Deadly Women: An Analysis of Indigenous Women's Leadership in Australia.

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction and Context 1

1 Introduction 3

1.1 Aims 3

1.2 Research Parameters 3

1.3 Disciplinary Approach 4

1.3.1 Problem Description and Research Question 4

1.3.2 Positioning and Structure 5

1.3.3 Significance of Study 6

1.3.4 Approach, Research Design and Methods 7

1.3.5 Contribution to New Knowledge 7

2 Profiles of Indigenous Women 9

2.1 Women Leading in Community 9

2.1.1 Val Cooms 9

2.1.2 Eugenia Flynn 9

2.1.3 Hayley Maguire 10

2.1.4 Elsie Hiess 10

2.1.5 Krystal Hurst 11

2.1.6 Natasha Davis 11

2.1.7 Celeste Liddle 12

2.1.8 Summer May Finlay 12

2.2 Women Leading in Public Areas 13

2.2.1 Professor Marcia Langton AM 13

2.2.2 Linda Burney MP 14

2.2.3 Pat Anderson AO 15

2.2.4 Nova Peris OAM 15

2.2.5 Deborah Cheetham 16

2.3 Women Leading Institutionally 16

2.3.1 Associate Professor Bronwyn Carlson 17

2.3.2 Associate Professor Tracey Bunda 17

2.3.3 Anne Martin 18

2.3.4 Dr Chelsea Bond 18
2.3.5 Katrina Fanning 18
2.3.6 Jo Chivers 19
2.3.7 Robyn Forester 20
2.3.8 Rachelle Towart 20
3 Problem Description 21
3.1 Leadership and Eldership 21
3.2 Face of Aboriginal Australia in a Contemporary Context 23
3.3 Initial Standpoint and narratives of Disadvantage and Deficit 24
3.4 Capacity Building 25
3.5 The Face of Contemporary Indigenous Women in the Australian Context 32
3.5.1 Truganini – A Historical Reflection on Indigenous Women and Leadership 35
3.5.2 A Contemporary Example of Indigenous Female Leadership 36
3.6 Summary 38
4 Colonisation, Resistance and Structures of Power in Australia 41
4.1 The Phenomenon of Colonisation 42
4.1.1 Unpacking the Impacts of Colonisation on Indigenous Australians 45
4.1.2 Conflict and Violence 47
4.1.3 Environmental Impact 50
4.1.4 Cultural Erosion 53
4.2 Structures of Power in an Australian Context 54
4.3 Fighting Back – Indigenous Responses to Power 55
4.4 Summary 58
II. Theory and Methodology 61
5 Theoretical Approaches to Leadership 63
5.1 Introduction 63
5.2 Eldership in a Leadership Context 64
5.3 Leadership Models 66
5.4 Followership 69
5.5 Adaptive Leadership 71
5.6 Culturalist Leadership 72

5.7 Leadership as Mobilisation 73
5.8 Feminist Approaches to Leadership 73
5.9 Indigenous Australian Leadership and Indigenous Women 76
5.10 Informal and Accidental Leadership for Indigenous Women 79
5.11 Identity and Performativity 83
5.11.1 Identity Processes and Agency in Leadership 83
5.11.2 Representations of Indigenous Women and Impact on Leadership 90
5.11.3 News Framing in Representation 92
5.11.4 Discourse and Representation in Identity and Leadership 94
5.11.5 Performativity in Leadership Roles 96
5.12 Summary 98
6 Research Methodology 101
6.1 Introduction 101
6.1.1 Indigenist Research and Knowledges 102
6.1.2 Indigenist Research 108
6.1.3 Decolonising Methodologies 109
6.1.4 Examples of Indigenist Research Agenda 112
6.1.5 Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory 114
6.2 Methodology 116
6.2.1 Research Design 117
6.2.2 Interview Analysis 127
6.2.3 Thematic Analysis 130
6.3 Limitations of the Study 133
6.4 Summary 133
III. Findings and Conclusion 135
7 Identity and Agency 137
7.1 Introduction 138
7.2 Understanding Identity 141
7.2.1 Practices Around Identifying as Indigenous 143
7.2.2 Community Identity 145
7.3 Agency for Indigenous Women 159

