

‘People come and go, but this place doesn’t’:¹ Narrating the creation of the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place as cultural resurgence

Robert Hudson and Shannon Woodcock

Abstract: Koori Elders on Gunai Kurnai Country planned and fought for the creation of the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place alongside their fight for self-determined medical and social services and land rights. We, the cultural manager of the Keeping Place, Kurnai Monero Ngarigo man Rob Hudson, and white colonist historian Shannon Woodcock, narrate in this paper how the community fought to create the Keeping Place through using the methodology that Elders gave to us in the Keeping Place itself. Rob’s telling of history from the time of European invasion until the opening of the Keeping Place in 1994 manifests the Keeping Place’s purpose, welcoming all Koori and non-Indigenous people into relationship with unceded Country and how we share it, in our scholarship as well as in everyday life.

The Koori community on Gunai Kurnai Country opened the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place in Bairnsdale in 1994. We write this article to you from this place – 300 kilometres east of Wurundjeri Country, where the city of Melbourne is located. This paper shares how the founders of the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place understood the history of European invasion and then narrates their work to create the Keeping Place within this colonial history. This article is grounded in the fact that Gunai Kurnai people are *of* this Country, and that this Country relies on Gunai Kurnai care for all relationships. Gunai Kurnai people constitute an ‘ecology

1 Quote by Uncle Russell Mullett, interview with the authors, 6 July 2020.

of intimacy' with other beings, including waters, animals and spirits in this place,² and remain sovereign through this recent and violent colonial occupation. This paper is also about Gunai Kurnai cultural resurgence, because this concept recognises the physical, cultural and spiritual role the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place plays in Gunai Kurnai community and Country continuing to thrive. After an introductory overview of how we (Rob and Shannon) work together, the second part of the paper shares the Keeping Place's history of white invasion and Koori resistance. The third and final section narrates how Elders of the Koori community of Gunai Kurnai Country established the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place.

This paper shares the story of how '67 proud, strong and resilient women and men' formed the East Gippsland Aboriginal Women's Group in 1972, which incorporated as East Gippsland Aboriginal Medical Services Co-operative Limited in 1975 and then the Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative Limited (GEGAC), as it is known today, in 1978.³ The community planned a Keeping Place for decades before it opened in 1994, discussing how it would be the cultural heart of their community run organisations. I (Rob) listened to my mother and aunties discuss the future contents and purpose of a Keeping Place around kitchen tables and campfires throughout my youth. The Keeping Place today is what they intended: a cultural space for Gunai Kurnai community education and a strategic interface with the colonial world, a place to bring our Ancestors and objects home to. I (Rob) have been the cultural manager here at the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place since 2014, and Shannon has been learning in this place since 2017.

We tell the history of the Keeping Place's creation in this paper in the way the Keeping Place directs us to tell it; we follow the Elders' historical knowledge that structures the permanent exhibit, and we work in the space of the Keeping Place as it was designed for us to do. Rob is responsible for the narrative he shares here because of his role in work and community, and Shannon is responsible for writing up this narrative in the way required to communicate with Western historians. This paper does two things: it shares a history and also is an example of how the Keeping Place facilitates cultural resurgence. We tell you what happened, and in doing so we also demonstrate how the Keeping Place creates the conditions for ongoing cultural resurgence. We write this history directed by and grounded in community knowledge that lives in relationships between ourselves and radiates through the Koori community, and we write on Country, slowly, having waited for the right place and the right time: here, now.

2 Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 8.

3 Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd (GEGAC), 'About Us', accessed 5 February 2023, www.gegac.org.au/about-us/.

Part one

Who are we and how are we writing this history together?

We are Rob Hudson and Shannon Woodcock. I (Rob) am a Kurnai Monero Ngarigo man and the cultural manager of the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place. I was born in Bairnsdale and grew up travelling and working with my family and other families on Country. My family travelled up to Bega and back down here again with the bean-picking seasons. This was to make a living and be able to keep our families together. I am responsible for the Keeping Place; I work with community and teach non-Indigenous people who come here to learn. All the Ancestors are here; it's a very spiritual place. I culturally and physically look after the objects in storage, on display and when they are repatriated.

Shannon is a white colonist historian who moved to Gunai Kurnai Country in 2017. They are a specialist in racism and violence, and moved here to try to live in line with the fact that Gunai Kurnai people never ceded sovereignty. Along with other members of the Koori community, I (Rob) have directed Shannon's historical work since 2017. They don't do historical work or move through Country without direction, in their words, or without thinking about what they are doing here, in my (Rob's) words.

We first met in the community context of Clinton Pryor's walk through Bairnsdale and Lakes Entrance in NAIDOC week 2017,⁴ and we formally met at the Keeping Place a few weeks later. Since 2017, Shannon has joined many tours of the Keeping Place exhibition, we have recorded our discussions about the work and function of the Keeping Place, and we have worked out what we can research and write for the community together so that everyone might better understand this place. We have never spoken about our way of working as a particular academic methodology, but yarning initiated by Rob and facilitated by the Keeping Place is key to how our friendship and working relationship grew, and from this trust we have developed ways to collaborate on different kinds of research and writing activities.⁵

My (Rob) role at the Keeping Place includes directing Shannon's work, and the intent and purpose of the Keeping Place guides our collaboration and our methodologies in historical and community work. Our first formal project together was to gather all the archival sources about this Country as the State Library of Victoria's first

4 Clinton Pryor walked 5,800 km in 360 days from Perth to Canberra to meet with the prime minister and share a list of grievances from his community. For photos of Clinton Pryor when he was in Gunai Kurnai Country, see Clinton Pryor – The Spirit Walker @Clintonwalk, Twitter, accessed 5 February 2023, twitter.com/clintonwalk/status/882473895936143361.

