



Spinning a yarn for community

Noongar women and CAN WA's doll making project

By Dave Palmer

Preface

Koor, koor

Nidja Noongar mai

Ngaardanginy boodja

Boorda nidja

Kalyakoorl mia ngaardanginy boodja.

Long, long time ago

This is *Noongar* homelands and hunting grounds

And long into the future

This will always be

Noongar home and hunting grounds.

Introduction

This is a story of a striking community based project that has recently reignited itself in the Wheatbelt region of WA. It is a story about people revisiting old community practices, reconfiguring relationships and finding ways to 'hold' each other when times are tough. The project has been facilitated by the Community Arts Network WA (CAN WA), a not-for-profit organisation that sets out to help build health and community wellbeing by using arts, performance, digital media and cultural development. It involves *Noongar* women coming together to make dolls, celebrate their families and rebuild their connections.

This essay begins by describing the community and the country where the project is taking place. It then 'visits' the work, explaining how things came about and providing a background to CAN WA's involvement. Next the essay reminds us of Aboriginal people's longstanding use of textile, fibre and other bush products to help build and maintain family and community. Finally the paper tracks what happens between people when something as simple as doll making occurs.

Kura (in the past) – Noongar boodja, Narrogin and CAN WA

The project has its roots in a number of places. It is set in *Noongar boodja* (*Noongar* country) with people who trace their family's connection to the Wheatbelt region of WA over many, many generations. It involves reinvigorating practices associated with Aboriginal textile production that are possibly as old as *Noongar* connections to their country. It draws on women's memory, their deep love of each other, their children and of comforting through storytelling and making dolls. It is also a story of revisiting successful and nationally acclaimed work carried out in the early 90s by those who are now older and keen to hand things on to younger people. Also sitting in the background is a history of family trauma, social distress and fighting in and around the town of Narrogin.

Noongar boodja (country)

Those who identify as *Noongar* call the southwest corner of Western Australia their *karla* (where their home fires burn). *Noongar* are those who have family and cultural affiliations to the first people who have lived in the region for as long as 38,000 years. *Noongar boodja* (country) runs from as far north as Geraldton, south, southeast to the small town of Noongar on the Great Eastern Highway, all the way as far east as Esperance on the south coast. This area takes in much of the state of Western Australia's Wheatbelt, many hundreds of kilometres of coastline, the state capital, Perth, and the regional cities of Bunbury and Albany (Collard 2007a, Hallam 1975).

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The word '*Noongar*' is translated by many as 'people' and is consistently used by those with affiliations to fourteen dialect groups across the greater cultural block of *Noongar*. To *Noongar*, *boodja* (or country) is critically important. In the old days each family group had their own *kaleep* (camping places), which had enormous importance for them. For *Noongar* their *moort* (family) and *kaitijin* (knowledge) is intricately tied up with *boodja*. This is reflected in the way people maintain their relationships and obligations to each other, their place and people's conduct. In the 'old days' all *Noongar* were born into a complex system of social groupings that ensured each was a member of a 'skin' or moiety group. As well as sharing a place in these groups with other humans, *Noongar* 'skin' includes flora, fauna, rocks, rivers and places. In this way, different parts of *boodja* (country) are *moort* (family) related in the same way as brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts. For many *Noongar* their 'old people' (those who have passed away) have symbolically and literally moved back to dwelling among the rocks, the trees and animals. For many *Noongar* this means that to visit and care for *boodja* (country) is to visit and care for *moort* (the old people) (Collard 2007b).





Noongar life has changed dramatically since *wadjela* (non-Aboriginal people) first came to the area to live in 1829. Long-held traditions, practices and language have been under enormous pressure, particularly between the 1850s and 1940s when families were forced to relocate away from their *karla* (or homelands). Many continued to be removed from their *moort* (family) through generations of government policy that involved forced family separation. These shifts in life have been recorded in oral traditions, song and dance traditions and in fine art work such as the 'Carrolup style' of painting that emerged from the Carrolup Mission near Katanning (Haebich 1988).

