

INDIGENOUS HEALING PRACTICES

Reflecting on Contesting and Presenting History With a Focus on the Impacts in the Present

Judy Atkinson^a, Michelle Evans^b, Julie Moschion^c

Keywords: violence, Indigenous, research, Indigenous Australians, Historical Frontier Violence Project, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, truth-telling
<https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.137965>

Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia

Vol. 13, Issue 1, 2025

For many Australians, historical accounts of massacres are fringe events from a distant past and are irrelevant to the way our communities operate and the health, economic, and social outcomes for Indigenous people today. Arguably, the persistence of these views is because the scale of massacres has only recently become apparent with the release of nationally verified massacre records (see Ryan et al., 2025, who produced the map used as a background image for this article). There has been no study that has attempted to link these events to current-day outcomes. The Historical Frontier Violence Project, an Australian Research Council Discovery grant, brings together quantitative and qualitative expertise from economics, leadership, engineering, geography, history, and psychology in a first attempt to build data to identify the historical factors that incited frontier violence, quantify the legacy on communities today, and conduct fieldwork to understand how historical trauma is transmitted across generations. In this reflection paper three of the researchers—an economist, a leadership scholar, and an internationally renowned researcher in intergenerational trauma—come together to consider our collective reflections on the project at the halfway point. The writing represents our first attempt to dialogue across disciplines as we make sense of early findings of truth-telling and consideration of whether healing is possible. The writing weaves in and out of first person, second person, and third person voices as we present ideas, communicate community voices, and speak our experiential knowledge.

^a Emeritus Professor Judy Atkinson is a Jiman (central west Queensland) and Bundjalung (Northern New South Wales) woman, with Anglo-Celtic and German heritage. As the founder of We Al-li she is currently their patron and working across many community-based trauma healing programs. She is an internationally renowned leader and researcher in intergenerational trauma. Her academic contributions to the understanding of trauma related issues stemming from the violence of colonisation and the healing/recovery of Indigenous peoples from such trauma won her the Carrick Neville Bonner Award in 2006 for her curriculum development and innovative teaching practice. In 2011 she was awarded the Fritz Redlick Memorial Award for Human Rights and Mental Health from the Harvard University program for refugee trauma.

^b Dr. Michelle Evans holds a professorship in leadership at the Faculty of Business and Economics at the University of Melbourne, specialising in the areas of Indigenous leadership and entrepreneurship. She is director of the Dilin Duwa Centre for Indigenous Business Leadership which works to contribute through education and research to an economically powerful Indigenous Australia. She is also founder of the award-winning MURRA Indigenous Business Masterclass Program, based at Melbourne Business School where she completed her PhD.

^c Dr. Julie Moschion is an associate professor of economics at the University of Queensland. Julie has participated in designing the Journeys Home Survey, a longitudinal study of Australians who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Her current research revolves around disadvantage in education, housing, health, and labour economics. Specifically, she works on homelessness and precarious housing, substance use, incarceration, gender gaps in education, peer effects, and females' labour market participation. Julie is developing a research agenda aiming to support the development of better opportunities for Indigenous Australians.

For over a century, Indigenous people were invisible and therefore not regarded as legitimate participants in a conflict. Now, however, the shift in contemporary politics is that settlers, their descendants and new migrants to Australia are not seen as participants in a conflict and are now the invisible party. The new invisibility recognizes and acknowledges Indigenous people in a range of ways but fails to construe the problem in terms of a conflict with other inhabitants of Australia. This exonerates settlers, their descendants and migrants from any participatory role in the ongoing conflict or responsibility for it, and, as a result, the inequalities that continue to affect Indigenous communities. (Little & McMillan, 2017, pp. 525–526)

Frontier violence is not the only historical wrong perpetrated against Indigenous Australians, but it is perhaps the most important because it set the tone for race relations and was arguably the catalyst for subsequent wrongs, including the removal of Indigenous people from their lands and families (the Stolen Generations), and is historically the most confronting for Australians. As Adrian Little and Wiradjuri scholar Mark McMillan (2017) have stated in the quotation presented above, the reality and consequences of frontier violence have been nullified by the subsequent erasure of the participation and role of settlers and Indigenous Australians in frontier conflict. This resulted in the version of settlement we learned in school, namely, that this land was one of *Terra Nullius* (empty land) and that nomad hunter-gatherers freely relinquished their land to pastoralists with occasional skirmishes owing to cultural misunderstandings.

