous 1905 Act and its amendments became institutionalised to dominate Aboriginal people in Western Australia, it created situations where entire families became isolated from their heritage and their extended Aboriginal families. He says that arguably these families were included in the process of assimilation<sup>555</sup>.

Anna Haebich<sup>556</sup> describes how the experiences of Aboriginal people have been erased through “*inexorable processes of collective memory and forgetting*”. Powerful national historical narratives have been moulded to celebrate the achievements of ‘settlers’ and migrants who made a nation out of nothingness. Up until the national apology by the Rudd Government,

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<sup>553</sup> Reynolds 2005: 81

<sup>554</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:70

<sup>555</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:95

<sup>556</sup> Haebich 2003:23

many Australians, including political leaders endorsed the goal of an assimilated way of life for all Australians. They have been opposed to examine the outcomes and evaluations of previous assimilationist practices and policies. It is perceived as simpler to ignore these outcomes, to forget the difficulties and debates over the past. These leaders claim that Australians were all consenting and strove to ensure removal of Aboriginal children from families and communities was done with the best intentions. This all attempted to bring about a convenient conclusion on the matter. However, the ways that my Nana orchestrated her family to present as assimilated was not lost on her children and grandchildren. Auntie Barb and my Mum discussed the general pressure their mother was experiencing and how such a reality perpetuated a negative sense of fear and shame for their Badimia background.

What thoughts would go through a child's mind should they witness heated discussions between their own mother and grandmother over the subject of identity and whether she should be taught her grandmother's culture? Observing such debates about whether she and her siblings would benefit learning Badimia culture must have raised significant questions in my mother's mind about what was being argued so vehemently. This can be seen in the conversation my Mum had recorded for an oral history project with writer Mary Ann Jebb. My mum goes into great detail about what her grandmother was actually teaching her as a young girl along with her sisters. It reveals the extent of the things that Granny was teaching her grandchildren and it also shows the conflict and resistance she experienced from her own mother about such knowledge being passed on to her.

*All the time I was with my grandmother, she taught us a lot of the, what you call like shaman duties - your food and your herbs and how to kill the kangaroo and stuff, and all that and how to track them. I track things I'm pretty good at that, she used to talk about the stars and everything, and she used to do sand drawings with different coloured sands like the Tibetan guys do. She tried to teach us language but because my mum had been educated by the nuns and they didn't believe that learning home language was a good idea, so mum wouldn't let us.*

*...She's slowly coming around [now] because we are the only mob that go and see her half the time. She wanted us to be white that was it, you can't be Aboriginal you've got to be white! The first four of us in the six [children in our] family, first four are all white looking kids, the last two look like little blackfellas.<sup>557</sup>*

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<sup>557</sup> Mary Ann Jebb interview with Ronnie Dowling 4/7/08 p11

When discussing the idea of disadvantages that current women in our family were experiencing compared to our women ancestors, Julie spoke about the disillusionment that she sometimes feels in her work.

JD: Disadvantages? I know so much politics that I know there are huge walls against what we can really achieve as Aboriginal people. This is not a democracy and when you learn more about how much that is then you feel like that you are hitting your head against a brick wall.

CD: So what seems like freedom is not.

JD: No. You are disenchanting and frustrated a lot. There are small freedoms that are given but there are a lot of things that aren't. You lose hope when that happens. Not completely because you have a good family. I have a good sense about what spirits are in the land. That no one can really own it. It's all about lies.<sup>558</sup>

## **Identity challenged**

Even though each generation of women interviewed for this thesis have differed in their opinions on what was a priority in the lives of their foremothers, every woman agreed that an individual's freedom to pursue their Aboriginality was constantly challenged either by the dominant culture or by those within our family. The manifestation of identity for each generation of women analysed came in many guises. The mothers and daughters who spoke with me talked strongly about struggle, survival and the celebration of that survival.

The predicament of fair-complexioned Aboriginal people is analysed by Boladeras<sup>559</sup> as being about facing 'two sets of values'. This means that if you openly identify as Aboriginal you might be accused of being too white to be Aboriginal and judged as doing so for material or political gain. If a person denies their heritage/identity, then they are given negative stereotyped traits. You might be publicly shamed by your people if you behave dismissive of your Aboriginal background. In both situations, a person's identification as Aboriginal can be about targeting them with an unseen stigma. On either side of the fence, a person can be the recipient of racism, ignorance and be dismissed almost daily. When discussing this dynamic with all members of my family, the fear of their Aboriginality being dismissed opening on a daily basis was a reality. Expressing your Aboriginality becomes an act of courage for this reason.

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<sup>558</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling Number 1 (3 June 2009:15-16)

<sup>559</sup> Boladeras 2007:14

Through retelling her story, my mother and I both discovered that power decides who is allowed to speak and who was forced into silence. Granny was pressured to officially renounce her connection to her people but in reality remained true to these connections into her later life. My mother remembers witnessing Granny sitting on the soft earth in front of her house in Coorow drawing sand paintings in the red earth with her fingers as she discussed Badimia lore with her elderly Badimia visitor and rarely to her grandchildren.

CD: What was Granny's attitude in teaching you [Badimia] language and all that? Was she very serious about it?

RD: Oh yeah. She was quite serious about it.

CD: It was important to her?

RD: Yes it was.

In the chapter about my mother, in multiple situations she faced as a woman, she saw the act of racial passing as a betrayal. Mum felt that the cost of fragmenting her persona exacted too high a cost especially in order to leave the past behind for expediency's sake. Her own mother's desire and hopes for her children to be free from racial stigma and able to access benefits of 'whiteness' meant that racial passing also brought with it feelings of dislocation and ostracism from dear ones. Mum did not want to disrespect the memory of her own late grandmother whom she loved dearly. The secrets that could never be told, as maintained by her mother, needed to be said out loud. My mum felt that these secrets were more about living a lie and she felt would be intolerable for her children to shoulder. When I discussed the ways that our mother regarded her Aboriginality while we were growing up together, my sister Julie describes it well. She said that our mother's sense of Aboriginality was "*very tactile...very dramatic...aggravated...frustrated...euphoric. She's just like a total open reflection of exactly what she was worried about or concerned about. Her questions were our questions.*"<sup>560</sup> It was as if Mum was taking us on her journey of discovering her identity and strengthening what she already knew.

By the time we were adolescents, our mother felt that the social pressures to pass as white had lessened. In my Nana's age, to acknowledge Aboriginality was to be a social outcast and to be the recipient of open degradation and ridicule. The opportunity to live an anonymous life was

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<sup>560</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling 3/6/09 p10

taken for the immediate necessity for a kind of freedom. Such a decision had a far reaching impact upon my mother's life so much so that when she identified as Aboriginal for the first time, her own siblings still held fears of white judgement and stigmatisation. Koori Activist, Kevin Gilbert<sup>561</sup> wrote that every Aboriginal family has within its midst '*white blackfellas*' whose 'whiteness' has "*sat uneasily on their shoulders*". Within our family, my Mum was the first person who actively pushed against the concealment of racial passing. She consciously made steps to stop the ploy used by her mother to simply omit that she was Aboriginal. However, my mother also demonstrated how she would conceal her identity as a form of subterfuge. She used her Aboriginality when she wanted to catch out racist attitudes. For example when Aboriginal issues were discussed in the mainstream TAFE courses she studied, Mum would challenge racist views by discussing her Aboriginality.

### **Impact of the research process and storytelling**

Before I began to write for this research, Melbin, my great great-grandmother, was not really owned by my family as much as it is now. She was an enigma that lived through the grouping of a few odd stories briefly spoken by our older generations. In my mother's generation, Melbin was hardly even spoken about but for my generation this was different. Our Nana and Great-Uncle George seemed to always speak about her and her story was repeated to us grandchildren very often. Julie and I always sensed an atmosphere of urgency especially when Nana spoke about Melbin to us. The few snippets of her life as told to me by my late grandmother had built up an all-encompassing mystery for me. By the time I was a young woman, I often superimposed myself in Melbin's shoes as she boarded that steam ship leaving Fremantle over the ocean to a completely foreign land at the complete servitude of Edward Oliver. I tried to imagine her eyes looking at the sights of England with its industry and pollution during the industrialised Victorian era. My ancestor would have walked past the destitution and desperation of white people living in these cities. The sheer volume of people and the conditions in which they lived would have compelled her to compare her life at home in Badimia country with its space and open clean skies. Would she have feared if she would ever see her home again? I think she would have. So much so that when my ancestor Melbin returned to her country she rejected Oliver and his control.