However, Noongar connection to *boodja*, *moort*, *kaitijin* and *wangkiny* (language) has proved remarkably resilient, managing to maintain, reignite and renew itself (Douglas 1976). Often this is most clearly expressed in Noongar forms of art, craft, music making, theatre, film and language revival (Collard and Palmer 2006).

CAN WA and tough times in Narrogin

The Noongar doll making project was rekindled when CAN WA began working in Narrogin in 2010. CAN WA's work is premised upon the need to involve local people in processes that track the past, understand and critique the present and use their imagination to consider how things can be different in the future. They host projects that both use the arts as a way to invigorate community and community involvement to invigorate the arts.

Seven years ago CAN WA began an important project in the Wheatbelt region. At the invitation of a range of Noongar and other Aboriginal people living in towns like Kellerberrin, CAN WA began by carrying out arts based workshops with local people. These workshops led to a range of larger productions and community celebrations, including the creation of evocative photographic books and films, as well as standing behind the local Aboriginal Corporation running a biennial 'Keela Dreaming' community celebration. It also supported local people to get together with oral historians and a nationally acclaimed broadcaster to produce wonderful oral histories and radio shows. Perhaps more importantly, it helped support the leadership of the area, created jobs in the arts for local people, and drew the community together (CAN WA 2010a, 2010b).

Out of this project came a second request for CAN WA to stretch its involvement into some of the towns in the southern Wheatbelt. Early in 2010 CAN WA set out on what it hopes will be at least a four-year project with people from the southern Wheatbelt communities of Narrogin, Pingelly, Brookton and Wagin. This work has become known as the *Strong Culture, Strong Community* project, predominantly funded by Lotterywest.

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CAN WA's extended involvement was shaped by the community distress experienced in Narrogin as a result of multiple youth suicides, very public and long-term family feuding and the lack of economic and employment opportunities in the region. Local person and now CAN WA Narrogin office Coordinator Geri Hayden describes the genesis of the project in this way:

A year before CAN WA started work I attended a meeting in Perth to talk about what people called the 'Narrogin troubles'. People talked about the family feuding in town and painted a pretty awful picture. I was waiting for them to tell us what they could offer or what they were going to do to support us. Not one of them actually stepped up to the plate. This was early 2009 and nobody wanted to touch it. I got really disheartened.

People were still crying out for help in 2009 when CAN WA got involved. They had two trainees and filmmaking and photography workshops going on. The two main family sides were involved in the project together. They were distant from each other but the fact that they were there was a powerful sign that something important was happening.

During the first year of this work, a string of arts projects started to get people together, encouraging a bit of healing and creating

'common ground' between local people. Photography workshops were run in Brookton, Pingelly, Narrogin and Wagin with nearly one hundred people learning the technical and artistic aspects of digital camera use, including the elements of design, composition and ways to use light. This was followed by filmmaking workshops with twenty-six people working with professional filmmakers from the Film and Television Institute (FTI). This allowed three groups to produce a ten-minute film capturing, celebrating and sharing local *Noongar* stories. A DVD of the three short films made in Narrogin, Brookton and Wagin was produced and is included as part of the *Voices of the Wheatbelt: Our Place, Our Stories* publication (CAN WA 2010a, b). In addition, hip-hop workshops were organised in conjunction with four local schools (CAN WA 2011a). These workshops involved over one hundred young people from which a core group of forty produced and launched video clips of four songs. The *Voices of the Wheatbelt: Wheat Beats* publication includes a booklet, DVD and CD, and celebrates the songwriting, recording and performance skills of young people aged between eleven and fifteen. Also during this first year a public artist worked with locals to create and install three seats in the local Gnarojin Park with designs depicting the six *Noongar* seasons.

All of this work carried out in the first twelve months was brought together in another production of a sound-scape featuring community stories of reminiscence and recollection, pain, distress and conflict and healing. *Narrogin Stories* and elements of the other work were presented to an enraptured audience at the official launch of the project in June 2010.