5 We recognise many important aspects of yarning from our own everyday life, including the role of gender, in Bessarab and Ng'Andu, 'Yarning about Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research'. Atkinson, Baird and Adams' article 'Are You Really Using Yarning Research?' is important in highlighting the central role of relationality to yarning and thus to research.

regional fellows (2019–21). Our first co-authored book, entitled *Self-Determined First Nations Museums and Colonial Contestation: The Keeping Place* (2022), is about how I (Rob) work with people and with Ancestor objects in the Keeping Place, and the relationship of the local settler historical societies with the Keeping Place. This book is a genuinely co-authored work for museum studies and critical Indigenous studies specialists. It details the work that I (Rob) do at the Keeping Place, and the work I direct Shannon to do through the Keeping Place.

Presenting this knowledge to you here in printed English language is a poor substitute for a face-to-face conversation at the Keeping Place. If you were with us, we could have a yarn; I (Rob) could see how you listen, you could ask questions and our conversation would take its own direction. You not being here reminds us how academia is part of ongoing colonial occupation and exploitation. Sharing knowledge this way separates us into the people who give the information and invisible readers who take that information in ways that we hope will be responsible.

In colonial culture, white people write things down and then white historians take the written word as more truthful than what is verbally shared. Historians have often written about Koori people without asking us if the white sources they are reading tell the truth, and they fail to interrogate written settler sources by themselves, especially failing to pay attention to violent occupation as intentional. When colonisers take information about our families and Country without relationships with the people or place, their work is often based on the incorrect idea that Koori communities don't know our own history. This causes pain, because nothing could be further from the truth; Koori communities know Koori and settler history through a sharing of knowledge that is in all our relationships with each other and with place. Colonial academic culture takes writing itself as a sign of superior knowledge and often fails to consult with Indigenous knowledge holders. This has created many historical accounts that are incomplete and obscured by perpetrator solidarity and bias.

Koori community knowledge of Koori history is strong, and we both believe (from our respective positions as knowledge holder and as Western academic) that Koori ways of knowing are more trustworthy than history written about Koori people by people outside the community. This is because Koori people engage with historical knowledge of themselves through their relationships with and responsibilities to this knowledge. As Yamatji historian Crystal McKinnon writes:

many Indigenous people consciously occupy a space of accountability to their families and wider communities. Comprehending this relatedness and accountability is important to understanding and utilizing Indigenous research methodologies, and Indigenous knowledges themselves.⁶

6 McKinnon, 'Sitting and Listening', 495.

When incorrect information is produced in communal sharing, other people listen, correct or add to the existing knowledge.⁷ On the level of things that are events locatable in settler time,⁸ this brief history of the Keeping Place addresses multiple omissions in Gippsland's history, putting the strong knowledge of the Elders who made the Keeping Place on the English academic record. We also want to put the white settler community's use of physical violence in 1987 against the Koori community back on the white colonial historical record.

The Koori community on Gunai Kurnai Country conceived of the Keeping Place as a vital centre for Indigenous cultural resurgence. They didn't use these words, but we choose an Indigenous resurgence paradigm because, as Jeff Corntassel explains, this 'reframes decolonization by turning away from the state in order to focus more fully on the complex interrelationships between Indigenous nationhood, place-based relationships, and community-centred practices that reinvigorate everyday acts of renewal and regeneration'.⁹ This describes what the Elders were doing when they were 'discussing' or 'curating' the future Keeping Place in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson says 'resurgence must be concerned with the reattachment of our minds, bodies and spirits to the network of relationships and ethical practices that generates grounded normativity'.¹⁰ First Nations communities across so-called Australia have enacted cultural resurgence throughout the period of colonial occupation, in organised and informal ways. We use the term 'cultural resurgence' to reference and share with other First Nations scholars here how we theorise this academic intervention in 2022. We pay our respects to the many artistic, cultural, political and protest movements before and alongside that of the Koori community on Gunai Kurnai Country who described themselves in different ways in English while working for self-determination and sovereign community. Especially between the 1960s and the 1990s, First Nations communities across the continent fought as the Gunai Kurnai Country community did to set up self-determined medical and housing services as well as cultural centres.¹¹

Rob takes responsibility for aligning this work with the intentions of Elders for this Keeping Place, and for the community knowledge shared here being appropriate to the relationship we have with you, reader. Not all information is shareable, and knowledge cannot be safely shared without tending to relationships. Participants in the sharing of knowledge understand their reciprocal responsibilities through relating

7 This teaching as cited and articulated here belongs to Uncle Brian McKinnon, from his forthcoming PhD dissertation. Shannon thanks Uncle Brian for working to explain this and waiting for them to come to understand it.

8 Here we use Mark Rifkin's concept of settler time, 'an account of time already oriented around settlement'. Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 9.

9 Corntassel, 'Life beyond the State', 73.

10 Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 44.

11 The Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place was one of multiple Keeping Places established at the same time as self-determined community organisations across the continent. For richer contextualisation of the history of Keeping Places, see Pieris, *Indigenous Cultural Centers and Museums*; Faulkhead and Berg, *Power and the Passion*; Museums and Galleries NSW, *Keeping Places & Beyond*; National Gallery of Australia, *Keeping Culture*; Robins, *Paradox and Paradigms*. For insight into the continuity of cultural practice in the south-east, see Jones, 'Lighting the Fire'.

and relationships. As we have not been able to consult with all the families of all the people who were involved in the events detailed in this article, we do not include any photographs of or information about people already published in the colonial press.

My (Rob) knowledge as cultural manager of the Keeping Place comes through my family, who taught and teach me how to relate to community and Country. Just as Simpson explains in relation to Nishnaabeg society, in Gunai Kurnai culture, people were and are:

expected to figure out their gifts and their responsibilities through ceremony and reflection and self-actualisation, and that process was really the most important governing process on an individual level – more important than the gender you were born into.¹²

This is how Gunai Kurnai society still functions; people know their families, their talents, and their roles in relationships with other people and places. My role in the Keeping Place is to keep our Ancestors, Ancestor objects and knowledge safe, and to support Koori community members in their cultural journeys.