7.3.1 Indigenous Women and Agency: “Someone’s got to step up” 163
7.3.2 Agentic Change and Advocacy 167
7.4 Summary 172
8 Governance 175
8.1 Introduction 176
8.2 Governance Structure and Development 177
8.3 Education 180
8.3.1 The Need for Stronger and More Effective Education 181
8.3.2 Institutional Leading, Governance and Education 183
8.4 Compliance, Resistance and their Interactions with Governance 191
8.5 Community Women and Governance Structures 195
8.5.1 High Profile Indigenous Women, Governance and Education 199
8.6 Institutional Domains, Compliance and Resistance 202
8.7 Future Directions 206
8.8 Summary 208
9 Followership 209
9.1 Introduction 210
9.2 Followership Identities and Relationships with Leaders 211
9.2.1 Shared Leadership and how it Relates to Followership 212
9.2.2 The Follower Identities 216
9.2.3 Dramaturgical Followers and Audience 217
9.2.4 Social Media Followers in a New Media Age 217
9.3 Listening and Influence 220
9.3.1 Inspiration and Aspirations 228
9.3.2 Role Modelling and Mentoring 232
9.4 Summary 235
10 Representation and Performativity 237
10.1 Introduction 238
10.2 Representation 239
10.2.1 What Representation Means for Indigenous People 239
10.2.2 Political Representation 242

10.2.3 Self-Representation 244
10.2.4 Indigenous Representation in Parliament 245
10.2.5 Media Influence on Black Female Representation 249
10.3 A Discourse on Performativity 251
10.3.1 Performativity in Leadership 254
10.3.2 Performativity in Followership and Adaptive Forms of Leading 257
10.4 'Skin in the game' and Symbolic Representation? 260
10.4.1 Black on Show: A Symbolic Representation Perspective 263
10.4.2 Community Performances and Representation of the Self 267
10.5 Summary 270
11 Challenges and Opportunities 273
11.1 Introduction 274
11.2 Challenges – Cultural, Gendered, and Generational 274
11.2.1 Racism and Discrimination 275
11.2.2 Navigating Culture and Dealing with Race 276
11.2.3 Cultural Impedance 278
11.2.4 Fluid and Static Cultural Constructions 279
11.2.5 Overburdening 280
11.2.6 White Feminism and Black Women's Lives 282
11.2.7 Institutional Barriers of Leadership 284
11.2.8 Cultural Gender Misconceptions 286
11.2.9 Female Lateral Violence: Black Women Against Each Other 288
11.2.10 The Negation of Women's Voices 291
11.2.11 The Double Burden of Gender and Aboriginality 291
11.2.12 Generational Dissonance 295
11.2.13 The Need for Appropriate Mentorship 297
11.3 Opportunities in Leadership 301
11.3.1 Opportunities of the Self 301
11.3.2 Affirmation and Self-Realisation 302
11.3.3 Opportunities Building Recognition of the Self 302
11.3.4 Opportunities in the Community 303

11.3.5 Harnessing Possibilities 303
11.3.6 Mentorship 304
11.3.7 Support and Reassurance 305
11.3.8 Cultivating Networks 306
11.3.9 Re-Framing Challenges to Opportunities 309
11.4 Summary 310
12 Conclusion 313
12.1 Discussion: Understanding, Representing and Conceptualising Indigenous Women's Leadership 313
12.1.1 Understanding Indigenous Women and Leadership 315
12.1.2 The Coolamon Representation of Indigenous Women's Leadership 317
12.1.3 Conceptualising Indigenous Women's Leadership 319
12.1.4 Unpacking the Graph – What Does Each Theme Mean? 321
12.1.5 A New Term for Indigenous Women Leaders 328
12.1.6 Truganini's Story 329
12.1.7 Tying the Strands Together 331
12.2 Summary 334
12.2.1 Theoretical and Policy Implications 339
12.2.2 Study Limitations 340
12.2.3 Areas for Future Research 340
IV. References 343
13 Bibliography 345

Table of Figures

Figure 1 Indigenous Life Expectancy Disparity (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014) 27

Figure 2 Indigenous Imprisonment Ratio compared to non-Indigenous (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012) 28

