



**KOORIE**

HERITAGE TRUST INC

GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

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Within the law.

A mother's grief: an emotion I am experiencing for the first time ...

Aboriginal women. We are entwined by love, birth, patterns of life, survival and trauma. Our motherhoods are bound together, especially when our spirits become fragmented.

I am here because of my mother, Kate and the stories she has lived. We are here because of her mother, Norma, and all the decisions she made to survive assimilation policies and the trauma they invoke. Norma is here because of Vera and Caroline, and so on and so on ... My motherhood is bound to theirs, my sisters, my Aunties.

You might call me crazy but the description of Country by Wurundjeri scholar and language expert, Mandy Nicholson, is exactly how I would describe me becoming a mother and motherhood: 'multifaceted, it includes the physical, non-physical, linguistic spiritual and emotional'<sup>1</sup>.

At the moment I feel ... peculiar. Numb...

Indigenous history is built on sovereignty, invasion and a long and continued cycle of institutionalised erasure, brutality, and the yawning development gap between Indigenous people and other Australians. Australian law permits these cycles to continue. This is our past and present despite Australia recognising the rights of Aboriginal people in 1967.

In times of great crisis, women come together ...

When Rio Tinto decided to destroy the Juukan Gorge caves at the beginning of Reconciliation Week (the theme of which was *In This Together*), the irony was not lost on anyone. Rio Tinto acted within the law. Despite protests from the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura peoples, the company received government approval to proceed.



<sup>1</sup> Nicholson, Mandy, and David Jones. 'Urban Aboriginal identity: "I can't see the durt (stars) in the city"'. In *UHPH 2018: Remaking Cities: Proceedings of the 14th Australasian Urban History Planning History Conference*, pp. 378-387. RMIT Centre for Urban Research, 2018.



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How strange. Convenient even, for some. The traditional owners' social, spiritual and physical DNA, carried by their mothers for 46 000 years, was destroyed at this place. Physical evidence of their sovereignty and ancestry stretching back to deep time, plain and simple, was erased.

Rio Tinto apologised – eventually – for the ‘distress we have caused’. They know that historically this token of sorrow will appease some Australians long enough for them to slip out of the news cycle (read Kevin Rudd’s Apology).

On the surface, Rio Tinto supports Aboriginal people in jobs and training, scholarships and community funding. It outwardly supported the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and Native Title because, ‘it’s the right thing to do’. Its implementation of ‘protect, respect, and remedy’ promotes the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. But when the rubber hits the road, \$100 a tonne of iron ore was too good to pass up at the time, and the government is too complicit to do anything about it.

Australia has never respected or recognised the worth of Aboriginal mothers, our life-story, our children, let alone our motherland (Place/Country) and survival ...

Australia imagines itself as a “settled’ nation”. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know this to be wrong. Unless non-Aboriginal people take the time to educate themselves about the connection between heritage, Aboriginal identity, and our right to value a fair and equal future, the schools, organisations, corporations, councils and government systems we all work in every day will continue to tread their destructive paths. But the Australian government does not know what the “right thing” to do is and refuses to listen.

The Juukan Caves disaster is a marker of deep sadness, institutional racism and the silencing and isolation of Aboriginal people who are desperate to build an Aboriginal future on Country, and a reminder that every day, across Australia, we are denied that right.

Australia is in the throes of mismanagement of Country, resulting in catastrophic events occurring at the same time: bushfires and the loss of biodiversity, water and cultural heritage, logging of Aboriginal sacred sites and the destruction of women’s birthing trees. Young people are caught in the despair of suicide, and children placed in gaol or removed from their families are away from kinship systems.



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So far, no-one has been held responsible for this fragmented violence that is represented by the wilful destruction of the Juukan Caves (just as no-one has been held accountable for the Juukan Caves destruction).

I am reminded that fragments of history and pain need to be explained, mourned, healed and made right. At present, history is being made alongside the abandonment of mourning and explanation of “what is right”.

A deafening silence and solitude surrounds me. How sheltered I feel in my little world in the already-colonised city, with my family close by to me and the impact of history, just for a minute, releasing its grip, just for a moment, so I can forget.

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*Julia grew up on Wadda Wurrung Country in Ocean Grove and Geelong. Her mother, Kate, is a member of the Stolen Generations, and her family's experience of history is one of separation and continuing to connect with family, history and Country. Her heritage crosses Darug and Dharrawal Country, and many stories of secrecy and survival.*

*Julia lives in Melbourne with her husband, and children, and recently started lecturing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History at The University of Melbourne. Her interests lie in storytelling, social justice and the arts.*