Our collaboration is ongoing, unattached to any 'projects' and unfinanced, and this work is part of Rob's job at the Keeping Place. Shannon does their part of the work without payment, because the knowledge and experience gained from working for community results in more opportunities for Shannon to find paid work. To write this article, built on a careful and solid working relationship, Rob wrote the history given by the Elders that led to the creation of the Keeping Place (part two), and we shared writing the history of the Elders' fight to get the physical Keeping Place established in the third part. We worked out the content of part two together, putting the archival evidence together with Rob's knowledge of what happened, and Shannon then wrote it up with references and white historical sources included. Rob reads the written drafts, we discuss them at length and Rob has the final call.

Rob speaks directly in part two, and Rob's voice and identification of the subject as 'our' community continues in part three. This reflects Rob's knowledge and focus as the provider of the content and structure of the article, and creates a space of cultural resurgence through our use of an Indigenous standpoint research position. The use of 'we' and 'our' for the Koori community is the authors' rhetorical choice to communicate that Rob is the primary author and the Koori community the primary actors, the written equivalent of Shannon sitting quietly in the room while community hold the floor. Shannon could not and would not be writing any of this without Rob's direction, content and knowledge. Rob could not and would not be writing this history for an academic journal without Shannon's academic knowledge and ease with writing, but this technical skill is secondary to the factual and conceptual content. We wrote this paper in Rob's office at the Keeping Place, and Uncle Russell Mullett participated in multiple recorded discussions, for which he is cited throughout. Ruth Walker also participated in very many of the tours, yarns and discussions that led to this article.

12 Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 4.

In the next section, Rob's use of the Elders' structure to provide an overview of the European occupation of Gunai Kurnai Country since 1839 highlights how the Keeping Place itself structures this history of the Keeping Place. The third part of the paper draws on primary sources and knowledge from Rob and Uncle Russell to place the fight for the Keeping Place within the dynamic changes in the Koori community from the 1950s until the 1990s.

Part two

Europeans invade and occupy Gunai Kurnai Country 1839–1957

We belong to one another, all part of the Gunai Kurnai Nation.¹³

Gunai and Kurnai people come from Borun and Tuk, who come from this Country. Borun and Tuk are our Ancestors, and many of the other stories we have that teach us how to be in Country and in relationship with each other are stories from a time when there was no need to divide animals from humans. In our stories there isn't a sense that words and spoken language are a superior way of communicating compared to so many other actions, either.¹⁴ The Gunai Kurnai are a nation comprised of the Brataualung, Brayakaulung, Brabralung, Krauatungalung and Tatungalung family clans, and our Country is our language area, from Wilsons Promontory in the west to the town of Orbost in the east and to just below Mount Hotham and Omeo in the mountains to the north.

Europeans violently invaded this Country to take the land. They used animals (sheep, cows) to occupy the land, change it and profit from it. The Keeping Place exhibition calls the first decade of European invasion the decade of death, because the white colonists worked together to massacre men, women and children just for being Gunai Kurnai people. Colonists shot as many of the animals that were already here as they could because they wanted all grass to be for their stock. White settlers abducted our children and perpetrated sexual violence against women. This all continues today, and it began from the first years that they arrived here.

Gunai Kurnai people fought back in many ways. They physically fought, rescuing women that white men like Ronald Macalister (1843, Port Albert) held captive and hurt. When the white men formed the first police forces specifically to remove us from our land, we learnt how to watch them and organised raids to demand the release of

13 These words, written by the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place founders, are at the start of the permanent exhibition.

14 Tuk and Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', 6.

our brothers and fathers held in the cells at Eagle Point and Maffra.¹⁵ We hid to save our lives, negotiated with diplomacy and used military strategy. Angus McMillan, and many other white men, kidnapped our young boys to use as translators and as free labour.

In my tours at the Keeping Place, I can only speak about my own family and what I know is true. Here, just as when you visit the exhibition, you will understand what I say in your own way. As Phillip Pepper says right at the start of his history book *The Kurnai of Gippsland*, (white) historians have written a lot about what happened here, but they have misrepresented the parts about how European people behaved towards Country and towards Aboriginal people.¹⁶ To use the exhibition's way of sharing the past does not make the information limited or out of date.¹⁷ The opposite is true. Our Elders spent a long time making sure that everyone was represented here and discussing how to present the truth, so significantly changing the structure and content of the exhibition would weaken its purpose.

My Elders learnt what happened in the same way they taught it to me. I was shown places on Country and learnt how to relate to those places through what has happened there, and what still happens there. This article provides the most basic overview. Sharing knowledge in this way, in community and on Country, means that 'history' as I tell you here is used in our everyday life, it isn't separate to how we live. We know that the colonists wrote down only a small part of what they did to our people and Country, and a smaller part again is in the archives.¹⁸ We know our history because our families experienced it. We have shared scientific, cultural and legal knowledge for more than 60,000 years, and we also share knowledge about colonisation.

By 1861, many more white people arrived and divided the land. The government let Rev. Bulmer establish the Lake Tyers mission. In 1863, Moravian missionary Rev. Hagenhauer established an Aboriginal mission called Ramahyuck.¹⁹ The missionaries wanted to protect Aboriginal people from white people, but they destroyed Aboriginal people in the same instance, because once you keep people locked up in one place and forbid them their culture that's what you're doing. On the missions you weren't allowed to do anything cultural, you had to learn Christianity instead of what the Elders did. That's how they took away our culture. Academics (like Howitt) and museums made their collections by taking our belongings and knowledge by force. Academics and museums also took animals, rocks and photographs from Country

15 The Border Police were the first colonial police force, who squatters called to Gippsland to help them remove Gunai Kurnai people from the land. Pepper, *The Kurnai of Gippsland*, 64–76.

16 Pepper, *The Kurnai of Gippsland*, xii.

17 'The desire for a "new beginning" is a common imperial tool that enables the institutionalization of totalitarian elements presented as constitutive of democratic regimes.' Azoulay, *Potential History*, 306.