Figure 3 Aboriginal Managers and Professionals (New South Wales Government, 2011) 29

Figure 4 Indigenous Median Income Disparity (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) 31

Figure 5 Colonial Era Timelines 44

Figure 6 Impact of Colonisation 46

Figure 7 Leadership Models 68

Figure 8 Tuhiwai Smith's Research Agenda (Smith, 1999, p. 117) 113

Figure 9 Crazy Bull's Research Agenda (Crazy Bull, 1997) 114

Figure 10 Methodological positioning of frameworks used 116

Figure 11 Measuring Leadership for Indigenous Australians 129

Figure 12 Distillation of Themes for analysis 132

Figure 13 Challenges and Opportunities 275

Figure 14 (Hurst, K. 2017. Gulaman (Gathang/Kattang language), Gillawarra Arts) 317

Figure 15 Conceptualisations of Indigenous Women's Leadership 321

Figure 16 Tying the Strands Together 331

Abstract

Whilst Indigenous female leadership studies have been undertaken previously, they have most commonly been in specific areas of politics, education and health. Located predominantly within the discipline of leadership studies, the aim of this strategic research project is to investigate the under-researched field of leadership for Indigenous Australian women. The thesis aims to address the question: 'What does it mean to be an Indigenous woman leader today'? To achieve this aim, three spheres are identified in which Indigenous women exist and lead: in community, in public areas, and institutionally. The problem described by this study is the lack of public acknowledgement in Australia for the accomplishment of Indigenous women leaders in any of these three spheres. To address this problem, the research design adopts a qualitative inductive approach – further contextualised through an Indigenous construct – to capture qualitative information from 20 Indigenous women leaders living in Canberra, Sydney, Taree, and Melbourne. Yarning and Dadirri were used as the main research methods to enable the individual experiences of the participants to highlight an Indigenous women's standpoint. A key finding from analysis of qualitative knowledge was the difficulty that participants experience in naming themselves as a 'leader,' since the connotations of the word for Indigenous women have become intermingled with historical contexts of Colonisation and modern-day contexts of adhering to 'mainstream success'. In short, the term 'leader' is in itself perceived as a barrier to leadership.

This study makes two main contributions: (a) it reveals a range of new sites at which Indigenous women's leadership continues to emerge and expand across Australia; (b) it identifies the growing leadership capacity of both Indigenous women and men that is weakly acknowledged and hence poorly promoted beyond the Indigenous arena. The findings of this study will contribute to leadership literature by providing researchers with insights into best practice Indigenous leadership and provide a platform for future research. If we are to make headway

in creating lasting change for Indigenous Australia, then the representation of effective and informal leadership needs to be witnessed.

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This project would not have come to fruition without the assistance of the women participants who gave me their time and allowed me their stories, and for that reason I feel they are co-authors within this thesis. Far too often Indigenous peoples have had their stories used as fodder for projects done without permission, or with no real outcome. Therefore, I want to give special mention to the women who gave me their insights and shared rich knowledge that has been incorporated into this thesis. Their information is not just about the women's 'journeys'; the detail that they have shared with me speaks compellingly of years of amazing work in public office, in community, creating social and political change and moving the discourse in Australian society to more Indigenous-specific issues. Let us not underestimate this exchange and production of scholarship.

The people who throughout my undergraduate years assisted in getting me to this point, have also been invaluable in their conviction that I could continue to push myself and strive for better: Wendy Somerville, my dear friend and colleague who started University at the same time, also

as a mature age student. Having you as my 'person' throughout my academic career has been the greatest gift and your intellectual ponderings have assisted me greatly. Thank you for the coffee, the lunches and the conversations we should have recorded over the years. I will be forever grateful. My other Indigenous brothers and friends, Paul Collis and Wayne Appleby for their high intellect and support, I acknowledge you and thank you. To my Honours supervisor, Mary Walsh for the challenge you set me; without you I would not have secured the University Medal for my Honours thesis project, nor would I have even considered taking on post-graduate study.

I would also acknowledge those who won't be named, the adversaries who were blessings in disguise, for they helped catapult me towards this point, and it was their lack of support which only propelled me further towards achieving my goal and proving to myself that I could do this.