Contesting this fiction is at the heart of the Historical Frontier Violence Project, funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery grant (ARC DP220101336), which brings together qualitative and quantitative expertise from psychology, leadership, economics, history, engineering, and geography. Guided and advised by an Indigenous majority steering committee, the project problematises history by examining it partly through community-based dialogue and partly through data. Three researchers—an internationally renowned leader and researcher in intergenerational trauma, a leadership scholar, and an economist—have come together to consider our collective reflections at the project’s halfway point. What follows is an overview of the project and a reflection on truth-telling and healing supported by some preliminary qualitative and quantitative findings. The writing weaves in and out of first person, second person, and third person voices as we present ideas, communicate community voices, and speak our experiential knowledge.

Overview of the Project

Researchers at the University of Queensland, University of Melbourne, University of Newcastle, and the Australian National University have come together to build broader understanding among all Australians about the injustices that First Nations Australians have experienced in the past, the

legacy of those injustices today, and the need for truth-telling to lay the ground for reconciliation. By linking the past to the present, the project aims to shed light on the origins of the gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians and encourage all Australians to embrace the practice of truth-telling. This represents a vital step towards better relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians as part of the healing process for the nation and for Country.

The project employs both qualitative (interviews, focus groups) and quantitative (data work) research approaches to analyse the current-day impacts of historical frontier violence and offer the evidence base for truth-telling and healing. Associating the qualitative and quantitative analyses offers a unique opportunity to marry embodied experiences with statistical facts and multiply the impact of individual stories. The qualitative research team, led by Professor Michelle Evans (an Indigenous leadership scholar) in partnership with Aunty Professor Judy Atkinson (an internationally renowned leader and researcher in intergenerational trauma), has focused on a case study in Moree, New South Wales. The purpose of the case study is to bring historical and statistical evidence into a dialogue with the participants, who are community Elders, leaders, and members, to examine collectively what is continuing the historical legacy of violence in the community and what is interrupting and changing that legacy. Namely, the research questions that have informed the project include investigating what connections exist between historical frontier violence and what is happening in the community today, what factors influence intergenerational trauma, and how truth-telling can play a role in helping the community to heal. It is hoped that this project will provide community members with evidence of intergenerational trauma and its link to historical frontier violence and then, through collective dialogue with community members, formulate ideas to recommend as potential policy changes.

The Moree engagement was originally designed across two phases—first, a week engaging and interviewing community Elders, leaders, and members (October 2023), and second, a week conducting focus groups and presenting preliminary findings back to the community (May 2024). From the interviews in October 2023 with Aboriginal community members, five key themes arose: legacy, community factors, healing, collaboration, and self-determination. During this phase, key local impacts of frontier violence emerged, such as that of pervasive segregation tainting all relationships and structures. A further third and final phase was added to the Moree engagement after the second fieldwork visit as a response to the need to create collaborative space for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members to share truth-telling, consider healing, and dream about the future together. The third phase is not a focus of this paper.

The quantitative research builds up from the findings of the qualitative research which highlighted key areas that display intergenerational impacts of historical frontier violence. Indeed, lived experiences and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are key to identifying relevant outcomes to be studied in the quantitative analysis such as economic, health, and cultural outcomes. Across the project, a variety of data sources are used to capture these outcomes including the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA), the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC), and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). These current-day outcomes are compared between communities where historical massacres have been recorded and communities where they have not. In this paper, we illustrate this process using residential segregation as a preliminary outcome which emerged from the early findings of the work in Moree. Overall, the quantitative analysis enables us to measure the extent to which the sites of frontier massacres are still associated with the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and with the fractures between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and the non-Indigenous communities today. By gauging the legacy of historical frontier violence across Australia, the quantitative analysis reinforces the relevance of considering its links with the current-day outcomes.

By establishing quantitative links between the past and present, we hope to improve our understanding of the root causes of the patterns we see today in communities and the importance of facing the past to be able to engage in healing. Much of the literature on truth-telling and healing in the Australian context is framed by reconciliation, whereby the goal for a reconciled nation is to seek a common vision for the future after careful and deliberate resolution of historical violence and consequential government discrimination (McIntosh, 2014). Understanding the deeply contextual and place-based relationships between the past and present requires commitment to articulating the timeline, accounting for the multiple stories and truths held, and discovering spaces for dialogue. According to Brounéus (2008), a “presumed link” (p. 10) exists between truth-telling and its benefits for healing at the individual and community levels, yet limited empirical work has tested this link. Guthrey (2015) also noted these concerns, stating how testimonials in public truth-telling may not facilitate healing; in fact, they could do the opposite and cause deeper suffering through retelling and reliving the violence and/or discrimination. Focus on individual testimonials does link experience of violence and resultant trauma directly with “political oppression” (Devitt, 2009, p. 60). However, moving from this “truth phase” to a justice or healing phase is systemically challenging (Sangster, 1999). Creating space for public discourse and dialogue is key to processing the past, because “settling the past is a present project” (Megumi, 2005, p. 37).