18 Indeed, 'The role of institutions such as archives and museums in the "preservation" of the past is the effect of a vast enterprise of destruction conducted at the expense of and as a substitute for destroyed worlds.' And 'If what they preserve is extracted from living worlds, and if living worlds are producing objects whose destination is the museum and archive, their study cannot be confined to what is in them but should include the role they play in this enterprise of world destruction.' Azoulay, *Potential History*, 19–20.

19 McLisky, Russell and Boucher, 'Managing Mission Life'.

without permission. They treated our Ancestors' bodies, our living bodies, and spears and shields and bullroarers as if they were objects, as if they weren't important for our health and relationships with Country. We are still fighting to find everything in their warehouses and collections, and to get special items such as Tulaba's shield (now held by the National Museum of Australia) and the bullroarers (in Pitt Rivers Museum) returned.²⁰ We need these objects to continue important ceremonies and to understand our own culture better; the bullroarers, for example, 'dispel the myth of initiation ceremonies only being for men'.²¹

The missionaries wouldn't let us speak our language. It does shatter you, the way that white policy didn't allow us to do all the things that come around with our law. Thousands of years of our knowledge was in our language and ceremony, and that was taken. If you were speaking language, you were punished and taken away from your family. If you didn't learn language, you could still be taken away. That was in the mission times, for my mother and in the time that I was a kid as well, in the 1970s. It was a catch-22; whether you teach culture or you don't, either way your family was going to be smashed if they caught you.

Those missionaries and teachers on Lake Tyers mission bought up our land and made guest houses, then brought tourists to the mission. Then the mission managers let us revive our culture of weaving and boomerang making to sell them to tourists and bring money in for the mission. They stopped us really practising our culture, but money talks. If it wasn't for missions, Aboriginal people would've been wiped out, but they did a lot of damage as well, and still do today. A lot of our Elders speak about getting rations to survive.

The photos of people living in myah myahs²² up on the wall in the Keeping Place, that's what I grew up in too. When I was a little tacker growing up, moving up and down the coast, up to about 1985, when I was about 10 years old, we lived in the bark huts on the riverbanks. Our floor was very polished dirt. There were probably 100 of us travelling, and a lot of us kids were hidden at different times because the policy was to take kids from families. My mum is Black. My dad is white. And at that time, in the 1970s, they were still taking children. You know about the Stolen Generations?

In 1886, the government made the orders to remove some people from the missions with the 'Half Caste Act'.²³ They were forced away from their families. A lot of the Elders today still speak about that. A lot of them don't speak either, because they don't want to go back into the pain of the past. Our people weren't allowed to work or have homes or medical treatment or education like white people were – and this was right up until the 1970s! The people forced off the missions couldn't see their families

20 For the Pitt Rivers Museum's restitution processes, see Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*. For the importance of the bullroarer, see Gibson and Mullett, 'The Last Jeraeil of Gippsland'.

21 Uncle Russell Mullett, interview with the authors, 6 July 2020. Also see Hudson and Woodcock, *Self-Determined First Nations Museums*, 58 and 68.

22 This is my (Rob's) spelling to reflect the way I was raised to say myah myah.

23 *Aborigines Protection Act 1886* (Vic.).

unless they snuck in at night, and people inside the mission couldn't leave, or work, or see a doctor or see their own children who had been taken away without written permission from the Aborigines Protection Board.

In the Aboriginal community everyone knows about this. It's really hard for me to know what to tell you about it because we were brought up knowing this. It's part of our family stories of who we are. These are the life stories of people I work with, our families, and people who come into the Keeping Place. White people too have come in here with stories of their families adopting Aboriginal kids who were stolen, and they realise now and share that pain with their families, and also the people they work with, their work families. This pain is through both of our communities.²⁴

Part three

Our fight for self-determination 1957–94

In the 1950s, state and federal government policies questioned whether they could continue to control Aboriginal people on missions in the same way, because we clearly weren't going to disappear as they expected. Their assimilation policies were about stopping us living together on the outskirts of towns or on the mission, they wanted to separate and control our families by moving us into housing in different places.²⁵ This was also a time when the government removed black children to raise them in white homes and they policed the people living on Lake Tyers as well.²⁶ We all knew where everyone was, and we lived in multigenerational families and were very familiar with the government controlling our lives, so the adults began to organise. As Chicka Dixon from Wallaga Lake said, 'this was genocide, but white people called it assimilation'.²⁷

In 1955 the premier instructed Charles McLean to review the *Aborigines Act 1928*, which still gave the Board for the Protection of Aborigines control over us. McLean visited communities across Victoria and depicted our way of living as a problem. It was a problem that we were poor, but he saw it as reflecting our culture rather than how society forced us to live. McLean visited Lake Tyers mission, and historian Corinne Manning points out that even though Lake Tyers residents had complained about the awful conditions they were forced to live under there since the 1940s, McLean saw it as simply more profitable for the government to sell the land and move the people elsewhere.²⁸ In 1956, Laurie Moffatt, who lived at Lake Tyers, told the press that

24 For a longer tour of the Keeping Place, see Hudson and Woodcock, *Self-Determined First Nations Museums*, 27–44. To be clear, this telling of the history through the exhibition links with the narrative in part three through detailing the affective and embodied work of the Elders alongside their ways of remembering and what they choose to remind us of as our shared past.

25 Healy, 'Aboriginal Mobility'.

26 Laurie Moffatt, 'Lake Tyers', September 1961, MS MC 8, DR 5, State Library of Victoria.

27 Tatz, *Black Viewpoints*, 45.

28 Manning, 'The McLean Report', 171.

residents wanted to live on and manage the reserve themselves including farming the land.²⁹ Despite the requests of Koori people at Lake Tyers, McLean recommended closing and selling Lake Tyers Reserve.³⁰ McLean's report resulted in the *Aborigines Act 1957* and replaced the Board for the Protection of Aborigines with the Aborigines Welfare Board, which ran Aboriginal affairs until 1967.