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In this way a variety of arts projects encouraged the involvement of different age groups in the community. Grannies (grandchildren) and the 'old people' (seniors) worked together to pass on skills and knowledge about culture. Literally and symbolically tangible things were built for the community, put together as signposts for *Noongar* culture, *Noongar* family and *Noongar* use of country. This happened in a safe and comfortable way, often bringing together people who had been in considerable conflict, frequently encouraging senior people to 'hold' and pass on their knowledge of language and culture (CAN WA 2010a, 2011a).

The many uses of dolls across time and place

Doll making has an extended history across the globe. Indeed there is evidence of dolls appearing in a multitude of cultures and being used by many different generations for various purposes. Now dolls are usually associated with children, toys and play. However, they have been variously used as items in ceremony, holding the stories of ancient gods, functioned in rituals associated with birth, death and marriage and acted as symbols to be worshipped, sung to, sacrificed and nurtured (see Fox & Landshoff 1972, Young 1992). According to Feen-Calligan *et al.* (2009), in ancient Egypt wooden dolls were made expressly to bury the dead to assist people to move to the next world (Young 1992). Dolls have long assisted in the transition of children into adult status. Greek and Roman girls were encouraged to make and play with dolls until the point at which they were married. At this point they became important in the transition status of girls to wives, placed at the opening of a shrine of each girl's protective goddess (Young 1992). Dolls have even been used to encourage reproduction. For example, young women of the African Ashanti people carried carved wooden dolls in the small of their backs as a means to minimise the chance of infertility, help produce good mothers and result in the birth of beautiful daughters (Markel 2000).

According to Estes (cited in Kobe 2009) this is because:

Dolls are one of the symbolic treasures of the instinctual nature. For centuries humans have felt that dolls emanate both a holiness and mana – an awesome and compelling prescience which acts upon persons, changing them spiritually. Dolls

are believed to be infused with life by their makers. They are used as markers of authority and talismans to remind one of one's own power.

'Dolls have also helped in the process of transmission of culture'

Also important has been the historical role played by dolls in keeping people healthy. In Dama, north of Australia, ritual healers are charged with making dolls out of palm leaves to lure demons of illness out of people (Fraser, as cited in Fox & Landshoff 1972). Doll maker Barb Kobe (2009) provides one firsthand account of how dolls have had a transformative impact on both her practice and her own health.

I found having a doll or puppet a useful, non-threatening tool to educate and transform beliefs and people's situations ... in each of these soft sculptures (dolls) ... we work through our feelings ... anger, grief and other emotions ... making dolls changes our emotional state ... people can transfer a feeling from inside to outside ... We can have conversations with the characters and use them to bring about a discussion about feelings.

Dolls have also helped in the process of transmission of culture, particularly by non-literate communities who have used them to animate stories, conceptual ideas, rituals and traditions. For example, the *Ramakien* dolls of Thailand have long been used to help tell stories about the rescue of an ancient Thai princess (representing traditional culture) from the evil clutches of an ogre (representing the threat of outside influences). *Kachina* dolls have been used by the Indigenous American group, the *Hopi*, to pass on knowledge about ecological sustainability and teach children about how to draw upon spirits to provide rain, good crops, and a life in balance. The Balinese are internationally celebrated for their majestic dolls that are made to celebrate and honour the rice goddess, *Dewi Sri*. In 19th-century middle class America, specially fashioned dolls were made to play out 'doll funerals' in the hope that girls could learn about grief and pick up the appropriate etiquette during periods of mourning (Formanek-Brunnel 1993). Dolls have also helped sustain local markets, encouraging trade in an

assortment of materials ranging from cloth, clay, grass, animal skin, corn husks, papier-mâché, wood, bone, rocks, shells, vegetables and fruit. It is still the practice today to use a form of dolls, scarecrows, to assist in the management of crops, protecting them from crows, wild pigs and other feral animals (Neal 1969).