This project makes connections to a colonial history that used violence to subjugate Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The result of the violence has been contemporary social circumstances that require healing. However, truth-telling is the first essential step. What is truth-telling? How is it apparent in the dialogues at the community level in Moree? Such enquiry leads to a second set of questions: What is healing? How do Aboriginal people in Moree speak to the role of healing and, further, embrace healing from the generational trauma of those lived generational experiences? Truth-telling does not just illuminate the impacts of past atrocities on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it can also be illuminating for those who inherit the legacy of past injustices.

Colonisation is seen in western minds as something in the past, that should stay there, and be forgotten about. While the impact of the process on the colonised is recognised, there is a reluctance on the part of the colonisers to recognise how they, too, have lost something of their humanity. (Watson, 2004, p. 1)

What Is Truth-Telling? (Aunty Professor Judy Atkinson)

Truth-telling is a challenge and a journey that demands investigation, recognition, and acceptance of Australian history. While truth-telling may challenge the Australian nation, it is necessary for understanding the long-term consequences of this history. The challenge requires us to confront ourselves as individuals, as social groups, and as a nation; to find the courage to listen to and investigate the stories of those who lived on and looked after their Country, before James Cook “discovered” the landmass now called Australia; and to harness the opportunity to work together for healing.

The challenge, then, also requires the capacity to consider the legacy of Arthur Phillip, the commander of the First Fleet of 11 ships that transported convicts to this country to establish a prison colony. This fact is a necessary function of our truth-telling. Truth-telling enables acknowledgement of our history, of who we were before the First Fleet entered Sydney Cove, of the violence of colonisation, massacres, and removals to reserves as detainment centres and to prisons as containment—punishment institutions. Truth-telling draws on cultural knowledges, spirituality, and ceremonial activities of Aboriginal culture. As we reclaim our right to be responsible for our own lawful health and healing processes, ceremonial activities reaffirm culture and rebuild community. Truth-telling provides the opportunity to reclaim our right to be responsible through healing action. While truth-telling demonstrates we have survived to name these truths, it is challenging because it asks us, essentially, who we are intentionally becoming, as we count the number of Aboriginal children in state care, as we continue to grow as a penal colony, building and filling ever more juvenile detention centres and adult prisons.

Acknowledging and accepting that the massacres—actual and attempted dispossession and subjugation—were traumatic, and that this history continues to affect the lives of survivors today, are essential for opening up a future that requires intentional action. To design a future that heals the harm of the past, we need to enter a truth-telling that asks: What are our youth telling us in their behaviour? What do our young people see as their future in their own country that is their birthright?

While state-led truth-telling processes have been presented in the form of confessions and public apologies, seen most notably in Prime Minister Paul Keating's (1992) Redfern speech and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's (2008) apology to the Stolen Generations, it is time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accepted our own responsibility to sit with the pain of this truth-telling and to take charge of what we need to do to bring about essential change for ourselves, for our children, and for our youth, for their future.

The late Emeritus Professor Lyndall Ryan and her research team documented the massacres across Australia as part of Australian colonial history, an essential truth to be faced by the Australian nation (Ryan et al., 2025). We are forced to face this truth as critical to an Australian understanding and acceptance of who we have been, of our history, and of ourselves, and to ask an important question—Who are we becoming? Connecting the past with the present is key to understanding the impact of the past in the present and invites the next critical step of healing together. The massacres and activities endorsed by policies of the state, and the long-term impacts of those massacres, the behaviours and beliefs of those who survived, are also essential truths this country must face. Hence, truth-telling is a journey into the depth, complexity, and spirit of ourselves, individually and collectively, as a nation.

What would truth-telling in action look like? The *Uluru Statement From the Heart* (Referendum Council, 2017) envisions forms of truth-telling as localised—focused on and contained to each specific region. Regional truth-telling focuses on local histories-of-place as foundations to consider the healing needs of each specific region. Throughout history, often the behaviour of each generation is predicated on the experiences of past generations. As we attempt to negotiate our place in a (post)colonial world, we are formed by our individual and communal past experiences. However, this generation does not know and has not heard about the experiences of its ancestors. Hence, our youth express their distress in their behaviour without understanding what the behaviour may mean. This is demonstrated by the community workers attempting to address the behaviour of the youth with whom they are working without first asking what that behaviour means.