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<sup>561</sup> Gilbert 1971:8

The chapter about Melbin reflects the tremendous respect we all hold for her today. Its creation allowed me and my family to discuss and solidify how precarious Melbin's life was with Oliver and how uncertain her future was especially having seen her once free people become destitute. In her lifetime, she saw the freedom of her people change to a fragile dependence upon these white strangers. Within a very short period of time, Melbin adapted and found a place within this changed world. It was her resilience, which all her women descendants admire, to tell Oliver to leave her alone and seek out his own kind. Her words act like a metaphor for survival and resistance to us all. Against an all-encompassing power of white men during her time, Melbin embodied independence up until she died. There is comfort in her body being claimed by her people when she died and how they returned her to our sacred Dreaming country alongside our ancestors. For those of us dispossessed descendants, such a return anchors us to place and identity. We care little that her grave was never confirmed or found, instead the story of her return lives and breathes through its retelling. It speaks of connection and resolution. Her story is our heritage even in its fragile state.

The ways that womenfolk in my family use these stories now and how we yarn about them is important. For example, prior to my research there was only scattered information about the original place that Melbin came from. The only information known was that her daughter, Mary (Latham nee Oliver) was born at New Gullewa. Due to my investigations it was discovered that New Gullewa was actually an outstation of a property named Wydgee Station. It was revealed that Wydgee station was the first property established by the Oliver brothers and the ruins of the house they built together during the 1870s still stands there. It is believed that Melbin came from this area due to the small river running through it. Wydgee ironically is the Badimia word for nothing. When women in my family talk about the origins of their earliest women ancestors, they say that they came from "nothing" as a humorous story. However, they often continue to yarn further to discuss what this means and that due to Nana's interview they can impart information about Melbin and Melbin's mother who was named after emu eggs. Emu eggs are a particularly important dreaming story in Badimia country. Her name was Wallah and when this is discussed with other Badimia people there is an immediate acknowledgement of place and kinship. This is but one story, consolidated and strengthened through research, which manifests connection to place and how significant Melbin is placed in our stories today. As a direct result of this research project, this is not just one story but part of a repertoire of stories about our women ancestors that we have created together.

Furthermore, the story of Melbin's daughter, Mary (Latham nee Oliver) has taken on its own life. Many of my family knew 'Granny' as an elderly woman but with the telling of her life in writing with information given by her daughter, my Nana, there is a stronger sense of her wisdom and resilience. Within the interview with my own mother and with Nana, it was revealed that Granny was very strong about teaching her culture and language to her grandchildren. She wanted her knowledge to survive into future generations. The welfare and native welfare documents obtained for my grandmother's compensation due to her removal, reveal an extraordinary woman. Granny survived the death of her parents, the extremes of domestic violence, destitution and the forced removal of her youngest children. More importantly, her story is owned by her descendants because Granny protected her family from racism in the small country town where she spent her last years. She symbolised protection against a hostile, harsh and bigoted world to her granddaughters. Her story lives on and inspires a whole new generation of women and girls in our family.

My grandmother was widely considered a very dignified but formidable character and remained so up until she passed away in November 2011. Prior to the research commencing, my grandmother and I always shared a formal but affectionate relationship together. The first interview I conducted with her reflected this but as each subsequent interview progressed, my Nana revealed more and became more generous with her information about herself and her family. This does not mean that she became an open book with me as her granddaughter. Nana still refused to change her opinions about the superiority of white society to that of Badimia. More importantly, in her own practical and realistic way, my Nana taught me a lot about the times she lived and how resilient women like her had to have been to keep their families contained. My Nana was all about family and the importance of maintaining those connections. The relationship we shared and strengthened through the research process was based on the understanding that our family needed to survive and prosper. This could only be ensured if we continued to tell our stories of survival and learn from the lessons of those women who came before us. Up until the time my grandmother passed, I like to believe that she had learnt from me as I had learnt from her about identity and connection to country. It is this fact that has been the most fulfilling of my research. It is this element that has filtered throughout my extended family and will continue to enrich our sense of ourselves as Badimia people.

Yet the perception of Nana clinging to her white heritage because her black heritage was socially abhorrent was dismantled during the interview process for my research. Not long

before my Nana passed away, I had come across a photograph of Shepherd Dinah standing in front of a group of other Badimia women, one of whom was Granny Galbraith, a close relative to Nana's mother. On seeing the photograph Nana exclaimed that she knew the old woman standing with a wana<sup>562</sup> stick (digging stick). Nana used Aboriginal English in her expression by stating "that old girl birthed me!" I will never forget that moment because in her statement, my grandmother acknowledged her beginnings as being Badimia and that Shepherd Dinah played a key role as a customary woman in her life and the life of her mother. An overwhelming sense of resolution came across me when she pointed to the photograph and taught me her beginning of existence as she lay in her sick bed. Whenever I showed the photograph to my grandmother from then on she would smile with satisfaction and thanked me for finding it.

My mother was taught to respect country and speak her mind. As a woman today, I have learnt this too but something else has been added due to the research process. I have learnt ways of passing on these stories as I yarn with other members of my family that gives value to them. It is not just the tone and the way I speak them but also how I select what is important. This importance was taught to me by my grandmother, my mother and my Aunties during this research project. This selection process was not a priority to me before my research project. Instead of randomly discussing small stories which had no real significance to me, I am now able to select segments of a larger comprehensive story of women beginning with Melbin going through to my own mother's story. I now hold a strong focus on what has made me who I am today and how I have come to the knowledge I possess in my family. I am able to reflect on existing knowledge as well as the knowledge gaps that still exist in the story I have been told and subsequently wrote. Couser<sup>563</sup> observes that just the mere act of telling personal stories or even merely having them listened to cannot be quantified. This is certainly the case for my family who spoke their stories knowing that it had the possible benefits to their collaborators and also the broader benefits they intended by writing such stories down to the public. For us all, myself included, it was a political act of asserting our story of identity. What was at stake was the representation of the self and of the other.

In her exhibition "Yes, Boss!", Julie was presenting an overall comment on power relations between Aboriginal Australians and Non-Aboriginal Australians since invasion. Each work in

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<sup>562</sup> Wana is the Badimia word for digging stick widely used by traditional Badimia women when harvesting vegetation and hunting small game.

<sup>563</sup> Couser 2004:33

the exhibition was about expressing the “voices of the powerless” and by painting our family and community, she wanted people to have a “good yarn” about what they saw and especially what they felt when seeing these lives and stories painted on canvas. In a catalogue essay<sup>564</sup>, I wrote the commonly used analogy that before a wound could be healed then it must be opened and then cleaned with regard to the damaged relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In the article for the National Aboriginal Triennial publication for the Culture Warriors publication, I was able to go further in my understanding of this relationship between the viewer and my sister’s work that originates from our family stories and the stories from our community.

*I know my sister’s work very intimately having witnessed her struggles for acceptance and expression throughout her life. Julie has always been a culture warrior for us all. She lures onlookers, both Aboriginal and Wudjula, into her world. Any spectator becomes integral to the drama she courageously depicts making those who witness part of a complex web of intimate spaces and relationships. The glances depicted in her images create in turn a dynamic where the viewer becomes gazed upon. Her expressions have unflinching power even in the smallest facial expression or physical gesture. Julie implores us to have compassion and see through our eyes as oppressed peoples, to respond to what they see in a humane consciousness and to celebrate our survival<sup>565</sup>.*

Must like my sister’s artworks, such work of telling our stories can never be completed but rather continues to pass onto future generations. Now that my interpretation, using the technology of non-Badimia writing, has been presented, I envision the stories presented here to be investigated into the future and built upon by successive generations of women in my family. I hope the manifestation of this interpretation can take many forms just as it has done for my twin sister and me. My sister’s translation of family story is completely different to my own and is equally rich and valid. Julie will no doubt continue to give account of our stories and our reality through painting and other art forms. I will continue to write about my women ancestors and that of the lives of their descendants. Indeed, this work is not finished and can be placed into a far larger context with regard to auto-ethnography as a field. The issues of Aboriginal identity and whiteness, is a particularly relevant area where such writing can be placed.