In more recent times, particularly since the shift towards industrialisation in Europe, dolls have become associated less with ritual, sacred work and healing and more with the ever-increasing leisure time of children (Young 1992). According to Burton (1997) there is a close association between the rise of childhood as a period in the life course, the reduction of labour carried out by children and the development of the doll as a tool for play. For example, the school and practitioners such as psychologists took up the doll as a tool for helping them manage the socialisation of children (Walker, 1989).

Recently processed materials have been used to make dolls. This includes rubber, recycled tyres, celluloid, vinyl, aluminum cans and plastics. In 1963 Mattel began to develop its 'Nurse Barbie' and 'Dr Ken'. Since then many hundreds of Barbie and Ken types have been manufactured for a global market (Davis 2005). The modern mass-produced toy doll industry is now enormous, drawing upon vast resources. Indeed Tosa (1997) claims that by the late 1990s if we were to line up Barbie dolls head to toe they would circle the earth more than eleven times. To make this possible the Mattel Company used over 100 million yards of fabrics to produce doll clothes. Now it is almost unimaginable to see children growing up independent of a wardrobe of Barbie, GI Joe, Power Rangers, and other mass-produced dolls. These act to socialise children into certain kinds of roles, fix into our collective psyche what it means to be girls and boys and prepare children for their various futures in the labour market (Hastings 2003). As a result, doll making represents one of the largest subsections of the fashion industry, sustaining the production of the biggest body of women's clothing across the globe (Tosa 1997). In developing countries locally crafted dolls represent a critical sustainable global enterprise and support the livelihoods of small and struggling communities (Helmores & Singh cited in Edwards 2010).



Dolls have also been used in early childhood development, teaching coordination skills such as shoe-lace tying, buttoning and zipping clothing and hand-eye activities (Glasberg, Maatita, Nangle & Schauer 1998). Playing with dolls has also been found to be valuable in schools, helping children experiment with new roles, building a storytelling repertoire, learning civics and developing critical imagination. In part this is because dolls elicit storytelling and fantasy work. In part it is because dolls encourage people to play and replay stories and scenarios over and over again. Therapists have used dolls to help socialise children with difficulties; support those who are troubled with making healthy companionship; assist with role-playing distress and trauma; buttress appropriate behaviours and identity formation; and help diagnose and treat various mental conditions (Whitney 1999, Walker 1989).

‘the doll can become a companion, an extension of family, and a friend, even a confidant’

Dolls are also increasingly being used in other modern health care settings. They have become a popular tool for training health care professionals and in first-aid education. Dolls are now a part of the kit of those carrying out antenatal classes for expectant parents. Muslin dolls are being used in the preparation of those who are about to undergo surgery (Gaynard, Goldberger & Laidley 1991). Dolls are also being useful in the care of dementia patients, helping to provide comfort, acting as a way to keep people in settings they feel have some familiarity and stimulating communication of emotions (Ehrenfeld & Bergman 1995; Mackenzie, James, Morse, Mukaetova-Ladinska & Reichelt 2006).

Art therapists claim that making dolls nurtures curative outcomes because the creativity it produces provides physical, emotional and spiritual comfort (see Pavlicevic and Ansdell 2004, Walker 1989). Getting into ‘the zone’, or what some have described as ‘finding flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1975), helps relieve stress, lower blood pressure and produce endorphins that give people a sense of wellbeing. It also encourages people to express themselves in a way that releases emotions, which itself aids physical healing.



Part of this dexterity of use reflects the fact that dolls are representations of the human form. Although they vary in style, all attempt to stand in for a person in some way. This makes it much easier for us to create emotional attachments to dolls than is usually the case for many other cultural artifacts. This is part of the reason why for so many of us the doll can become a companion, an extension of family, and a friend, even a confidant.