When we ask, “What is this behaviour telling us?”, by necessity, we enter our own truth-telling as we work to help the youth make meaning of their worlds. The behaviour may tell us that their parents are drinking and fighting without understanding why. Consequently, it may mean that the youth are unsafe within a layered expression of generational trauma.

For example, a community in Western Australia initiated a five-day trauma workshop to respond to the community's concerns about youth behaviour. All the attendees were young community youth workers from across that region, except for two older women in their 80s who came from the specific community in which the workshop was being held; they had asked to participate out of concern for their young people. The workshop began with an invitation for each attendee to share information about themselves and what they wished to gain from the workshop. At this point, the two older women started to talk to each other intensely in language. The youth workers became impatient. Finally, the Elders turned to the organisers, ready for the workshop to continue. They were asked if they had anything they would like to share.

The two women shared their childhood memories: one woman had run from the Mistake Creek Massacre when some of her family members were shot and killed, and the other had witnessed her father being chained to a boab tree and whipped by a station manager. None of the community had heard these stories before from the two Elders. In fact, the Elders said they had never shared their childhood memories with anyone before, other than with each other. The stories changed the whole focus for the day, and in fact for the rest of the week. That night, the two women were asked to share the same stories within the community, and the youth decided to make the Elders' stories into a play, which included the need for healing. The play was performed for the community later in the week. Before the organisers left, the senior law women of the community decided to have a special meeting out on women's Country to help the older women heal from their childhood memories. The special meeting was a healing ritual where Elders spoke to the organisers about responsibility and the pain of the stories that arose during the workshop. The Elders told the organisers they would not take this pain (of the stories) with them back to their homes.

The lesson to be learned here is that as the workshop attendees were invited to "tell our stories", the two women entered their truth, at the same time providing their lived experience as children. They taught their community their truth, and initiated localised cultural-healing action, which the youth accepted as their responsibility through performing the play. This truth-telling by the two elderly women, who shared their childhood stories, helped the workshop group and later the community to link these stories to regional history. Healing action followed.

Community members began to talk together. They began to make sense of behaviours that may have resulted in substance misuse, family violence, and problematic child and youth behaviours (which was why I had been invited in). Refocusing and establishing the connections between past atrocities—trauma—and present-day behaviours helped the community turn to the need to use their own cultural-healing initiatives reflective of their community-specific cultural determinants.

Today, experiences have formed present beliefs and behaviours. Today, too many of the details of massacres, of atrocities, are owned by academics, not by the affected community because community members have been silenced, told not to talk about it, because that only creates more distress. Truth-telling must be embedded within those who have been harmed and who have the cultural power and responsibility to heal that harm, not the academic world, unless academics are willing to work with communities for healing (a return to wholeness).

Establishing the connections between past atrocities and present-day behaviour could help regions to understand youth behaviour, consider healing action, and build cultural-healing initiatives specific to local communities. The Historical Frontier Violence Project creates a research commitment to empirically explore the consequences and connections between the past and the present, highlighting the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' outcomes.

Preliminary Findings That Truth-Tell

Qualitative Findings (Professor Michelle Evans)

In October 2023, we interviewed nine Aboriginal community members to gain insights into how community members experience the impacts of historical frontier violence today. We transcribed these interviews, checked the transcript with each interviewee, and conducted a thematic analysis during which we coded all transcripts in a grounded way, letting themes arise from the words of the transcripts. What follows is an interpretation of the qualitative interviews with the inclusion of direct quotations (in quotation marks, not attributed) from transcripts describing the truths about living in Moree today.

“It’s like the frontier wars are not over yet”

Frontier violence and colonisation achieved erasure of custodianship of the Kamilaroi people, who are the Traditional Owners of the land upon which the town of Moree is located. This included generational destruction of connection to Country, community, language, and identity, and destruction of the lore that underpins kinship systems. Kinship systems organise our community and Country and inform the relationships between people, land, waters, stars, animals, plants, and other integral parts of our world. This web of lore was systematically destroyed through the violence of colonisation that killed our Elders, removed us from our Country, and prevented us from being together, sharing our culture through language.