And finally, to my family – Mum Ruth, my late father Des, my brother Mike and two sisters Sharli and Sharyn, my niece Isobel and my nephews Joshua, Blake and Elias and my beloved daughter Niamh. You all have been my champions for so long and without you this would neither be possible nor worthwhile. Niamh, you are the light of my life and as a single parent I have watched you overcome adversity in so many ways, giving me the strength to overcome my challenges also. Thank you. To my partner Andrew – you came along at a time during the PhD when I was ready to accept love, friendship and understanding. Through your eyes I have been able to see things clearer and articulate my truth, but it is the solace I discovered in you that has been the greatest gift.

This research project contains the names of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islanders who may be deceased.

Prologue

I have always had strong Aboriginal women around me. Throughout my childhood, my mother was determined, loyal, feisty and loving, and my Aboriginal aunts were the same. My mother's story has had a great influence over mine. Having moved away from most of her siblings to start a family in Brisbane in the late sixties, my mother was at times disconnected from the rest of her family, and this was evident during her moments of sadness. I believe this began long ago for her though, as her family were often silent to the history that loomed around them. This has been something I have struggled with in connecting the dots to my Identity, and something that has encouraged me to write, ponder and research. So here begins my story.

My mother, Ruth Owna Yarnold was born on July 31st, 1948 in Taree, New South Wales. She is descended from Biripi country, connected to the Buggs and Bloomfields, with a Chinese connection added to the mix from Xiamen, formerly known as Amoy, China. One of nine children (eight of which survived and with one still born), her father Henry (known as Harry) worked as a fisherman and later, on building the Sydney Harbour bridge. Her mother, Ivy (nee Bloomfield) was a homemaker. When I have asked Ruth about her childhood, it has often been difficult to get information from her, and it has come from snippets I have had to piece together. My father's heritage goes back to Tipperary, County Cork, Ireland, where his grandfather was a Connaught ranger. The Irish connection in my life has also been strong, but I digress.

Ruth lived for the first seven years of her life in a house which had hessian bags and newspapers on the walls. Her mother Ivy would wash clothes on a pontoon and get fresh water from the waterhole to boil the sheets up. Her oldest sister Carmen had to look after her when she travelled into Taree, and she remembers a time when having chicken was a luxury but eating seafood was a daily part of her diet. Ruth describes this time as challenging, but happy.

Her father Harry couldn't read, and her mother would read the paper to him. Ruth knows, that regardless of his illiteracy, Harry was still smart enough to see that continuing to live near Taree was becoming dangerous due to the protection policies of the Stolen Generation. Children were being forcibly removed from their families and ultimately Harry decided to move them to the city. Ivy had to leave the rest of her family behind and eventually lost contact with them due to the dislocation.

Ruth can't remember school in Taree, and whether that suggests she didn't go or simply has no recollection is unknown. The earliest memory my mother has of schooling, is attending Waterloo Public School in Sydney. She felt like she was treated differently in school and was very quiet. She remembers one moment when she got the cane for making noise in the library when she wasn't there at the time and believed that the teacher just didn't like black people. Ruth doesn't remember any darker-skinned children at school and says that she was the darkest there.

My mother cannot remember any serious health issues as a child, but remembers her mother relying on Asian medicine to keep the family healthy due to a distrust of most doctors. As my Great Grandfather was Chinese, it seems that these beliefs were handed down through my family. Ruth recalls that there were moments growing up where everyone in the family were frightened; firstly, in Taree where there was a greater threat of removal, and later in Sydney due to being the only Aboriginal family within the area. Fear was a dull ache and constant reminder in their daily lives; not in an all-pervading manner but rather something expected for Aboriginal people as a result of the potential for forcible removal or application of unwanted government policies. Harry used to tell them to say they were either of Maori or Indian origin, and to not go outside without shoes on. This suggests he was in fear of people making assumptions as to the care of his children and informing the authorities to investigate their care.

Ruth's fondest memories of growing up were of outings with the family to Narrabeen Lake, hiring a little boat and taking picnics. Later, whilst the family were living in Moruya, New South Wales, Ruth thought about getting married and possibly becoming a school teacher. Although the Yarnold upbringing had times of struggle and fear, there were also great elements of laughter, togetherness and love.