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<sup>564</sup> Dowling 2004:1

<sup>565</sup> Dowling in National Gallery of Australia (2007:96)

I turn to Frantz Fanon<sup>566</sup> who spoke about the injustice metered out to him by white prejudice. He states that it was his oppression that enabled him to make a remarkable discovery about the lives of the black man through antiquity. He says “*what I found there took away my breath*” because black consciousness is not a “*potentiality of something.*” He says this by announcing.. “*I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It is. It is its own follower.*” This is clearly seen in the chapter about Julie and I. Through the actions of our mother to repair some of the damage done by colonialism by claiming our identity as Badimia, our generation can question and develop our own sense of who we all are even by using the tools of the coloniser (ie painting and writing). Intrinsically, this research has revealed the process of identity formation through active decolonisation and Aboriginal women’s empowerment through storytelling and narrative of their foremothers. It reveals how social environments directly impact upon identity formation and maintenance.

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<sup>566</sup> Frantz Fanon in Donald and Rattansi 1992:235

## **Chapter Ten**

### **Discussion**

In this chapter, I will provide focused discussion on what the results of this research mean with an interpretation of the data. Through this discussion will be a comparison with other research in this field with an evaluation of the importance of what was uncovered. I will outline any limitations or improvement that could have been made and raise questions about future directions for this kind of inquiry. Finally, I will provide a discussion about how the research relates to the aims of originally proposed. In essence, this chapter is about the significant of the outcomes achieved by this research.

#### **Racism and sexism**

By keeping safe the stories of our connections to country and the life stories of our mutual ancestors, being an Indigenous storyteller is something that I needed to conceptualise for myself. Much like many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women writers, I believe that a closer analysis and investigation into the realms of both theory and experience regarding racism and sexism is important. It gives impetus to a greater understanding of how racism and sexism are infused with a powerful socio-sexual component. This also enhances their intensity and their psychological impact upon Indigenous women today. Evans argued that in the economic sphere, both processes of racism and sexism meant that Aboriginal people of both sexes had rigid roles in the labour market and that exploitation and the prevention of upward social mobility was institutional. Each doctrine of racism and sexism carried with it far reaching

*“ideological, attitudinal, behavioural and institutional ramifications”*.<sup>567</sup> Such ramifications were investigated within my own family and such discussions about identity became highly valuable. They highlighted the experiences of ‘mixed-race’ Aboriginal people and the sexual domination of Aboriginal women. All of these discussions assisted in raising racial consciousness and bringing about decolonisation. This research will also add to the study of the stolen generations and the debates surrounding the so-called ‘black arm band’ view of Australian history.

By putting these Badimia women’s lives into context, the significance of their lives and what was said by those who remain alive today are particularly significant. Their story is important to Aboriginal families because they speak about the journey of indigenous women through successive generations of colonisation and forced assimilation. Within Aboriginal studies, such stories spanning several generations is invaluable because such data provides rich material to appreciate the adaptability and strength of colonised Aboriginal women. Within the umbrella of auto-ethnography, this thesis pushes the envelope further into a different way of including an author’s personal journey when asking her own family members questions about themselves and the influence of their women ancestors upon their contemporary Aboriginal lives today.

To an extreme of this is the rumour or the innuendo in my family about Melbin being exhibited abroad by her white master, my great great-grandfather Edward Oliver. At a time when two North Queensland Aboriginal groups were taken by a Mr Cunningham, an American showman commissioned by P.T. Barnum circus, my great great-grandmother had already been returned from England. Writing about their experience, Poignant’s<sup>568</sup> reveals much about those times and the world that Melbin would have lived in. Europe was gripped with large scale emigration occurring throughout the colonies and the Americas. By 1880, the movement of people into the cities saw European cities having populations of over a million. London, for example, was approaching 4 million people and as with many of these cities, was in a state of perpetual transformation. These populations were revelling in the advancements of faster mail services delivering newspapers and journals and with their contents rural and cities became linked together. Yet Poignant discusses her concerns about the entanglement of fact and fiction in the narratives found in colonial record of this time. She says potent euphemisms were replaced with new ones such as *“dispersal’ instead of slaughter, defining resistance as ‘outrage’ and*

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<sup>567</sup> Evans 1999:202

<sup>568</sup> Poignant 2004:257

*those who resisted as 'criminals', and describing indigenous peoples and their cultures in terms of a 'savagery'".*<sup>569</sup> When Indigenous peoples are able to re-write and re-interpret history through the modes of life writing, they have the significant potential to perform social action and to enact change in the lived world. It is hoped that the words of the women who took part in this thesis can bring about positive acknowledgement and change when comprehending the depth of colonial experience in Western Australia.

## **Aboriginality**

For Aboriginal people in the first half of the twentieth century, a form of apartheid existed in Western Australia that created a chasm between them and wudjulas. It is widely known that not one Aboriginal family in the state had escaped the effects of the removal policies. Henry Reynolds points towards another direction in which such stories can provide explanations for future generations of Australians. He says that generally historians have focused separately on Aboriginality as being the *antithesis of whiteness* and not on the more invisible category of sovereignty. The medical construction of white Australia provided a "*lens through which we may view two hundred years of European settlement*" which gives explanations of this "*strange project in human displacement*". He states that this may be the only way we could possibly make sense of mixed-race as a category whose boundaries are marked in an *excitingly assailable manner*.<sup>570</sup>

How Aboriginality had manifest in my grandmother's<sup>571</sup> life is mostly accompanied by a strong sense of denial. It is seen in her life choices how dramatically her identity was a source of shame for her. Frantz Fanon accurately described the dynamic of identity that he and others such as Nana have experienced. He described how he felt that white men surrounded him in a group holding guns in their hands telling him that his identity was wrong. He proclaimed "*I am guilty. I do not know of what, but I know that I am no good.*"<sup>572</sup> Kim Scott<sup>573</sup> discusses how while he grew up that he knew few Noongar people that he was related to and how they too had little connections with the Noongar community. He asks poignantly whether he and his family had deliberately cut themselves off from other Aboriginal families or had they been isolated by history and the circumstances of their particular region. The answer, he surmised, lay within the dynamic of country towns and the divisions between Aboriginal people

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<sup>569</sup> Poignant (2004:10)

<sup>570</sup> Reynolds 2005:4/5

<sup>571</sup> Also known as Nana by her family

<sup>572</sup> Fanon 1992:238

<sup>573</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:178

themselves which provided a “*sharp edge*” to the way that identity was forged for mixed-race Aboriginal people in the state and indeed throughout Australia. Race, as noted by Reynolds<sup>574</sup>, was perceived as an international issue making miscegenation and increased global mobility as the source of many social problems. This was evident with racial issues being reported widely in newspapers around the world in particular the United States, South Africa, Australia and India. This meant that for Aboriginal people of mixed-race heritage this contested Aboriginal past challenged non-Aboriginal comfortable and ingrained view of a homogenous past that united everyone.

When it came time for me and my mother to discuss identity issues for this research especially concerning Nana, it was revealed how early Mum had witnessed contentious identity issues were between her own mother and grandmother. For example, when asked whether Nana looked down on Aboriginal people, my Mum demonstrated that it was not a simple situation to describe. Mum explained how she would play with the Aboriginal kids in Coorow and she vividly remembers how Nana would say “behave yourself, don’t do anything stupid!” in that she should show respect and manners to other Badimia people. Mum would then go down the street to play with the Badimia girls in the camp. Her response to an additional question as to whether her mother admired Aboriginal people was very revealing.

CD: Did she look up to Aboriginal people in any way?

RD: No. I think she was afraid of Granny too, because you know when they’d used to have conversations or anything, I would eavesdrop on them sometimes. Granny used to want us to learn languages and Mum would say “No, because they can’t use that in real life. You know they won’t be able to get a job if they know that stuff. What’s the point of it?” They used to have huge arguments about it.

CD: Really, what do you mean by huge arguments?