What was once a flourishing ecosystem was controlled, taken over, and often destroyed. Kamilaroi people fought, “but when you’re fighting against weapons of mass destruction” success is limited. Regarding our ancestors who survived the frontier, “families would move, there wasn’t one set place, so they were travelling” until various forms of control were exerted. For instance,

“under the Act¹ they were being told when and where to go and what to do”. The massacres and violence of the frontier became the collective experience that connected all members of the community.

The current-day impacts of the violence of the frontier are experienced every day. This systematic domination of British law, British language, British values, and British racial and class hierarchy infected and affected nearly every part of Kamilaroi people’s lives. Freedom of movement, freedom of employment, and freedom of association were all denied and controlled during the Protection Era. The systems of control tightened the connections between families because they were experiencing the same regime. The intergenerational trauma of these memories and family-level impacts across generations led to individuals, families, and communities becoming stuck, holding the trauma generation after generation.

Trauma speaks to the experience of violence but more so to loss of Country, culture, language, and kinship lore. It has left generations of our communities surviving, and the logic of survival reflects being quiet, not speaking language, and not sharing culture or history. Locked into the sadness, grief, and anger of intergenerational trauma, locked into suffering, it becomes extremely difficult to move towards healing and freedom.

“After 1967, that’s when people started being divided and lost that sort of connection”

How Aboriginal communities operated after the closure of reserves and missions post-1967 presents an important set of experiences to explore. Free now to integrate into towns and cities, free to move and seek employment, our families had to find their own way in a mainstream society that supported us being counted as citizens but continued to stigmatise, marginalise, and isolate us. That freedom was a fiction because Aboriginal people were required to move into town and were kept segregated. As a result, Aboriginal people and families describe their living conditions, as compared to those of non-Aboriginal residents, using phrases such as living in “abject poverty”, Moree is “like a warzone”, Moree is a “hard” town, and “you assimilate, or you suffer”.

Moree is a racially segregated town. Examples of segregation can be seen in which pub the locals frequent (be it the Post Office Hotel with “your cockies and your old local blokes”, the Victoria Hotel being “the black fella pub”, or the Amaroo “for the lower class, lower middle class”) or which football team you play for or support (the Moree Boars where “white fellas play” or the Moree Boomerangs where “the black fellas play”). Colourism is alive and well, since people with “dark skin” experience greater levels of direct, overt racism, such as shop assistants “scanning ... just concentrating” on young

¹ The New South Wales Aborigines Protection Act of 1909, and its subsequent amendments, gave the Protection Board powers to govern the lives of Aboriginal people for nearly 60 years.

people with darker skin. Economic discrimination is another tactic deployed towards racial segregation, as the following excerpts illustrate: “make the pool unaffordable to actually go into the pool for south side Moree”² and “\$2 to print a piece of paper” at the library. Such practices make Aboriginal people feel unwelcome in what are meant to be facilities for all people in the town.

Historical frontier violence has also had a “massive influence” on the communities and families in Moree. Trauma affects physical and psychological health—leading to self-medicating to relieve ongoing suffering—and limits opportunities. It is the impacts of violence “that was put onto us ... in the most inhumane ways” that perpetuate suffering across generations.

The Aboriginal community’s “relationship to [the] violence” inflicted upon our families, and the violence perpetuated by Aboriginal people themselves, are expressions of the contemporary day effects of frontier violence. The place, the town of Moree, has such a “history of violence”; violence is bubbling under the surface and erupts, growing over the years, being an expression between people whereby we are “violent instead of trying to talk one another through it”.

Quantitative Findings (Associate Professor Julie Moschion)

The quantitative part of the project extends the local evidence of long-term impacts of historical frontier violence emerging from the interviews and focus groups conducted in Moree. The fieldwork highlighted how segregation perpetuates the fractures between the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal communities. Based on these insights, we build residential segregation indices to investigate whether residential segregation is more prevalent in Moree than in Australia on average, and whether we observe a relationship to the recorded massacres (Ryan et al., 2025). We use the most widely used segregation index in the literature, the dissimilarity index (Duncan & Duncan, 1955). This index, which draws upon the ABS’s Australian Statistical Geography Standard, represents segregation within a Statistical Area Level 2 (SA2) by measuring whether Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are distributed evenly across neighbourhoods (Statistical Areas Level 1 or SA1) within the SA2. While SA1s have an average population of 400 people, SA2s are aggregated from SA1s, and have an average of 10,000 and represent communities that interact economically and socially. The dissimilarity index measures the percentage of one group that would have to move across neighbourhoods to be distributed evenly across neighbourhoods. A dissimilarity index value of 0 indicates total integration (both groups are distributed in the same proportions across all neighbourhoods). A

² Moree is a racially segregated town in which historical mission sites are predominantly located south of the Mehi River; the contemporary Aboriginal population is still living in and around these mission sites.

dissimilarity index value of 1 indicates total segregation (members of one group are located in completely different neighbourhoods to the second group).