It is a brief history I know, and one that I am still trying to harvest from my mother as she is getting older. At times, I feel quite the existential and cultural detective, of both her life and through that my own, as I gain snippets of information and decipher them through the lens I now contain. That lens is one of a complex identity, of overcoming difficulties and of the gift of education which I have acquired as a result of having been born in this age. I can look back and think of what my mother, her sisters, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had to do to achieve whilst dealing with overwhelming discrimination and 'othering' from the rest of the world.

There is the added importance in this story of the knowledge and education that is required for my connection to culture, and it is one I will forever be focused on. For both my mother and myself, the path back towards a stronger culture is like all of us in Indigenous Australia – both a shared, collective ideal and a specific and largely individual expedition full of philosophical terrain and re-questioning of place, context and time. It is one I gladly embarked on, and a destination I may never reach.

The women in my life feature heavily because the Aboriginal men in my life were mythical, unreal creatures I saw from afar. Sadly, all the men are gone now, suggesting deep seated issues that reverberate through our communities drawn from such things as removal, dislocation and trauma. Some of my uncles I have never met; one died in a car crash whilst been driven by another uncle, charged on alcohol. One went to jail for vehicular manslaughter and was

essentially ‘forgotten’ or only discussed in hushed tones or anecdotes of his life before the ‘event’ that led to his incarceration. One was the epitome of the lovable rogue – sweet natured, gentle and full of love. Uncle Kimbo was love personified and died early following years of alcohol abuse. I feel an immense sense of longing for my Aboriginal men, my uncles and grandfather that have left our family. The only thing that abates this feeling is knowing the Aboriginal women I have are remaining strong, loving and defiant. The poem I wrote when thinking about these men in my history also tells a story of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men.

All the men are gone

All the men are gone

They left, over the hill

Towards the river

Not gentle flowing glisten

But raging, tumult of tears.

All the men are gone

And when they were there

They were already ghosts

Dark reflections of strength

But faded in significance

All the men are gone

He who fought and he who ran to cells

They who drank to quell

Ringing bells of past pain.

All the men. They have gone.

(Ryan, 2016)

We have since found our Uncle, Glenn Yarnold, who was lost to us for decades and has come back to us. We had thought he had died, possibly in prison, and his ghost is real to the past stories we have not yet uncovered. We may never know the extent to which his experiences shaped him, and the sorrow at those losses is a shared experience of countless Indigenous Australians who have been removed, discarded by the system and then found again. All we can do is move forward with a degree of strength and belief that there is a healing life ahead of us.

The women are left, or they were left due to all these factors. The women had to carry on, often burdened by all these traumas and yet determined to live a life. These women – my mother Ruth and her sisters (Carmen, Maria and Paula) – are not famous, in high-level positions of influence, or recognised as having done amazing things. They have instead led their children and created meaningful lives despite having had limited educational or employment opportunities. They have taught lessons that reach far beyond that of theory or the attainment of a degree. Their lessons are those of love, loyalty, overcoming of obstacles and living a full life. This for me has been the very best teaching of all, as these lessons have driven my ways of being from long before I decided to undertake University studies. Their lessons made me claw in the dirt to prevent myself from entering a spiral of deficit that in many ways appeared destined for me. That determination to not willingly surrender into an abyss of unrealised potential catapulted

me towards where I am now and will continue to do so beyond this project. For that I am forever thankful.

Another part of my motivation came from a real turning point in my life before I came to University. I was working in out-of-home care, and inevitably taking on cases of Indigenous children coming in to foster care and working with Indigenous foster carers. I had a chronic illness with resulting complications and was quickly burning out. After another stint in hospital, I realised I had to change something. I became unemployed as a way of trying to get my health and life together, but there was more I needed to do to effect some change. I could see that I was ticking boxes off in the criteria that stood for Indigenous disadvantage in this country. Single parent – tick. Chronic health issues – tick. Unemployed – tick. Emerging from a domestically violent situation – tick. I was becoming the statistic so often heard when Indigenous people are discussed, and it was not my reality – I was not the crisis, and I didn't want my life to become the crisis. Plus, I had the access and opportunity to change it. I began a foundation course at The University of Canberra and for the first two months of that program, my early-teen daughter and I were homeless and couch surfing. But we survived, unlike many others undertaking this process. University became my full-time job and I worked hard, and my success or resolve has come from this desire to not only change the crisis for myself, but for anyone else who may feel their path is destined to tick those deficit boxes. As Aboriginal people, we are regularly told to stay in a particular lane in life; work only in Indigenous-specific areas or be happy with the status quo of your families' existence because we should just recognise how lucky we are to still be a culture. We have accepted this for too long, and from my personal experience I know that we have skills and abilities with which to create more change for our families into the future. This is essential to my path in writing academically, and in writing about Indigenous women and leadership.