Koori communities organised and protested from 1957 onwards, working with white people who supported Aboriginal self-determination at the Council for Aboriginal Rights, and drawing on strategies of public protest.³¹ As with today, we fought on many fronts: to save Lake Tyers mission, to support the campaign for the referendum, and to demand self-determined housing, medical, educational and cultural organisations. Gunai Kurnai people, and Koori people who grew up on and lived on Gunai Kurnai Country, focused on the fight here, but we were always learning from and travelling to support battles being fought by other communities, especially the Koori movements in Melbourne and Sydney.

In 1957, Doug Nicholls, Doris Blackburn, Stan Davey and Gordon Bryant formed the Aborigines Advancement League (AAL),³² and in 1958 Nicholls was the Victorian representative to the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA). FCAA, made up of white people and First Nations people, decided to push for a national referendum to amend the Australian Constitution. This would enable the federal government to legislate for Aboriginal people as a group rather than leaving 'Aboriginal affairs' to the state governments. Between 1963 and 1970, FCAATSI (Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders from 1964) held annual conferences in Canberra, and campaigned for equal wages, for what became the 1967 referendum to change the Australian Constitution, and for land rights. Hundreds of grassroots organisers attended these conferences, and people shared information and knowledge about each other's problems and solutions.

Pastor Doug Nicholls and Gladys Nicholls visited rural and urban communities. Uncle Russell Mullett remembers them visiting his community at Jackson's Track. After the government said it would close Lake Tyers (in 1962), Doug Nicholls marched with representatives from Lake Tyers in Melbourne in 1963. He was vital to that campaign because he brought together Koori people and non-Indigenous people who fought with us from all over Victoria. He understood how the fights for land rights and health care and our rights were linked. In 1965, the Victorian Aborigines Welfare Board decided to lease land in Morwell and force Aboriginal people living at Lake Tyers to move to a 'transit village' there.³³ Doug Nicholls and the Aborigines

29 *Melbourne Sun* in Rowse, 'Contesting Assimilation', x.

30 McLean, 'Report upon the Operation of the Aborigines Act 1928 and the Regulations and Orders Made Thereunder'.

31 Taffe, 'Fighting for Lake Tyers'.

32 Broome, *Fighting Hard*.

33 Marsden, "'What's This about a New Mission?'" , 95.

Advancement League fought against this as a ‘continuation of the Government’s policy of arbitrarily acquiring land and placing Aboriginal families there in areas which are alien to them’.³⁴

After a lot of campaigning and discussions, in May 1965 Lake Tyers became a ‘Permanent Reserve’³⁵ and in 1971, under the *Aboriginal Land Act 1970*, the government gave unconditional title deeds to families residing on Lake Tyers Reserve.³⁶ Charlie Carter became the first chairman of Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust, and he gave a powerful speech when he accepted the deeds (Figure 1). He said, ‘this land is our land, our land for Aboriginals’, which is the truth.³⁷



Figure 1: Charlie Carter standing at a podium and accepting the deeds to Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust in 1971. Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls is seated behind Charlie Carter in the far left of the frame.

Source: Audio Visual Archive, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra. Online at National Museum Australia, indigenoustrights.net.au/land_rights/lake_tyers,_1962-70.

³⁴ Marsden, “‘What’s This about a New Mission?’”, 95.

³⁵ Anonymous 1985, 69–85, cited in Rowse, ‘Contesting Assimilation’; Broome, *Fighting Hard*, 99–107. Rowse, *Indigenous and Other Australians*, 325–28.

³⁶ See Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1971, 3.

³⁷ Charlie Carter, at 2:30 in video clip entitled ‘A Brief History of the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Community’, uploaded to www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1658871070899933, produced by ABC, www.abc.net.au/missionvoices/lake_tyers, site discontinued. Throughout this period, white people wrote letters to the press about whether they supported Aboriginal people being given [back their] land. Many colonists were against land being handed back because they didn’t want Aboriginal people to have the right to sell the land if they decided to. For one example, see the editorial ‘A Calculated Gamble’, *Age* (Melbourne), 26 July 1971.

A lot happened between 1965 and 1971 when the deeds were handed back. People saw the news footage from the 1965 Freedom Rides, and talked about protest methods for civil rights, especially in rural communities, at the FCAATSI conference. Racism in everyday life on occupied Gunai Kurnai Country was relentless and violent. Racist violence was also gendered, and Koori men faced particular violence in their everyday lives while trying to earn a living. Uncle Russell Mullett told us that:

the movement was about women and welfare support. Not only here, it was all over the state. That's another untold history. If you look at the history of co-ops and the women who formed them. Those women knew about the law because they kicked around, I guess. It's like Pastor Doug Nicholls, his wife Gladys Nicholls was really strong, and you had these strong women moving around the place talking. Even on a national level, women like Faith Bandler were strong women around all through the 1960s period leading up to the referendum. Look at how many women were involved in that! At the end of the day, women put in the time and had the impetus to do it whereas the men in the community had almost like a learned helplessness. For those that were living in the bush, even in our place down there at Jackson's Track, the men went there because they could work in the bush, away from the government.³⁸

In 1968, after the referendum, a new federal Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs replaced the Aborigines Welfare Board, and then the Victorian Office of the newly established Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs was opened. Activism for Lake Tyers continued, with ongoing and increasing visits from allied groups of students and workers on building projects, 'adventure camps' and training in first aid, as just some examples gathered from news reports. The Black Panther Party also had connections in the Gunai Kurnai community and on Lake Tyers, and Roosevelt Brown visited in 1971.³⁹ As Paul Coe said in 1974:

the whole policy of Black Power in Australia is a policy of self-assertion, of self-identity ... which is trying to encourage black culture – the re-learning, the re-instating of black culture wherever it is possible.⁴⁰

A fight for health and housing

In 1972, 20 Aunties formed an organisation called the East Gippsland Aboriginal Women's Group and marched from Lake Tyers to Bairnsdale to draw attention to the complete lack of health services for Aboriginal people on our Country.⁴¹ We couldn't get basic health services. Some of those women, like Nessie Skuta and Linda Twite, had experience with Aboriginal politics, but all of them knew how hard it was to

38 Uncle Russell Mullett, interview, 6 July 2020.

39 'Black Panther "at Lake Tyers"', *Sun News-Pictorial*, 13 January 1972.