Early results indicate that segregation in Moree and the Moree region is about 0.53 compared with the Australian average of 0.39 (authors' calculations based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2016 Census). Consistent with the connection made by the Aboriginal community in Moree, this high segregation index value reflects the record of many massacres around the Moree region, including massacres recorded at Waterloo Creek, Slaughterhouse Creek, Myall Creek, and Gravesend Mountain, totalling over 400 Aboriginal people killed (Ryan et al., 2025). The next step will be to test the strength of the relationship between recorded massacres and segregation for Australia as a whole using multivariate regressions. This will allow us to identify the mark of frontier violence in communities today but is unrelated to geographical, historical, and other current characteristics. In other words, we will control for potential confounders that may explain the relationship between recorded massacres and segregation; for example, if massacres and segregation are both more prevalent on more productive lands.

Informed by the qualitative fieldwork, we will consider a range of economic, health, and cultural outcomes. In practice, the quantitative research is an ambitious and challenging data exercise. It requires linking many data assets that have not yet been linked, some of which are being created as part of this project. Another challenge is to find ways to measure outcomes that are difficult to measure or for which data are not available at the level of detail required, that is, for the whole of Australia with information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status and geographical location. Economic and health outcomes are easier to measure and will include education attainment, employment, welfare, housing, child development, cancers, mental health, and substance and alcohol use. Cultural losses resulting from historical frontier violence are more difficult to measure but can be approximated by analysing the use of Indigenous languages or applications for native title, for example. The qualitative findings have also highlighted the importance of relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous members of the community. Beyond segregation, the existence of fractures between communities will be studied by exploring measures of social capital, referendum results (Referendum on Constitutional Alteration 1967, 2023), and school bullying.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing, some outcomes that have been identified as important manifestations of intergenerational impacts cannot be included because of data constraints. For example, this is the case with experiences of physical or sexual violence, incarcerations, and state care. Recent developments in Australia, including the *Personal Level Integrated Data Asset* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023), make us hopeful that in the coming years we will be able to integrate these important outcomes into the quantitative research.

In the context of truth-telling, the combination of local qualitative evidence and national quantitative evidence can improve our understanding of the interconnections across documented regional history. Each region would feel heard and supported during their process of recovery from historic trauma. Moreover, each region would be linked to other regions to support and learn from each other in terms of what works for recovery and why. Then, they would be able to take the courage to ask themselves: What are the long-term outcomes within families, communities, and regions from the historic trauma? What can we do ourselves, for healing action? Taking responsibility for facing the historic truth and accepting responsibility for acting at our local level for healing action would create an interlinking and collective framework to address what works in cultural recovery for those continuing to experience the impacts of generational trauma resulting from Australian colonial history.

Preliminary Findings on Healing

What Is Healing? (Aunty Professor Judy Atkinson)

Healing happens when we allow ourselves to accept our differences and work together as a nation to grow within us a sense of meaning and purpose with a collective sense of self, in spite of our struggles and diversities. Through truth-telling of past experiences, and choosing to heal, the self as an individual and as part of the national collective can evolve and develop future aspirations. We can come to learn the diversity of people and cultures, and the strength of who we are, as individuals and as part of the collectives in this country now called Australia.

While truth-telling is a critical step for facing the historic truth and accepting responsibility for the generational distress, healing is an essential local, regional, and national responsibility in response to generational trauma. Healing is curative and restorative. As restoration, it reconciles and repairs, opening pathways for the future as we work together to heal a nation. The restorative approach works to address the underlying causes that generated the need for healing. This may mean challenging ourselves as a nation. Healing means listening to stories that confront us, that challenge us, and then working together to find alternative ways to build our nation beyond that of the prison industry introduced in 1788. Currently, we are failing in that responsibility.

However, healing is hard work. Healing requires acceptance—acceptance of what we have been and of what we are. And now we have the opportunity to work together to build a better future for all Australians, working towards what we can become. In acceptance of what has been, in truth-telling, the first and necessary step is to examine the pain of our generational, individual, and collective experiences. Thus, by truth-seeking and truth-telling, we can envision our future potential as a nation as we work together to repair any harm we have experienced, individually and collectively.