RD: You know, like, for Granny it wouldn’t be that much of an argument. She used to say her bit and walk off. And if Mum didn’t think, well... she missed out... you see?<sup>575</sup>

The constant maintenance of a non-Aboriginal persona also meant that her children were called upon to have a script of what to say when questioned about their heritage by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. Auntie Barb, for example, discussed how hurtful it was not to

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<sup>574</sup> Reynolds 2005:59

<sup>575</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Ronnie Dowling 10/12/08 p10

have her mother involved in her school life because Nana was ostracised for being Aboriginal by the school and other non-Aboriginal mothers. Even as a mature woman, my Aunt became very emotional about how her mother chose to remain passively invisible because she was the recipient of racism.

My Auntie Barb goes further to describe what the assimilation process did to Nana's abilities as a mother to her children. It demonstrates the profound result of Nana being removed from Granny as a young 12-year-old.

CD:           What about the notion of being a mother?

Barb:         We had no training, to be a mother.<sup>576</sup>

Again Scott<sup>577</sup> expresses similar sentiments about how the narratives of families cross with others to reveal historical power plays that remain to separate Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people in Australia. More importantly, they reveal how "small fractures" can be created by people who lived those lives during those times. It also can reveal that some boundaries remain unchallenged having been created when past generations lived through racial segregation and when white power seemed a natural thing. Such stories within families also speak about love, friendships and tragedy that moved and defied such boundaries too even if it was for a short time. Such stories have a profound influence upon those listening today especially those willing to reinterpret and make such stories apart of their own interpretation.

In discussing how Nana scripted her children and grandchildren to say that they took the identity of their white fathers, my grandmother was orchestrating the dynamic of 'passing as white'. People of complicated or mixed descent are often attacked from two directions. If we do not identify as Aboriginal then we are accused of denying or disowning our heritage. When we identify as fair-skinned Aboriginal people, our legitimacy is constantly challenged especially when accessing services and grants. It was insightful to read the words of Noongar elder, Hazel Brown when yarning with her nephew, acclaimed Noongar writer, Kim Scott. She says that wudjula people in country towns are the most small minded from her experience. *"Just because you got coloured blood in you... If you don't want to leave your people, they*

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<sup>576</sup> P9 Transcript for Barb Dowling interviewed 1/2/07

<sup>577</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:139

*tread them down and then they tread you down on top of them” Hazel explains. She says that you are told “You’ll never make it in a white man’s world if you cling to the blacks.” That is why, Hazel surmises, that “Lots of people, they’ve been turned from their own kind. Lots of people were ashamed to admit that they got coloured blood in them.”<sup>578</sup>*

Race is seen as socially constructed within the academy but within the general public the idea of ‘race’ is considered an undisputable biological reality. Some people still believe that a person who says they are Aboriginal and appear to be white is somehow a challenge to a dominant white order. This white ideal is the epitome of racial normalcy and mixture with Aboriginal ‘blood’ is an embarrassment or as something that can be excused away. The question posed in such challenges is about ‘why would anyone want to claim Aboriginality when its position holds such negative connotations?’ especially within the general non-Aboriginal community. Such a negative reaction within the Aboriginal community is not always present. For example, when we finally went into the Abstudy department in 1982 to apply for assistance with our high schooling, my Mum took a selection of key photographs that clearly showed her family identity as Aboriginal. The Aboriginal case worker’s reaction to us upon showing these photographs was revealing. She explained that she and her colleagues had already discussed our application prior to our meeting and were wondering why it took us so long to apply for assistance. This worker said that our family was widely known as being Badimia and that accessing services was an important act because of the pain and suffering our large family had endured due to colonialism. This was a surprise to my mother more than anyone because my Nana had always told her that she would be laughed out of the department for even wanting to claim assistance as Aboriginal people.

When discussing the process of our small family openly identifying together, my sister Julie explained how important the search for relatives was for Mum. It was as if it was an expression of her freedom as a Badimia woman and it brought about healing. When I asked Julie if identifying was a brave thing to do she answered “*Yep, I think so.*”

JD: Well I mean she is as intrigued as we are about what empowerment she can have. She does feel like that. She is isolated. In a way I had this feeling when I was growing up that Mum went out of her way to try and find family. In a way she did it because her mother (*Nana*) wasn’t doing that. Something in Mum felt that she lacked something when she’d go off and meet family members and tell them about news

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<sup>578</sup> Scott & Brown 2005:176

and things. She would really go to them but we'd be on public transport and we'd see a cousin and it would be on hell for leather talking about things. I don't think I saw Nana do that. I don't remember Nana doing that. They have always come to her but Mum seemed to always bump into cousins and things and that made it a different experience for her and for me.<sup>579</sup>

## Writing our stories

The life writing of Australian Indigenous women, as noted by Grossman<sup>580</sup>, describes Australian cultural life and knowledge in general as “*disparate as well as shared.*” Such writing allows Aboriginal women to celebrate the achievements, mourn the losses sustained by themselves, their families and communities. More importantly, our stories become an important mechanism for making sure that future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the knowledge of “*transitional histories*” and how these have impacted upon the lives of their “*maternal forebears*”. Grossman makes it plain that such histories “*cannot - and should not - be left to the non-Indigenous world to tell and to record.*”

Considered one of Australia's leading writers on the positioning of Indigenous life narrative, Brewster<sup>581</sup> in her article entitled ‘Remembering Whiteness’ places the white reader as “*witness to their own act of witnessing*” in that the true claims of Indigenous life narratives “*foreground the stakes in the larger, more profound national crisis of truth. The stakes in this crisis are the processive investment in the authority, privilege and entitlement that accompany whiteness.*” She goes further by claiming that the ideology of racial hierarchy is “*indeed integral to Australian culture; white privilege and differential entitlement and the subordination of racialised minorities are mutually constituted.*”<sup>582</sup> In another article by Brewster<sup>583</sup> entitled ‘Intersubjectivity, Whiteness and Race’, she makes it plain that “*...conversations with Indigenous texts and people will thus always undo, unsettle and deconstruct white identities.*” The stories presented in my research have presented in detail some of the subtleties of how mixed-race Badimia women have adapted and survived generations of assimilationist policy and interventions. They provide discussions about race that describe how they circumvented official policy and white social stigmatism.

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<sup>579</sup> Carol Dowling interview with Julie Dowling 3/6/09p11-12

<sup>580</sup> Grossman 1998:175

<sup>581</sup> Brewster 2005:15

<sup>582</sup> Brewster 2005:4

<sup>583</sup> Brewster 2005:7

The evidence I have presented here is about making the relationship between the writer and the subject more close. When the vulnerability and dependency between the writer and subject are greater the ethnical stakes are higher. The need for scrutiny becomes more urgent. I have always maintained that the closeness between me and my female family members is central. The intimacy and interdependence between me as a writer and each participant as subject has seen us present together a combined story created with extended interviews and privileged access. Together this story was created through mutual cooperation. With this in essence, I envision other Aboriginal families working together to rebuilt their stories of survival. Indeed Aboriginal identity is now considered a national movement and is used as a statement of self-determination by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia. What remains a challenge is how such self-defence and self-representation can be created in the right circumstances. Misrepresentation is all around us and the question is how we as Indigenous people manifest our unique world view without impediments.

The evidence presented in each chapter is different. This means that a person reading them must approached them in different ways. My studies were not just merely a part of a daily search for the answers to long-held questions about what it means for me to be Aboriginal. As an Aboriginal woman, these chapters were about my determined aim to create my own oral history interpretation through my studies. By adding and strengthening my connection to country and to my women ancestors as a continuation of storytelling in my family, the journey I took meant I made many friends and some enemies. I was raised on stories about my great-grandmother as told by my mother who recounted the values and wisdom of our ancestors as was passed onto her. It was through the encouragement of my mother and the stories of *moorditj yorgas*<sup>584</sup> (strong women) in my family that I undertook studies giving me the time, discipline and scope to write about their lives for future generations. I feel very privileged to have such a strong line of story entrusted to me.

The nature of the evidence being shared with me was predominantly emotional and sensitive with qualities centred around trying to comprehend the events of the past so as to make sense of the present within each participants own lives. The way this was done involved highly specialised analytical skills driven by courage, insight and honesty. Talking about how white men depicted and treated our women ancestors often as animals or beasts of burden called upon

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<sup>584</sup> Noongar phrase to refer to *moorditj* (strong) *yorgas* (women)

us all to look at the kinds of men they were. Their hatred and aggression against Badimia people in general and, in the realm of sexuality, upon the bodies of the women they chose specifically, projects the shadow-selves they repressed. It is through telling these stories the women in my family bring into the light this treatment.