Aboriginal traditions of textile, fabric and dolls

Like many other cultural traditions, one of the ways Australian Aboriginal communities have expressed their cultural identities, transmitted ideas, prepared the young for adulthood and performed various governmental functions is through the things they make. Often in these settings locally accessible plant materials, bush products and animal and human hair is gathered, crafted and used in conjunction with song, dance and performance to maintain social relations, perpetuate ideals and guide conduct. As the following example illustrates, textile, paint and fibres often take centre stage in processes that help draw community together to maintain cultural continuity. This account by *Tiwi* writers

Kantilla and Kerinaia describes the use of fibre artifacts and textiles in the performance of ceremonies that have at their core the practice of transmitting culture and 'holding' (Myers 1991) Aboriginal young people. In this example, fathers, aunts and grandmothers use various fibres such as hair and feathers to prepare young women for a process of transition into adult members of the larger community. In this way, fibre and textile is worn as part of the exercise of what we might call 'community transformation', where the young people are 'remade' through careful adornment.

In the morning they paint her body and the father of the girl goes and puts a feather head-dress (pirmirtiki) on her head, and a goose-feather ball (pukupunawu) around her neck. Her aunts put an armband (pamajini) and hairbelt (wirririma) on her. Then the grandmother will go and put bark around her. They smash the red ochre, white ochre. They get a stick and paint her up all over her body with a lot of care. They put a necklace around her and dress her up (Kantilla and Kerinaia cited in Wood Conroy 2009, p. 30).

Many of these same textiles are used for practical purposes, assisting people to carry out their everyday chores and duties. As a consequence, there has been a rich tradition in Australia of using a range of skills and techniques to fashion textiles. These include:

- looping and knotting to make practical items such as bags and nets
- twining for makeshift baskets, mats and fish and animal traps
- coiling to make hardier traps and baskets
- rolling, kneading and sewing to make coats and blankets
- spinning and making hairbelts and hair rings.

This combination of practical and symbolic use enjoys a continuity of practice for many who have been able to mix the new and old economies in the creative arts industry. Rigney (in *Tjanpi Desert Weavers*, Fernand Cardoso and Clouston 2009) describes how women of the Central Desert region have continued working with grass fibres, incorporating techniques recently learnt from women from the south and the north into old



practices associated with making *manguri* (hair rings) to balance the *piti* (wooden carrying dish) on their heads.

There are also long standing practices that involve using textile, fibre, bush products and found objects as artifacts of 'play'. This work has been fundamental in helping children and adults transform and master identity in their surroundings, create conditions for nurturance and help prepare people for the necessities of craft making for life. In this way, bush toy making has long been tied up with the many transformations necessary for Aboriginal people. As Haagen (1994, p. 1) observes, Aboriginal people have an established history of retaining 'a strong collective sense of attachment to the artifacts of play'. In her wonderful collection of essays on Aboriginal bush toys, Haagen (1994, p. 12) points to the central part played by dolls in traditional camp life. Throughout Australia, including the southwest of WA, simple dolls were carried around much the same as a baby would be. This may have taken the form of a plain stick or stone painted with a little ochre. In other settings sticks were chosen with some kind of 'distinguishing feature upon it, like a knob at one end which represents the head' (Basedow cited in Haagen 1994, p. 12). Often dolls were carried around with miniature versions of baby carriers (known in many parts of the country as *coolaman*), or perhaps using small 'dilly bags' made by adults for children's play. In some areas a simple doll was fashioned by taking a forked stick. These sticks would be 'split at one extremity, each split half being bent and kinked so as to form a "knee"' (Roth cited in Haagen 1994, p. 13).

Many of these skills and techniques have been maintained, reconfigured and added to by artists producing items for the art and craft industry. These old skills and practices have even expanded, diversified and creatively transformed through Aboriginal people working with arts mentors, collaborators and western art audiences. This has allowed traditional practices to be 'revived and revitalised by artists who want to reconnect with their heritage and confirm their cultural identities' (Artback nd, p. 2).