This requires action. Recovery or healing from generational trauma is the action of talking, listening, planning, and working together to enhance healing capacity. Through making choices for change, our self-image and self-esteem grow so that we see the possibility of creating the future together. Healthy self-images lead to a healthy society.

We see and hear each other. We can disagree but commit to listening and learning from each other in order to know and accept different points of view, developed from different lived experiences, different and diverse cultures, which are all essential to the whole of who we are as a nation. We are enriched by our differences, as much as by our commonalities. If we accept dissent and struggle as possibility, as an opportunity for learning and growth, we can celebrate our evolution as a dynamic, distinctive country grounded in the ancient cultures and communities that have been here for millennia and the immigrants who came searching for a different life. Hence, we can grow together. We can learn to learn from each other.

In the process of listening to, accepting, and learning from our past struggles, we now understand a critical learning. Those who were here before the arrival of the First Fleet teach us to face the struggles, to witness the bravery of survival, and to celebrate ourselves as a nation. Thus, the meaning of who we are collectively as a nation can emerge as we find ways to live and grow together.

When we consider what was, and what now is, we can learn from the past and reconsider our future. The future is ours to create, but we must listen to and learn from each other, no matter how painful or shameful. Healing for the future does not entail building and filling more prisons and youth detention centres. Healing repairs harm. It works to recreate wholeness in body, mind, and spirit. Wellbeing services for our children and young people who have trauma experiences, which are often labelled as behavioural problems, present opportunities for using culturally safe and proficient skills to build a healing future. This way we build cultural safety and competency skills for all workers, which involves a neuro-developmental rationale for healing trauma. It also requires a whole-of-community approach.

Creating safety and security is also the work of promoting hope, courage, and a sense of belonging as we work on the critical focus of justice, fairness, and dignity. As we value ourselves, so we give value to others. In working together to heal generational trauma, we are working to create community—and hence, the possibility of healing a nation.

Qualitative Findings (Professor Michelle Evans)

“Do not forget to claim your generational strengths; your ancestors gave you more than wounds”

Truth-telling and sharing stories, history, and culture are key to healing. Sharing the stories of frontier violence is also important to understanding history and what happened to our families. And this means holding onto not just the story but also the connection between the storyteller and the

story that needs to be cherished. Language is the connective tissue between Country, culture, and community. However, loss of language reverberates in families. It is these disconnections that echo throughout families today.

Healing must address loss because of colonisation and frontier violence—loss of “connection to Country” and loss of “our identity”. Because loss means that “we’re walking in two shoes out there in community trying to figure out who we are and where we come from”. This loss has been perpetuated across generations. Thus, the healing needs to focus on “vulnerability” in the kids, who “don’t know how to ask for [help]—there’s no stability, there’s no sort of routine”.

Healing also needs to redress dysfunctional initiation processes that have developed in Moree, for instance, “we’re expected to drink ... people think they need to fire that trauma that they’ve been entwined in, that’s their rite of passage to go through and be an adult”, and “going to jail” is an initiation. The healing should focus on young people, especially when you “see a lot of the kids are side-tracked by ... the crime waves ... negative peer pressure”. But also, adults and parents need to focus on healing themselves too: “Mum and Dad never fixed themselves, and then Pop never fixed [himself], because we’re just too worried about our babies, just doing the best, doing the best for them as much as we could”.

Healing through self-determined processes, our own approaches, will change the war zone that is Moree. This requires truth-telling “definitely for White Australia, even Black Australia”, “mandated Aboriginal studies”, and understanding “our native grasses and farm, like, the old people set good examples, so the rest of the people will follow”. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways—“our own methods of doing things ... it’s about us taking our rightful place”—will signal an important change; “it has to be us, by us, for us”. Healing is connected to land, to our Country. Most importantly, healing emerges from truth-telling, and that needs to be grounded in “a Treaty or any settlement with First [Nations] People”. Self-determination is about the right to decide on our lives and livelihoods, to live according to our own beliefs and values and have our identities recognised, and the stories our community members share about their choice and freedom heard. A central way forward is through education about our history, about what has happened here. This is the way forward to reckon with history. We also need to include education about our culture, values, and connectedness to Country.

Kitchen table discussions might provide a good platform to have healing dialogues. We also need to hear stories and examples of how non-Aboriginal community members are acknowledging frontier violence and the impacts of colonisation. Working collaboratively opens a range of resources and possibilities. Connecting generations, from children to adults to parents and Elders, provides benefits for everyone who collaborates. Our community has “a lot of expertise in the town, [but] a lot of expertise has been shunned by

the community”, so how do we open ourselves to embrace what we already have amongst community? Because “we need to hear more of the inspirations of how change can happen”.