Julie and I have always viewed our community, culture and family as all important. It is what informed Julie's artworks and she has spoken openly and honestly about our family's past tribulations and current problems. Sometimes this has brought great healing in our family and on the other hand, it has brought controversy and division especially when presenting works about domestic violence and drug abuse. Julie has always admired artists like the late Robert Campbell Jnr because he painted to inform his family first, then his art extended out to include others. As Julie said to her interview with her former Curtin University lecturer Ted Snell, "*I work from the family and see how far it goes but your individuality is all about how you fit in the family. What I have to grapple with is people's perception of us. They tend to confuse biology with culture. ..I identify with Indigenous, not just as a political act but because I live in my community. I was brought up in a big Yamatji<sup>585</sup> family.*"<sup>586</sup> That is why Julie has painted many of our family from life. One particular group of paintings is entitled '*The Dispossession Series*' where she painted Mum, Nana, our late Great-Uncle George, and myself on large canvas in close-up. Lim says in her analysis of Julie's work that this series is "*deceptively simple*" because they are the most powerful of all her works to date. This author believes that it is our gaze and the words of text that Julie brings home to the viewer that "*the past is still very much present in the lives of her family.*"<sup>587</sup>

Even though Julie and I have gained some economic prosperity due to our respective careers, there still remains pressure from the predicament faced by our extended family. Brady<sup>588</sup> observes that the present young generation of Aboriginal women in Australia, of which Julie and I belong, face struggles to "*balance the retention of Aboriginal culture, keeping our family's together, whilst fighting economic oppression and racism and trying to master accepted and expected idealistic 'normal behaviour' of the whites.*" It is the latter requirements that are perceived by members of our family as a means to destroy our culture which is unwelcome and objectionable. Our family has always viewed an open house policy where all

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<sup>585</sup> Yamatji is a term used to refer to Aboriginal nations such as Badimia who are located in and around Geraldton Western Australia. It is akin to saying Europe to discuss a region containing many Aboriginal nations.

<sup>586</sup> Snell 2005:2

<sup>587</sup> Lim 2006:94

<sup>588</sup> Brady 2006:105

are welcome and is desirable. For a non-Aboriginal family, home is a sanctuary where only a selected and privileged few can come in. Such a difference in values continues to govern our creative environment. It is not uncommon to have several family members present when Julie brings her work out for discussion and improvement. Her works become a family instrument for empowerment and expression. The act of discussion means that the work becomes owned by our family before it is sent out to destinations unknown. That is why Julie's works are complex, layered in symbolism and meaning; she varies both palette and style all the time. Her work is a community event and is therefore 'well worn' subject pieces by the time they are exhibited. By painting a portrait, Julie brings an individual into the public realm and the process breaks down barriers within her community. I have also witnessed people from the broader Aboriginal community come to Julie to tell her their stories and she records them too within her art. She has described it as if a dam has burst where her community and family are finally able to talk about things. Julie is a conduit and champion for social justice for her family and community. Describing the process of how Julie retells stories has been a highlight of this research experience.

### **Limitations and improvements**

There was only one casualty that was experienced during the entire research process. Certain members of the Clinch family broke all association with my work and one of their elderly family members withdrew the interview she conducted with me. From my understanding, this was due to personal differences that arose from a multimedia artwork produced by Julie and myself for the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art. This art piece contained images of Coodingnow where the Clinch family had lived. Claiming a particularly strong ownership of this location meant that certain Clinch family members, not all however, did not want images of Coodingnow being shown to the public. Every effort was made to resolve this issue but this still remains a particularly sensitive matter between our family and this branch of the Clinch family. Now that the Badimia Native Title claim has been rejected by the federal court stating that Badimia culture no longer exists, the views of my sister and I have changed. We have been asked to become involved again in the appeal against this high court decision. I believe that my thesis will become an important document to assist our family's claim for acknowledgement and to assist the claim group in gaining rights to our lands as Badimia peoples together. It may contribute to a deeper understanding of our family's connection to Coodingnow and to repair the damage between us all as Badimia people.

## **Future applications**

The methods applied to several generations of women within my family highlights their potential application to other indigenous families in Australia. By having the researcher conduct an auto-ethnographic study of their own families and presentation of themselves within the research as an indigenous person, I believe there is the potential for widespread benefits. Not only could a family consolidate their history of survival but also reflect upon their future direction to maintain cultural traditions and connection to country. The act of decolonisation is more than reinvigorating and repairing cultural traditions damaged by invasion. Decolonisation as seen through active storytelling is about taking stock of the journey of resistance and survival so as to reconstitute a robust cultural identity as first nations peoples in this land. All stories have something to teach us. What is most important is to learn to listen, not simply hear, the words that storytellers have to share. Many stories from first nations peoples tell a counter-story to that of the documented history of first nations Peoples in Australia.

Most first nations peoples come from an oral society. I believe that storytelling methodology honours our story telling traditions as well as our Ancestors. As storytelling was done orally in a different language, we must honour them by listening and documenting stories in the spirit of the Ancestors. In other words, I feel that storytelling enables us to keep the teachings of our Ancestors, culture, and tradition alive through the entire research process. As we share stories of long ago, we are given an opportunity to go back to that time. Storytelling in this sense is an act of resistance. The stories in my thesis are written as they were told and experienced, not edited to parallel the Australian story; they give voice to a story that has not been fully told. This provides an opportunity for first nations to have their histories documented and included in the written records. Likewise, storytelling revises history by naming and including their experience. When we listen with open hearts and open minds, we respect and honour the storytellers. This is a process of respecting and honouring people whilst simultaneously documenting their reality.

In essence, I believe this research project has achieved all three of its objectives. Not only were the stories of five generations of Indigenous women in one family documented regarding the extent and impact of colonialism in Australia but also the impact of domination upon them as first nations women. Connections were investigated and found to exist between Melbin's story and that of other Indigenous women used as an eroticised, scientific 'other' for the Western

gaze. The only element missing here was more detailed western documentation or records about Melbin's life. She did live but only scant record of her life was retrieved from accessible records. Finally, I have been able to write my personal account of my own decolonisation process through discussion of identity, sexism, racism, colonialism and the impact of creating the Aboriginal spectacle. The storytelling process uncovered new ways of knowing. For the most part, these ways of knowing and being were stripped from me and my family through the process of colonisation. For generations in my family, our ways of knowing and being were not permitted, and storytelling is a means through which these ways of knowing and being can be uncovered and reclaimed.

## **Chapter Eleven**

### **Conclusion**

I was raised in a family where comparisons between us and non-Aboriginal people continually occurred. As I grew up in my extended family and as a child of a single mother, the stories of my women ancestors revealed much about their struggles to define their place within a racist world. It seemed that one of the keys to our survival was not only a hope for a better future, but also about maintaining ties to the past remembering who we were as well as whom we were trying to become. It is knowing who I have been, based on my personal and cultural history, that makes it possible for me to maintain my determination to understand who I am now and be aware of the possibilities of who I may be in the future. It is important to include my own journey of discovery and understanding throughout the research project. I also had the benefit of having a twin sister who has manifested her own journey of identity and decolonisation through her artworks as a successful contemporary Aboriginal visual artist. Our lives have always been connected through our work and this is reflected in the chapter written about our unique journey together as sisters.

The first objective of my research was to document and analyse how five generations of indigenous women in one family engaged with colonialism in Australia to reveal the extent and impact of wudjula domination of indigenous women. From interviews with the living women in my family, I wrote chapters on each significant woman in my family representing each generation down to myself and my twin sister Julie. After consideration, I changed the order of how these chapters were to be presented. The first chapter concerns the lives of my

twin sister and myself. My reason for this positioning was to emphasise how we manifest our identity as Badimia women in contemporary Australian society but also to trace a journey back to our ancestor women, who struggled, survived and influenced our lives so that we could enjoy certain freedoms. Nevertheless, each chapter reflects the different evidence and complexity of these women's lives as individuals living in vastly different historical periods in Australia while facing diverse social contexts. In every chapter, the evidence presented was varied. I deliberately presented my own engagement with the material being uncovered and then analysed what this information meant to me as a Badimia woman.