The Indigenous Community

Often throughout my life, I have heard people discuss freely this notion of community. It can be specific or generalised, individual or collective, and has almost mythical qualities when connected to Aboriginal Australia. For my grandparents in Taree, community was there, but the fear of removal of their children was stronger than the bonds binding them to their ancestral community. So community for them became a somewhat fluid and complex dance, moving from place to place, living on the fringes and not being sure of whether one place will accept 'blow-ins' or not.

Later in my own life, community began to mean something much more to me. When I first attended University, I was not expecting to feel such a sense of belonging as I did. At first, I was fearful – I had very little experience with young Aboriginal men but for my cousins who I only saw intermittently, and as a young girl I had had a traumatic experience with an Aboriginal man – so this issue of overriding fear again. Fear of coming into my own cultural identity, fear of beginning at university, and fear of how my life would turn out was suffocating. In time I felt that easing, and it was the unknown that had been the biggest obstacle for me. This was the same with my academic work. Prior to coming to University, I had done many different jobs in the personal care industry such as health care and aged care. I did not believe I was smart, or resilient or capable. My parents had always told me I was intelligent, but there exists something in our culture that hinders our self-belief, or at least in my family there was. I often think that it was this lack of Indigenous community which encouraged that, and since joining a community of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people interested in higher education, I have felt my ability to believe in myself grow stronger, as is my attachment to the wider Indigenous community with which I belong to. I feel a connection to the Indigenous community in Canberra through work completed there also.

Indigenous Women in the Community

My mother and I are on a similar path, one that is about reconnection and reclamation of our culture and heritage. For her it is about the past, the fear, and a sense of coming home. For me it is about understanding of the self, in order to understand the place I hold in the world and how I am meant to be within it. This means everything to me, this is why I write. I have spent many years, long before academia, where I have questioned my Identity. Am I Aboriginal enough? Does my Irish and Chinese ancestry mean I am less Aboriginal, or some kind of hybrid that fits nowhere and therefore does not have the right to pontificate on Aboriginal issues? I have achieved many things through studying and writing about my culture – my Honours thesis on Indigenous political representation won me my University Medal in 2013 – yet through this there is always a sense of loss, a wondering if it is enough. ENOUGH is something I struggle with every day, and in connection to my Aboriginality, my hybridity and my ability to represent a degree of Aboriginal contemporary culture, this is a never-ending philosophical question. Would having a community, or being connected to my country change that?

I have also had the good fortune to witness various strong Aboriginal women who work in the 'community'. This type of community has a broad and variable definition: the community that is of place, the community that exists within an educational setting whereby the common thread which holds us is that we are Aboriginal from many different countries, communities which can be multifaceted and unique in their design and function. The community of Aboriginal women within academia, is overflowing with innovative ideas interspersed with traditional ways and knowledge.

These women invariably have one thing in common; an unwavering desire for change, and a passion to make things different from what they have seen or observed in the past. Some may

consider them hard, however that is born from continually fighting to create a positive impact on the lives of other Aboriginal Australians, and to Australian society itself.

This may sound a lofty ideal and could be viewed as far too idealistic for post-modern Australia. I ask, why should we not want this for the country we live in? For what our ancestors have had to endure and what they have overcome? For the non-Indigenous people who were not told of the hidden histories that appear to have been silenced or forgotten? Our early education has told us that the British came to this country in 1788, and we celebrate Australia day every year to commemorate this, completely disregarding the First Nations Peoples who inhabited here, the frontier wars fought to keep their way of life, and the resilience of Aboriginal people to survive? This is also why I have chosen to write about Aboriginal women – throughout history there have been strong women fighting to survive and many of them have gone unnoticed. And for every woman we know of who has led in ways that have been celebrated or discussed, there are more women who have contributed to this survival and have gone undocumented. They may have raised strong children to carry on further and create change, instilling in them confidence and determination. They may have mobilised a community to build on small differences to empower and drive their region to a stronger future or become a leader of a large organisation that delivers outcomes for the whole of Australia. All these women are leaders, they all manage change, inspire, give opportunity and assist in creating a different narrative for Indigenous Australia.