40 Tatz, *Black Viewpoints*, 104.

41 'The Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs records that in the prior year, in Victoria, 'at least three new Aboriginal groups have emerged', *Annual Report*, 1971, 2.

get medical help for our people. The first medical centre was in a small building on Frances Street in Bairnsdale. The women rented other buildings throughout Bairnsdale for housing and services.

In 1975, the Women's Group incorporated as East Gippsland Aboriginal Medical Services Co-operative Limited, which became Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative Limited (GEGAC) in 1978. The federal *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976* was useful for the community to form GEGAC.⁴² Communities across urban and regional locations formed self-determined medical centres, legal services, housing services and cultural centres at this time. As Johanna Perheentupa details in her book *Redfern: Aboriginal Activism in the 1970s*, community organisation of health, legal and social welfare services was grounded in specific places and communities, such as in the urban centres of Redfern and Fitzroy, and communities influenced each other by sharing experience and knowledge.⁴³ GEGAC writes on their website that they:

would not exist if not for the founding members who showed courage and leadership to stand up and act for all Aboriginal people in Gippsland and East Gippsland. Fighting for equality, recognition and respect to improve the quality of life for all Aboriginal people.⁴⁴

Cultural heritage as community wellbeing

Alongside the creation of self-determined organisations, there was a strong Koori movement for community control of stolen Ancestors, Ancestor objects and cultural heritage. From invasion, colonists stole the bodies of Ancestors and sacred objects, and these items still constitute major collections at the University of Melbourne, Victoria Museum and National Gallery of Victoria.⁴⁵ White people used stolen artefacts and bodies of First Nations people to discursively construct First Nations people on this continent as 'the "ground zero" of evolutionary development'.⁴⁶ Smith emphasises that the changes to heritage control after 1980 in Victoria were influenced by the civil rights and land rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and that Koori people called:

the ethics of the collection practices of museums and archaeologists ... into question. Land was re-defined in public discourse as both material and cultural by these claims, as were the Aboriginal 'artefacts' held in museums and by university-based archaeologists.⁴⁷

42 Uncle Russell Mullett, interview, 6 July 2020.

43 Perheentupa, *Redfern*.

44 GEGAC, 'About Us'.

45 See Azoulay, *Potential History*; Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*.

46 Turnbull, 'Australian Museums'; Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*.

47 Smith, 'A History of Aboriginal Heritage Legislation', 110.

Uncle Russell Mullett told us about his work as an inspector for the *Archaeological and Aboriginal Relics Preservation Act 1972* in the 1980s. Along with other heritage workers such as Jim Berg in Melbourne, who founded the Koori Heritage Trust in 1985, Uncle Russell confronted and inspected the work and collections of white archaeologists from universities who continued to take students for 'digs' on Ancestor burial sites without the required permits.⁴⁸ Uncle Russell's presence as an inspector prevented their digs, and inspectors were also called by private collectors to register what they held with the Victoria Archaeological Survey, as per the legislation. Koori inspectors developed knowledge and relationships vital for the future repatriation of stolen objects to Keeping Places on many Countries, and Uncle Russell, now at GLaWAC, works closely with the Keeping Place.⁴⁹ In the early years of the Keeping Place, the Gunai Kurnai community welcomed home a canoe made in 1900, which had been kept in a shed, and shields and carvings that were held in the Victoria Museum.

These items needed a Keeping Place to hold them in their relationship with Country. The cultural manager is always someone who is part of this community, and who has knowledge responsibilities. A Keeping Place is the primary safe place to return an object to because the required community members for that particular object are brought together to welcome it home. Speaking from our own experiences, myself (Rob) and Uncle Russell let the objects guide us, tell us how they need to be treated.⁵⁰ We contact the families connected with these objects or Ancestors, and we find the correct place for the returned item, be that returning it to Country, or to the family or keeping it here at the Keeping Place.

The fight for land rights and cultural heritage are only separate things in colonial ways of thinking and law. It is all part of the same fight if you want protect land from destruction, to protect people and animals from dispossession and to protect cultural heritage. When community stood up and said this, colonial laws had to change across many areas. When Aunt Sandra Onus and Aunt Christine Frankland/Saunders won *Onus v. Alcoa of Australia Ltd* in 1981, for example,⁵¹ the Federal Court recognised that Gunditjmara people had a 'special interest' with Country, and that white archaeologists were not competent to do a scientific assessment of the site.⁵² Koori demands led to two landmark pieces of federal legislation, the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984* and *Aboriginal Land (Lake Condah and Framlingham Forest) Act 1987*.⁵³ Aunt Sandra Onus and Marjorie Thorpe led

48 See Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council, 'Historical Overview', reviewed 16 March 2020, accessed 5 February 2023, www.aboriginalheritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/historical-overview; Faulkhead and Berg, *Power and the Passion*.

49 Hudson and Woodcock, *Self-Determined First Nations Museums* details the extent of cultural, spiritual and technical work required at the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place in the process of repatriation.

50 See Chapter 3 'Receiving and Working with Ancestor Objects' in Hudson and Woodcock, *Self-Determined First Nations Museums*, 65–84.

51 Weir, *The Gunditjmara Land Justice Story*.

52 Smith, 'A History of Aboriginal Heritage Legislation', 113.

53 Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation website, accessed 5 February 2023, www.gunditjmirring.com/cultural-heritage.

the fight for Djab Wurrung Country trees (2018–22), 40 years after *Onus v. Alcoa*. This highlights the ongoing colonial refusal to protect vital cultural heritage, and the incredible energy and fight required from Elders.