The stories we created together into chapters as a family revealed much about the kind of relationships we shared and how this changed due to this research. At the beginning, my relationship with my immediate family of my mother and sister was extremely close. I did not anticipate that this could become even more so but it did. Not only did I gain the opportunity to consolidate into writing the collaboration I had with my twin sister's career but also deepened my understanding of the struggles experiences by our mother. The research journey has enabled us to reflect and strengthen the story of our little band of three women together. I believe that this extended out further to the circle of women known as "the aunties", my three maternal aunts, Barbara, Patricia and Elizabeth. Even though my Auntie Barb was the one who came forward to be interviewed, my other two Aunties "Pat" and "Liz" worked hard to help me make sense of the material I had uncovered and analysed. My Aunties worked as a very active and supportive reference group in themselves. The Aunties unselfishly shared their insight and honest analysis of our family stories especially when information was gained after the four interviews with my grandmother (their mother).

The relationship between myself and those who told me stories about my family has changed. Those that were asked to take part in the search for the stories of their women relatives already had a strong and supportive role in my life prior to the tape recorder being switched on for interviews. With the discussions and the data gathered and reviewed together these relationship have only deepened as we have taken this journey together. The primary members of this reference group of key participants included my late grandmother, my mother, my Auntie Barbara, my twin sister Julie who were interviewed and recorded for this project. On the periphery to this key group were additional people I discussed elements of this work including my late great uncle George Latham and my two maternal aunties, Patricia and Elizabeth. I have also interviewed two additional people who knew my great-grandmother Mary Latham (nee

Oliver) and the social context of the orphanage where my grandmother Mary Dowling (nee Latham) was taken as a child. These two women were Mary Hirst and Merrilyn Elkington, who are both non-Aboriginal women.

The second objective of this research was to investigate any connections between Melbin's story and that of other indigenous women used as an eroticised, scientific 'other' for the Western gaze. The chapter about Melbin reached back in time to our oldest ancestor woman, our great-great-grandmother. Melbin remains a lasting reminder of the completeness of colonisation in our family. Like so many other Aboriginal families whose family members were named by white colonialists, Melbin's name encompasses the colonial act. When my white great great-grandfather named her after his favourite town, the sheer power he exercised in renaming another human being symbolised the wiping away of her cultural and community persona. As with many other Aboriginal people in these early days of invasion, Melbin was a construction which disenfranchised her from then on. My great great-grandfather, Edward Oliver may not have had any romantic affiliation with Melbin. This is evidence by the fact that he fathered several other children with other Badimia women during the time he was with her. Melbin, and at least one of these women named Shepherd Dinah, may have been close relatives to each other. Dinah maintained a strong bond with Melbin even after she died by teaching Badimia lore and helping Melbin's children and grandchildren. The bond between Badimia women was maintained and that heritage was passed down to me. Even though there were scant historical documents about Melbin, the strength of oral histories in my family and recorded life of Edward Oliver enabled me to build a story of the life of my woman ancestor during this early times of colonisation in Badimia country.

In the chapter about the life of her daughter, my great-grandmother, Mary Latham (nee Oliver), it is as if we learn another element of our own survival as women. The onslaught of English colonialism began to spread wider into Badimia country and became more established. When I read the letter from the Pastor from Dongara early in my research regarding the marriage of my great-grandmother and great-grandfather (Francis Latham), I realised that my writing was no longer just about retracing the lives of these women but it also concerned the constructions and tensions surrounding identity. Such a search helped me gain understanding of how possible or impossible it was for "Granny" to raise her own daughters as Badimia women. The accounts of my grandmother, my mother, my Auntie Barb and Mary Hirst provided a deeper understanding of the tensions that Granny lived with. It is through written documents with

references to her husband and her father that another dimension emerged to her life that was not present with that of Melbin, her mother. More importantly, 'Granny' was brought alive through the stories told to me and she was always spoken about by those who knew her personally as being a caring, extremely hardworking, resourceful and courageous woman who faced her times with pride and determination.

In the chapter about my grandmother's life, my late grandmother (Mary Dowling nee Latham) speaks about her experiences and the ways she adapted her behaviour left a lasting influence upon her family. My "Nana" would code switch between an overtly assimilated 'quarter-caste' woman to that of a Badimia woman with kinship ties and obligations. This meant that culture and connection to women ancestors became significantly altered or truncated with her influence. This is evident in Nana's life story because her forced removal from her mother had a lasting impact upon the current two generations of women in my family.

In the chapter about Veronica Dowling, my mother, I wrote about her life journey fraught with ill health, racism, her struggles as a single mother on welfare and her quest to strengthen her Aboriginality. My mother speaks about being dragged away by her mother so that she could not witness her Granny speaking Badimia with Shepherd Dinah as they discussed their sand paintings and singing in language. Mum recognises this language today as being Badimia and in her living memory such a clandestine experience gave my mother the determination to strengthen her Aboriginality her whole life. For the benefit of me and my sister, and despite the efforts of the Church and her mother to prevent it from being a part of her life, Mum confidently sought out freedom of identity rather than to continue the oppression manufactured and experienced by her fore-mothers.

As Julie's twin sister, I am in a unique position to write about the impact of Julie's career and artwork upon her family both immediate and extended. In the chapter about Julie and me, the most significant events have seemed to centre on Julie's career as a painter. The most profound element in Julie's paintings is that she had painted our grandmother, Molly, more than any other person in her career. This is not an insignificant thing for our family. Our grandmother was the only surviving sibling of her nine brothers and sisters. This meant that her influence upon her family and extended family was considerable. When all the old people died in our family, Nana took on the role of matriarch and was widely respected for her wisdom. Julie and

I believe that the health of a family is determined by how old their elders live and the way that children are raised to know their place within their family structure. You are not expected to behave in an individualistic way in this structure but rather part of a collective responsible to elders and older living generations as Badimia people.

The final objective of this research was to write a personal account of my own decolonising process including discussions of identity, sexism, racism, colonialism and the impact of creating the Aboriginal spectacle. This was achieved through the process of engagement with the women storytellers in my family and my analysis of those stories. This is evident in the poetry and prose throughout this thesis expressing my inner most thoughts and feelings about the knowledge and experiences I had encountered.

The history of colonisation and dispossession of Badimia people demonstrated through this thesis document cannot be underestimated. As a family, we hope that our input will bring about healing and understanding of just how dispossession affected families such as ours and in particular, Badimia women, who were traded as if they were material goods. Such realities as experienced by our ancestors constituted the basis of colonial relations in Badimia country and in Australia. It is such sexual exchanges and their miscegenetic product that captures the antagonistic, violent power relationship of sexual and cultural diffusion from one society to another. This was a dominant paradigm through which this study was framed as it is about the design of colonialism's passionate economic and political traffic.

What I learnt from this journey is that the oral tradition has served some important functions for first nations people in Australia. The historical and mythological stories provide moral guidelines by which one should live. They teach the young and remind the old of what behaviour is appropriate and inappropriate in our cultures; they provide a sense of identity and belonging, situating community members within their lineage and establishing their relationship to the rest of the natural world. What I am most proud of is that this research allowed me the opportunity to learn about a way of life by studying the people who live it and asking them (and myself) how we thought about our experience. I learnt that it was not about studying what I thought as the researcher was important but I became open to hear what the storytellers deemed to be important about their experience. Authenticity was a real concern for me from the time I started my journey. I wanted to authentically tell our collective story as

women. That is, I was concerned about how I could tell these women's story when I was a part of the same family. To facilitate my desire to capture the essence of experience and memory, I chose to conduct multiple interviews dependent on the storyteller.

The most difficult aspect of this research was the stress surrounding the reception of certain members of another Badimia family whom shared a common story of country. There were connections between our families which had been lost due to dispossession and time. This created tensions and mistrust as to why we were seeking our place within the story of Badimia peoples. This dynamic was artificially created due to this family's quest for recognition under the National Native Title legislation and the quest for the Badimia claim group for land rights. This legislation strictly sanctions those Badimia people who have been dispossessed from country such as my family. Even though our stories remain of our connection to country, there were gatekeepers preventing our family from finding more detailed information about Melbin and her connection to Coordingnow station, her final resting place. A resolution to this situation was made by my making connections with other members of the Badimia claim group including significant elders whom have welcomed our family into the claim group. We are now actively involved as family representatives in the current appeal against the negative outcome of the high court decision that Badimia people have no continuous connection to our country.