Next Steps

With regard to methodology, we have conducted two fieldwork trips to Moree—the first to interview and connect with Aboriginal community members and the second to conduct focus groups with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members. What has become apparent is that a third fieldwork trip is required to address the healing needs that were surfaced through the interviews and focus groups with community members whom we have been working and thinking with on this project. The process of undertaking the project has revealed the complexity of the work we are doing together with community.

The qualitative fieldwork has emphasised not only the fractures between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in Moree but also the desire of many stakeholders to build bridges between communities. Alongside the development of truth-telling and healing processes, the quantitative research provides evidence that the long-term impacts of historical frontier violence are not anecdotal. It is essential to bring combined qualitative and quantitative evidence to non-Aboriginal communities in Moree and across Australia. As mentioned earlier, a third phase to the Moree community engagement has been set to bring together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members in a pilot truth-telling, healing, and dreaming the future workshop. Whilst this workshop will be an attempt to create a space for past, present, and future, we acknowledge that designing these healing spaces is complex.

By filling the gap in knowledge about the circumstances of settlement and its enduring impacts, all Australians can truly acknowledge the past and its legacy and engage in listening deeply to the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. At a local level, by demonstrating that the outcomes we witness today in communities are in fact symptoms of intergenerational trauma, the findings support the development of community-led programs that directly address trauma, rather than band-aid policies that focus on treating the symptoms of the trauma.

Published: May 21, 2025 AEST.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2023). *Personal level integrated data asset (PLIDA)* [Dataset]. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/microdata-tablebuilder/available-microdata-tablebuilder/person-level-integrated-data-asset-plida>
- Brounéus, K. (2008). *Rethinking reconciliation: Concepts, methods, and an empirical study of truth telling and psychological health in Rwanda* [Doctoral dissertation, Uppsala University]. <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A171573&dswid=3369>
- Devitt, R. (2009). “Healing the heartbreak”?: The role of testimony in the Australian inquiry into the separation of Indigenous children from their families. *Humanities Research*, 15(3), 49–70. <https://doi.org/10.22459/HR.XV.12.2009.04>
- Duncan, O. D., & Duncan, B. (1955). A methodological analysis of segregation indexes. *American Sociological Review*, 20(2), 210–217. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2088328>
- Guthrey, H. L. (2015). *Victim healing and truth commissions: Transforming pain through voice in Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-12487-2>
- Keating, P. J. (1992, December 10). *Speech by the Hon Prime Minister, P J Keating. Australian launch of the International Year for the World's Indigenous People* [Speech transcript]. PM Transcripts. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00008765.pdf>
- Little, A., & McMillan, M. (2017). Invisibility and the politics of reconciliation in Australia: Keeping conflict in view. *Ethnopolitics*, 16(5), 519–537. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2016.1219473>
- McIntosh, I. S. (2014). Reconciliation, you’ve got to be dreaming: Exploring methodologies for monitoring and achieving Aboriginal reconciliation in Australia by 2030. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 32(1), 55–81. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21101>
- Megumi, I. T. O. (2005). Will “truth” help “peace”?: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-conflict Sierra Leone. *Japanese Review of Cultural Anthropology*, 6, 19–41. https://doi.org/10.14890/jrca.6.0_19
- Referendum Council. (2017). *Final report of the Referendum Council*. https://ulurustatemdev.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Referendum_Council_Final_Report.pdf
- Referendum on Constitutional Alteration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice). (2023). <https://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/referendums/2023.htm>
- Rudd, K. (2008, February 13). *Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples* [Speech transcript]. Australian Parliament House. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id:%22chamber/hansardr/2008-02-13/0003%22>
- Ryan, L., Debenham, J., Pascoe, B., Smith, R., Owen, C., Richards, J., Gilbert, S., Anders, R., Usher, K., Price, D., Newley, J., Brown, M., & Hugh, C. (2025). *Colonial frontier massacres in Australia, 1788–1930*. University of Newcastle. <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres>
- Sangster, K. (1999). Looking the beast in the eye [How truth commissions come to terms with pain]. *Arena Magazine*, 39, 43–45.
- Watson, L. (2004, September 21–24). *Recognition of Indigenous terms of reference* [Keynote address]. A Contribution to Change: Cooperation out of Conflict Conference: Celebrating Difference, Embracing Equality, Hobart, Tasmania. <https://uniting.church/lilla-watson-let-us-work-together/>