The right place for the Keeping Place

In 1983, the Department of Education put the old Bairnsdale High School block up for sale. This place is high, overlooking the wetlands and lakes from the southern edge of the town of Bairnsdale. This was a meeting place for Gunai Kurnai people long before invasion. The block included the old school buildings and, most importantly, the outdoor open area bordered by large eucalyptus trees, including one that had made a canoe with community and grown that memory in its bark. Because of the significance of this site to the Koori community, GEGAC negotiated with the Department of Education from 1983 until 1987 to buy the land, but the department refused to sell GEGAC the entire block.

There was a huge ceremony on the land in February 1987 when GEGAC bought the section of the block that the government would allow them to purchase. The *Bairnsdale Advertiser* printed a photo of ‘Mrs Rachael Mullett, Chairman of GEGAC and Mrs Nessie Skuta OAM former member of the National Aboriginal Conference’ holding the deed.⁵⁴ The audience of at least 100 people sat in rows of plastic chairs. GEGAC had published detailed information about what the planned co-op centre would provide in the *Bairnsdale Advertiser* the week before.⁵⁵ The article explained that the new ‘Aboriginal Centre’ would include social services, a dining room and drop-in centre, administration, health services, a hall for the National Aboriginal Conference and would ‘take into account foreseeable expansion, as required to meet increases in social, educational and cultural programs’. Further, the article detailed:

the Keeping Place will form the basis of the exhibition areas. The co-op intends to reassemble artifacts here which are now located in other museums and or privately owned. In time the material to be displayed, together with the cultural knowledge of the community and archival information to be collected in the library will develop into a detailed account of regional aboriginal history and culture. A workshop/laboratory (for the maintenance of the artifact collection) and artifacts shop will adjoin the Keeping Place Library resource centre to compliment those items on display in the Keeping Place proper. Materials to be collected will include any relevant literature relating to local aboriginal culture, family histories, mission and archive reports, newspapers, government reports and historic photographs. It would also collect oral history as available. Craft workshops – the workshops will again fulfil an educational role, while also generating income for the co-op through the manufacture of trad aboriginal

⁵⁴ *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 20 February 1987, 1.

⁵⁵ *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 13 February 1987, 1, 8.

artifacts. Craftsmen with the skill and knowledge necessary for manufacturing aboriginal artifacts still live in the area and will be engaged to train others in traditional manufacturing techniques. Thus at least some section of local aboriginal culture would be ensured of continuing and not be lost forever. Artifacts to be produced will include weapons, tools, paintings and carvings. Groups of school children and other visitors will also be encouraged to inspect the artifacts being made.⁵⁶

White residents of Bairnsdale, especially those in Rupert Street bordering the site, protested against GEGAC's building plan at public meetings and in letters to the council and the *Bairnsdale Advertiser*. These colonists argued that proximity to GEGAC would lower their property values and negatively impact their street parking. GEGAC organised an open forum where people could see the architectural plans and ask questions. Local residents were familiar with the beautiful old scar tree on the Rupert Street side of the block, and it was common knowledge that those trees were old Gunai Kurnai meeting places. The plans were shared with the public on Monday 24 March 1987, and on Thursday night 27 March 1987 someone came and burnt down those trees. Someone doused the trees in petrol, watched them burn and no-one called the fire brigade.

The community, through GEGAC, published a powerful letter in response to the attack in the local newspaper. The Elders called the burning of the scar tree a:

contemptible action and one which was not only a direct and vicious attack on Aboriginal people, but one of destruction of historical heritage ... It is a naïve notion that the removal of the tree would remove the significance Aborigines attach to the land it stood on. An action based upon such a notion, however, is quite in keeping with the way in which Aborigines have been treated in the past by the wider community. Destruction of the tree does not remove its significance. The charred remains of the tree will serve as a monument to the continued struggle of Aborigines towards self-determination. This action only makes the Aboriginal people more determined to achieve their ideals. The proposed Cultural Centre to be built on the site will be of benefit to the whole community. It will not only serve as a cultural focus for Aborigines but will also symbolise the invitation of friendship and acceptance that Aborigines extend to others. It is deplorable that those who must have seen destruction occurring on this site did not come forward to save the tree that was being destroyed.⁵⁷

56 *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 13 February 1987, 8.

57 *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 30 March 1987, 3.

THE BAIRNSDALE ADVERTISER

Canoe tree destroyed by fire

Police at Bairnsdale are making investigations following a fire early on Friday morning, which destroyed a canoe tree on the site of the proposed Aboriginal Community Cultural and Recreational Centre.

The tree had been burning for some time before the fire was reported, and it has been destroyed, with only the stump remaining in the ground, and the rest of the tree lying where it fell.

It had been intended that the tree would be preserved in the development of the site, latest plans for the project having been presented to Bairnsdale Town Council on Monday night last.

STATEMENT BY CO-OPERATIVE.
On Friday afternoon, the board of directors of the Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal

Co-Operative Limited issued a statement condemning the "senseless destruction" of the tree, which they said was registered as a relic about 25 years ago.

They said the burning of the tree was a "contemptible action and one which was not only an action which was a direct and vicious attack upon aboriginal people, but one of destruction of historical heritage."

The statement continued:

"The aboriginal community of Bairnsdale has recently been met with protest, against the proposed construction of a Cultural Centre, by a small group of local residents and a prominent local politician."

"The high profile and emotional media coverage of this issue has certainly contributed towards this act of destruction."

"The aboriginal community has continued to adopt a passive responsible and productive attitude towards negotiations with the protesters and if the protest had not been so public, the tree would be still there."

"It is a naive notion that the removal of the tree would remove the significance aborigines attach to the land it stood on."

"An action based upon such a notion however, is quite in keeping with the way in which aborigines

have been treated, in the past, by the wider community."

"Destruction of the tree does not remove its significance."