I believe that the use of auto-ethnography can be applied to other first nations families in Australia. Gaining control of the research process has been decisive for Indigenous peoples in decolonisation. Participatory research, such as auto-ethnography, has been a partner in this process. The participation in all levels of research by Indigenous participants and that the research benefits the community in some manner demonstrates these respectful relationships. This requires a special kind of vigilance within the politics of an academic environment. For Indigenous peoples, our knowledge is passed on through stories that shape shift in relation to the wisdom of the storyteller at the time of the telling. For the indigenous researcher, incorporating Indigenous epistemology into a non-Indigenous language with all that it implies is complex. It is a troublesome task of criss-crossing cultural epistemologies. Those of us who have pursued academic study and plunged ourselves into the muddy waters of research have commitments to use our skills to improve the socio-economic conditions of our people. As Indigenous peoples, we have lots of work ahead of us, and reclaiming research is one of many tasks on the list. It will be a difficult process, but it will be an astonishing new discourse in a world poorly in need of hope. Our stories are our focus and our strength.

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Appendix 1.

Map of Central West/Gascoyne Region of Western Australia

Boundaries of towns including Wubin, Paynes Find, Mount Magnet, Yalgoo, Mullewa, Dongara, Eneabba, Coorow, Three Springs, Morawa & Mingenew.



## Appendix 2.

### Map of significant Suburbs in Perth metropolitan area

Key suburbs for my family included Belmont, Armadale, Bassendean, Gosnells, Maddington, Karawara, Riverton, Redcliffe, Victoria Park & North Perth



Appendix 3

Painting by Julie Dowling 1997. Portrait entitled "Melbin" (owned by Cruthers Collection)



Appendix 4.

Painting by Julie Dowling entitled “Sista Carol” (Archibald Finalist painting 2000, Dowling private collection)



## Appendix 5

Photograph of original mud brick ruins of Oliver brother's homestead on Wydgee Station (Photo taken by author 2009)



Appendix 6.

Uncle Samuel Winmar (to left of donkey, with large moustache) Half-brother to Mary Oliver (my great grandmother). His mother was Melbin.



Appendix 7.

Unknown grave at Coodingnow station (photograph taken with permission of Clinch Family)



## Appendix 8.

Track leading to the sacred site for Badimia of the Beemara creation being. Site not shown due to cultural sensitivity. Sight found on Coodingnow station. To the right is the large meeting group where local and regional nations would meet for exhibition fights, competitions and trade.



Appendix 9.

Group photograph of Shepard Dinah with Mary Galbraith to the left in white dress. Shepard Dinah is the oldest woman (centre) holding a digging stick known in Badimia language as Wanna. Photograph taken on Coodingnow circa 1920.



Appendix 10.

Photograph of Mary Latham (Nee Oliver) taken by my grandmother Molly as a child. East Perth Train Station circa 1930s.



Appendix 11.

Photograph of Mary Latham (nee Oliver) as an elderly woman. Child in foreground is granddaughter Janet Latham (father is Ted Latham)



## Appendix 12 – Curtin University Human Research Ethics Approval

memorandum		University of Technology
<b>To</b>	Maureen Perkins Social Sciences	Office of Research and Development
<b>From</b>	Dr Stephan Millett, Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee	Human Research Ethics Committee
<b>Subject</b>	Protocol Approval HR 136/2006	TELEPHONE 0766770
<b>Date</b>	13 December 2006	FACSIMILE 92663793
<b>Copy</b>	Maureen Perkins, Social Sciences Carol Dowling, Social Sciences Graduate Studies Officer, Division of Humanities	EMAIL hrec@curtin.edu.au

Thank you for your application submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for the project titled "'Find One of your own Kind" Autoethnography and my Aboriginal Women Ancestors". Your application has been reviewed by the HREC and is approved.

- You are authorised to commence your research as stated in your proposal.
- The approval number for your project is HR 136/2006. Please quote this number in any future correspondence.
- Approval of this project is for a period of twelve months 12-12-2006 to 11-12-2007. To renew this approval a completed Form B (attached) must be submitted before the expiry date 11-12-2007.
- If you are a Higher Degree by Research student, data collection must not begin before your Application for Candidacy is approved by your Divisional Graduate Studies Committee.

Applicants should note the following:

It is the policy of the HREC to conduct random audits on a percentage of approved projects. These audits may be conducted at any time after the project starts. In cases where the HREC considers that there may be a risk of adverse events, or where participants may be especially vulnerable, the HREC may request the chief investigator to provide an outcomes report, including information on follow-up of participants.

The attached FORM B should to be completed and returned to the Secretary, HREC, C/- Office of Research & Development:

When the project has finished, or

- If at any time during the twelve months changes/amendments occur, or
- If a serious or unexpected adverse event occurs, or
- 14 days prior to the expiry date if renewal is required.
- An application for renewal may be made with a Form B three years running, after which a new application form (Form A), providing comprehensive details, must be submitted.

Regards,



Dr Stephan Millett  
Executive Officer

Human Research Ethics Committee

## Appendix 13 – Participant Information Sheet

### *Information Sheet*

**Project Title:** “Find One of Your Own Kind!”:  
Autoethnography and my Aboriginal Women Ancestors

***Who is conducting this research:***

I, Carol Dowling, am the coordinator of this research project as requirement for a Doctor of Philosophy (Social Sciences) at Curtin University of Technology. I am also an active member of the Perth Noongar community.

***What is this research project about?:***

This research project is about researching and retelling the story of my great great-grandmother, Melbin, my great-grandmother, Mary Latham (nee-Oliver) and the way women in my family view their Aboriginal heritage. This project will be an analysis of the impact of racism, sexism, nationhood and Aboriginality upon women over time. Such an exploration will enable members of my family and myself to make comment on constructions of identity within my family.

**Aims of project:**

- To look at how five generations of indigenous women in my family deal with the impact of wudjula culture and domination in Australia.
- To investigate any connections between Melbin’s story and that of other indigenous women used as exhibits during early colonial times.
- To write about my personal observations and discussions with female family members about identity, sexism, racism, colonialism and the impact of creating Melbin a spectacle.

**Nature of involvement of participants:**

This project should not interrupt your life in a major way. Your involvement will include:

- Reading a written account of Melbin and Mary Latham (nee Oliver)’s life accompanied by viewing historical photographs.
- Taking part in a 2 hour interview (approx.) recorded on audiotape in the location of your choice.
- Reading, commenting and directing the way your views will be presented in a final report.

**Confidentiality and Security of Information:**

Every effort will be made to ensure that your personal information is kept safe and secure. The following guidelines will be strictly followed to ensure rights to confidentiality and security are respected:

- Your involvement in this study will be done with your clear written consent as well as the written consent of all interested parties including family members and other individuals;
- You can withdraw your involvement at any time without explanation by advising me (Carol Dowling) if that is what you want to do;
- All material gathered from you can be reviewed and commented on by you, as the participant, in any part of the research process before it is published;
- You can have the option to remove any information from transcripts which you don't want to be published in this research project.
- You will not be coerced or induced to volunteer in this project;
- It is your choice, as a participant, to have your identity or the identities of people you are referring to in this research be kept strictly confidential and records will be kept safe and secure;
- You can voluntarily be noted on transcripts and data collections by a pseudonym (a name you are not known by) to ensure confidentiality should it be needed.

**Any Risks/Benefits to participants:**

The risk with this research is that you may make comments that are critical of the Oliver, Latham and Dowling families or people associated with these families, and that this information could be personally hurtful and disruptive. Therefore, it is crucial that the following safeguards will be in place to make sure that no identifiable information can be accessed by associated family members

To ensure this I, Carol Dowling, will:

- Guarantee the anonymity of people participating in this study (should they so wish) by being identified in transcripts and data collections by a name you are not known by.
- Keep all data in a secure locked cabinet at the office of Dr. Maureen Perkins (my supervisor at Curtin University). Dr. Perkins and I will be the only key holders.

The primary benefit of this research is that you will be able to provide feedback about identity issues and family history about the Oliver, Latham and Dowling families, thereby leading to a deeper knowledge of colonialism and history in Western Australia. This is a significant benefit because it is the first time that members of my family will have had an opportunity to voice their experiences and stories as known to them alone. Family member input will be a highly valuable contribution to developing new knowledge about colonisation, nationalism and identity experiences for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia.