Background

My background in Indigenous leadership has not been something I had planned, and my motivation to research this issue was due in part to my own journey of discovery as to where leadership begins, how it is cultivated, and how Indigenous women such as myself fit in. I have worked in minor leadership roles within government, non-government out-of-home foster care, and mentoring of Indigenous people in a nationally run company. Connected with this, my academic life has been filled with opportunities where I have been told I was leading younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students towards understanding the value of further education and showing them the way. This statement often had me perplexed as I wasn't really sure what I was doing in this unofficial leadership capacity. Was it simply leading by example? Were those who followed me doing so because of how I carried myself, or how I was performing in this role? Did I see myself as assuming that role, or having any impact as a supposed leader? These questions therefore drove me to want to create an understanding of leadership for other Indigenous women as well as for myself, and the investigation which follows will endeavour to reflect that. My own personal and individual understanding of Identity and culture also drove my desire to write this research project.

A Final Dedication

To the Indigenous women I have had the pleasure of knowing throughout my life, to the ones I haven't met who are getting shit done without fanfare, acknowledgement, praise, without getting paid or noticed. To those who impact on people, on communities, who change conversations from sadness to hope, from statistics to relationships, to the strong, silent, loud and 'aggressive'. This is for you. This is not for men to debunk, to label, to categorise. This is for women.

This is for Nay, a beautiful young woman when I met her full of spark, culture, determination and promise. Her identity was strong, and she taught me many things. Her leaving was one of the biggest shocks of my life because I knew she would *work*. She would get the shit done when others would not, this I knew of her. Losing touch with her will be a large regret, reconnecting with her before she left was a touching reminder. It is also for Stephen, a young man I had mentored many years ago who did not make it through and left when he shouldn't due to failures in systems which should have protected him. It is in these stories that we recognise the women who work to change things, make things better and attempt to give others more of a chance. It is here that we see true leadership emerge.

Clarification of Terms

Throughout this research both terms ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Indigenous’ are used interchangeably when referring to Aboriginal people of Australia. Congruent with various texts that have been used when discussing these participants, the terms ‘Aboriginal ‘and ‘Indigenous’ have been predominantly used in both independent Indigenous texts and mainstream texts. The word Indigenous has different meaning in national and international contexts, in law, in politics and in our communities. The Social Justice Commissioners models of the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal’ state:

> An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives. (Australian Government, 1981)

I am also providing a brief list of key terms that are regularly stated within the thesis, to assist in the wide terminology that is included to cover the disciplines of leadership, feminist and Indigenous studies.

Key Terms

Individualist leadership - Individualist models of leadership are commonly founded upon the notion that to lead is to be in front, to guide, to influence and to persuade.

Culturalist leadership – Leadership practice within different cultural contexts, whereby local knowledge, community consensus and adhering to specific cultural ideas is important.

Makarrata - Yolngu term that has been used as one way to describe a treaty. It has many meanings, but in this instance, it represents a restoration of peace after a dispute.

Coolamon – A cultural tool historically used to carry foods and babies by many Indigenous women.

Gulaman – A Coolamon, as spoke in the Gathang/Kattang language, the language of the Woromi and Biripi people.

Crithi – A large Coolamon, as spoken in the Gathang/Kattang language.

Dadirri – A term to describe deep and active listening and non-intrusive observation, as spoken by the Ngangikurungkurr people of the Northern Territory.

Yarning – A term describing informal and relaxed discussion through which both parties journey together visiting places and topics of interest, building a relationship that is accountable to Indigenous people.

Imagery is also an important aspect of this thesis, as I use graphic images such as graphs and diagrams to explain terms and concepts used throughout the project as one way to visualise these ideas.