"The charred remains of the tree will serve as a monument to the continued struggle of aborigines towards self-determination."

"This action only makes the aboriginal people more determined to achieve their ideals."

"The proposed Cultural Centre to be built on the site will be of benefit to the whole community."

"It will not only serve as a cultural focus for aborigines, but will also symbolise the invitation of friendship and acceptance that aborigines extend to others."

"It is deplorable that those who must have seen destruction occurring on this site did not come forward to save the tree that was being destroyed."

"The tree carried the same, if not more significance to aborigines as, for example, historic buildings do for many in the wider community. It served as a part of the memory of ancestors and of their achievements and life-style."

"The Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative is seeking advice from the Crown Solicitor as to

what further action is to be taken.

COMMENT BY MINISTER

The Victorian Minister responsible for Aboriginal Affairs Mr Jim Kennan said on Friday "I am angered and saddened by the news that the tree has been destroyed."

"I am sure that the overwhelming percentage of the Bairnsdale community will be disgusted by this senseless act of destruction."

"I am sure that, together with the Bairnsdale Council, most residents will want to ensure that the Bairnsdale aboriginal community's plans to develop the former High School site for the benefit of the whole community will not be jeopardised by this act of vandalism."

CORRESPONDENCE

Problems at Paynesville

Sir, — It was lovely to see Paynesville get a bit of a clean up in places that will be in view during the Governor's visit.

A shame though, that the Governor won't want to swim inside the yellow markers, where rocks are 18 inches high covered by weed. Then along in the children's sand pit, there are mounds of gravel just where they were emptied some time ago, covered in grass.

If anyone is going to take their grandchildren or children to play there, I suggest they leave the plastic bucket and spade home and take a pick and crowbar, as for sure that's what they will need.

This is a lovely tourist area but not if you have small children.

A. Stanton,
Main Road,
Paynesville.

Wy Yung site to be sold

Sir, — The residents of Bairnsdale, and more especially those residing in the Wy Yung - Ellaswood area, may be interested to know that since 1984 the Wy Yung Community Hall Committee has been en-



Remains of the canoe tree on the former Bairnsdale High School site, after it was destroyed by fire early on Friday morning (see story).

Figure 2: Image of the canoe tree destroyed by arson in *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, 30 March 1987, 3.

Source: Original photograph by Lisa Roberts, 2022.



Figure 3: The scar tree in 2022.

Source: Original photographs by Lisa Roberts, 2022.

This letter guides me in how I respond to people in the Keeping Place as well. The community spoke to the heart of the matter, saying that physically destroying a place on the land does not take it away from us. Our relationship with Country is stronger than owning something or seeing something. Those trees are still over there, you can sit with them, between the medical centre and the Keeping Place.

When the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place was opened in 1994 there was a huge celebration:

Back then the very existence of this place was very radical. Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (AAV) funded the building of the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place, they supported bricks and mortar projects at that time, but the Keeping Place has remained independent within GEGAC.⁵⁸

A lot of our mobs were empowered by this place, there were mobs from western districts right up to Sydney way come down to celebrate the Keeping Place being opened. GEGAC being opened as a massive organisation, it was huge. Still today different blackfellas and tourists come through, and they're gobsmacked by how it is presented. I say this is how it was created; I haven't changed anything and people tell me that the Old People have done it really well. 'People come and go, but this place doesn't', as Uncle Russell says.⁵⁹ I love what the Elders wrote here on the sign as the end of the exhibition:

⁵⁸ Uncle Russell Mullett, interview, 6 July 2020.

⁵⁹ Uncle Russell Mullett, interview, 6 July 2020.

Time now to stand up and be counted and be proud. It's not like the mission days, and those early days, when all those things were taken off us and you weren't allowed to speak your language. Yeah, it's happening.

That's a really powerful statement. That's a statement for the Keeping Place being opened: they could talk, they could be proud. We keep here everything that was taken away from them. It's all coming back.



Figure 4: The Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place, a two-storey building surrounded by a landscape of eucalyptus trees and lomandra. The long body of a felled scar tree, placed on a stand and covered with a roof, runs along the left side of the paved entry to the building.

Source: Original photograph by Lisa Roberts, 2022.

Conclusion

The Gunai Kurnai community planned and fought for the Keeping Place for decades. The Elders still show us how to share the truth about what happened here through the permanent exhibition. The Keeping Place, and this paper itself, was made and is being made in its own time, on Country, through the love and energy of community discussion and deep consideration. The Elders included everyone's stories without speaking for people, so that, as Uncle Russell says, the cultural manager may change, people may come and go, but the Keeping Place continues to do the work it was intended to.

We know that the history we have written here is true because community holds that knowledge. We, the Koori community, remember all these things in our everyday lives, and our remembering enables us to care for all the people and beings and places, including colonists, who live with us on Gunai Kurnai Country. We are responsible for everybody here. The Keeping Place was made so that both Koori people and non-Indigenous people could come here to meet with us and with the Ancestor objects and spirits, and this is the approach we have taken in writing this academic history as well. We invite you to consider how our Elders understood cultural health as vital alongside self-determined medical and social organisations and land rights.

Our work here writing this short history extends the work Rob does at the Keeping Place through being 'concerned with the reattachment of our minds, bodies and spirits to the network of relationships and ethical practices' in what we call cultural resurgence.⁶⁰ To share the history of this specific place, we turned to the knowledge the Elders put in the Keeping Place's permanent exhibition and used the space the Elders enabled for our (Rob and Shannon) collaboration. The Elders' creation of the Keeping Place in the face of racist violence is the result of many acts of cultural resurgence intended to facilitate our ongoing expansion of cultural practice and community strength. Writing this article in relation with the Elders' historical knowledge is also an act of cultural resurgence.

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⁶⁰ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 44.

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This text is taken from *Aboriginal History*, Volume 46, 2022, edited by
Crystal McKinnon and Ben Silverstein, published 2023 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/AH.46.2022.03