Contact details: Deleted for confidentiality of submission of doctoral thesis

**Supervisor's Contact Details:**

**Dr. Maureen Perkins**

Senior Lecturer - School of Social Sciences

Curtin University of Technology

Ph: (08) 266 2762

Appendix 14 –

Example of Interview Questions

MELBIN

What was the story of Melbin as told to you as you were growing up?

What does this story mean to you?

Are there any parts of her story that you have wondered about?

Are there silences about Melbin's life?

How do these silences make you feel?

You have painted the story of Melbin, why did you feel compelled to do that?

By painting Melbin, what has this done for your understanding of her story?

Are there any aspects of Melbin as a woman that you have wondered about?

Should Melbin's story have any importance?

Why?

---

GRANNY LATHAM

Granny went to England with Melbin as a baby, why did you think that happened?

Both you and I were raised with the stories of Granny Latham. Who told you these stories?

What impression did these stories give you of Granny from these stories?

Who was she in your eyes?

Can you recount a story about Granny that sticks in your mind as being significant?

Even though the stories are second hand, ie. Through the eyes of Mum as a child, what did those stories reveal to you about Granny?

In your view was Granny living as a Badimia woman?

Did she find it hard to fit into either white or Aboriginal communities?

Mum has described how she used to watch Nana and Granny arguing about teaching Badimia culture and language to her and her sisters. What does this reveal about the passing of culture through the women in our family?

What still remains of Granny's influence upon the women in her family?

What did her life represent to you?

NANA

Nana is 90 years old. What sort of influence has she had upon you and our family?

How would you describe Nana to future generations of women in our family?

How influential has the Catholic church been in Nana's life?

Why do certain members of our family view Nana's experience in the orphanage as being a privileged life or her having received better treatment than other members of the family?

Did Catholicism provide protection for us as oppressed peoples or did it continue colonialism in our communities?

Did Nana live a double life with regard to her Aboriginal heritage and identity?

How did she do this?

Did she look down on Aboriginal people?

Did she look up to Aboriginal people?

Did she look down on Wudjula culture?

Did she look up to Wudjula culture and society?

Would you say that Nana got along with white people generally?

Was she treated different by white people when we were growing up?

Did she teach us anything about Badimia culture or about identity?

You have painted Nana on many occasions; she has this process revealed to you about her as an Aboriginal woman and as a woman?

Has Nana struggled with the idea of her children and grandchildren openly identifying as Badimia today?

With Nana, how would you describe her to future generations of women in our family?

---

MUM

Mum brought us up as a single mum. How would you describe our early life with her?

As we grew up, how would you describe our life with Mum regarding to our Aboriginality?

Was it difficult for Mum as a single mother? What were some of the difficulties she faced?

With how we were raised, what was her primary focus in raising us?

We started to identify as Aboriginal when we were 14 years old, what prompted Mum to get assistance from our schooling based on our Aboriginality?

What were the implications of Mum identifying openly?

Was it a brave thing to do?

How do you think Mum has approached our Aboriginality and involvement in the Aboriginal community?

You have painted Mum a few times, what has this revealed to you about Mum as a person?

Is Mum a storyteller? What do her stories mean to you and to future generations?

How would you describe Mum to future generations of women in our family?

---

## YOURSELF

What are the things that you learnt from our childhood raised in a single parent family living on welfare benefits?

Being raised together as twins, how have you found it to establish your individuality?

As people always question us, what does it feel like being a twin?

From a young age you have been able to express yourself through drawing and painting, has this limited you or given you freedom?

How has it limited you?

How has it liberated you?

A large part of your art themes have been about your investigations into Aboriginality and the stories of your women ancestors, do you feel that this is ongoing?

When you hear about the stories of struggle and courage of our women ancestors, about Nana and Mum, what does that mean to how you have lived your life?

What advantages have you had compared to our women ancestors?

What disadvantages have you had compared to our women ancestors?

Education and to perfection of your craft have dominated your life, are there things about your life that you feel or think need to be given more focus now that you are 40 years old?

How would you like to be remembered by future generations of women in our family?

We have had a close affiliation with each other over the years especially creatively, how would you describe this collaboration?

Where are you heading in your artistic career?

Where do you think you are heading in your life generally? Say for the next five years?

---

## CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY

When did you first become aware that you had Aboriginal heritage?

When people talk to you about Aboriginality how does it make you feel?

How does Aboriginality work?

Who can and should identify as Aboriginal? Why?

Who shouldn't identify as Aboriginal? Why?

Is having an identity important?

Should identity matter?

Can a person choose to be Aboriginal if they want to? Why?

Why do some people feel ashamed of claiming their Aboriginality?

What are some of the rules about who can be Aboriginal that you have heard from other people?

What does full-blood mean? Is it an appropriate definition?

What does half-caste mean? Is it an appropriate definition?

What makes half-caste or more appropriately mixed raced people different to so called 'full-blood' Aboriginal people?

What does a quarter-caste mean? Is it an appropriate definition? What have people said about this definition as being different from so called full-bloods or half-castes?

Should such classifications be used when dealing with Aboriginal people today? Why/why not?

How will people in our generation and future generations honour their Aboriginal heritage and history? Will it be a struggle?

How do you view your Aboriginality? Do you see that claiming an identity as important?

---

## THE IMPACT OF COLONISATION

What does the word colonisation mean to you?

Would you say that our family has experienced colonisation?

Has this experience been good or has it been bad?

Is colonisation something of the past or does it still affect our family today?

Who makes colonisation happen?

Can you stop colonisation from happening? How?

Is decolonisation possible? What do you need to do to make that happen?

---

## THE EXPERIENCE OF SEXISM IN OUR FAMILY

Would you say that women such as Melbin and Granny were treated fairly by their men?

Was Melbin treated fairly by society as a woman?

What does sexism mean to you?

Should women be treated equally as men in society today ie. Same wages for same work?

What can we learn from our women ancestors about being a woman today?

Was pre-contact Aboriginal society equal do you think?

Is Aboriginal society equal today?

Do you experience sexism in your life now?

---

## THE EXPERIENCE OF RACISM IN OUR FAMILY

Have anyone in your family experienced racism because they had Aboriginal heritage?

Describe briefly what happened?

How often did such an experience occur in your family?

Can racism be prevented? How?

Why do people care about racism so much?

How can you identify a racist? Who are they?

Do you think that Melbin experiences racism by being taken to England by Edward Oliver?

Is colonialism racist?

When Frances Latham took Nana and Auntie Dot to the orphanage, was that because he feared they would “marry into the town blacks”? Was his actions racist or compassionate?

Would you say that racism happens within our family between family members?

How does it manifest?

---

## THE NATURE OF ORAL HISTORY IN OUR FAMILY

What does an oral history mean to you?

What does it mean to tell a yarn in our family?

Can you believe an oral history in our family?

Are they important to our family?

What can a yarn/oral history do?

Who should tell a family yarn?

What is one of your favourite story within the family? Why?

Can an oral history or yarn be put into writing?

Is that a good thing? Or a bad thing?

Can an oral history or yarn be put into a painting?

Is that a good thing? Or is it a bad thing?

Who has the right to do that?

Do oral histories or family yarns change over time?

Who can we protect these stories?

---

## OUR FAMILY AND NATIONHOOD

When your father is a white man, do you take the nationality of the father?

Does being proud to be Aboriginal automatically make you anti-national?

When Noongar people say that they are part of the Noongar nation, what does that do with ideas of an Australian nation?

Should there be separate Aboriginal nations? Why? Why not?

Are you part of an Aboriginal nation?

Would you like to be part of an Aboriginal nation?

What would that involve? How could we make it happen?

Why should we make it happen?

How important is our traditional lands up north such as Coodingnow, Warridar and Ninghan stations to our family? Why are they important?

How important is it to teach future generations about where you come from and what their ancestors did?

When you started to strongly identify as Badimia, how did that make you feel?

Was it a brave thing to do or was it scary?

Is having a strong sense of identity important to you?

Is it important to other Aboriginal women? Especially if they come from background similar to our own?

What does it mean to be a fair skinned Aboriginal person?

Is it an easy position to be in?

What are some of the things you need to consider when dealing with white people?

What are some of the things you need to consider when dealing with Aboriginal people?