The use of textile, natural fibre and the making of dolls by *Noongar* communities is something that stretches back many generations. According to Nalda Searles, some of the first accounts of Aboriginal women's involvement in coiling

fibre and shaping textile can be traced to its introduction to the Margaret River Mission as a way to make prayer baskets from the 1920s to the 1950s (Searles 2006, p. 37).

'The project maintained a connection to old conventions of linking craftwork with the business of nurturing community. During this time women set up sewing circles, sitting around indoor fires to warm their hearts and bodies'

Many of the older participants in this project talk about dolls in the lives of *Noongar* from early times. Jean Riley recounts the part played by dolls made from a simple stick and piece of cloth wrapped around. Geri Hayden provides similar accounts of making dolls from what was available including bottles, material and old throwaways. Mavis Bolton offers good evidence that this goes back many generations, offering accounts of how her own grandmother encouraged young girls to use their ingenuity to make toys to keep themselves entertained.

Yeye: the recent story of doll making in the southwest

In the early 1990s, the old *Noongar* practice of doll making was brought to life again when the local Narrogin Aboriginal Corporation began working with the Town of Narrogin to host a series of workshops led by fabric and fine artists Nalda Searles and Pantjiti Mary McLean. This work started with a two-week residency in February and March of 1994 (Searles 2007, p. 73). Both women had a history of working with Aboriginal women from various Western Desert communities with Pantjiti herself a well-recognised Aboriginal textile artist and painter. These two women moved to Narrogin as 'artists in residence', working in conjunction with the federally funded *Community Development Employment Program* (CDEP). Through these workshops local Aboriginal people, both young and adult, were taught a combination of traditional and contemporary skills in painting, decorative wood burning, clay modelling, jewellery making, basketry, patchwork, appliqué and importantly doll making. Approximately 125 people took



part. Participants included Aboriginal students from Narrogin Senior High School. Primary school children joined in by carrying out painting work with some of the old people. Young men experimented with woodcarving, wood burning decoration, and painting using ochre. The largest group, women of varying ages, explored bush jewellery, grass baskets, string bags and rag dolls.

‘The practice, alive in symbolism and metaphor, encouraged women to weave together old memories, unpick their relationships, and spin new yarns and re-stitch community’

The project set out to draw on the existing art and craft skills of *Noongar* and introduce new and exciting arts mediums. A committed group of local people soon formed a *Noongar* craft cooperative experimenting with a new distinctly *Noongar* style of doll making. The figures in Pantjiti’s paintings influenced the women to create their first black Aboriginal dolls. The project maintained a connection to old conventions of linking craftwork with the business of nurturing community. During this time women set up sewing circles, sitting around indoor fires to warm their hearts and bodies.

When Nalda and Mary moved onto their next project a group of the Narrogin artists set up the *Marramucking* Craft Group to continue the work. Initially they held a display and sale of the work at the Narrogin Spring Festival and exhibited at the Narrogin Gallery. They also set up a shop display to sell to tourists, visitors and locals and arranged to sell work through outlets in Perth and Sydney. This helped them create a body of work for an exhibition at the WA Crafts Council called *Women’s Business*. *Marramucking* exhibited nineteen works to an audience of 4,500 people. All of the works sold.

News of the dolls, their style and the *Noongar* doll makers soon travelled. With the support of Nalda and Pantjiti and their contacts the Narrogin group was invited to showcase their work in local, national and international exhibitions. Both the women and their dolls travelled to Perth, Canberra and Beijing where they participated in an exhibition of Pacific and Aboriginal Women’s craft. The original artists and their families kept some of the work. A number of dolls were sold to private collectors. The WA Museum, the Berndt Museum and the National Gallery of Australia purchased part of the collection. The dolls can now be found all over Australia.

Not only did this project encourage a rich arts and craft enterprise culture, it also drew upon an important tradition of cultural regeneration and transmission. The practice, alive in symbolism



and metaphor, encouraged women to weave together old memories, unpick their relationships, and spin new yarns and re-stitch community. As Nalda recounts, making dolls helped women share stories and pass on their recollections of growing up *Noongar* in the region. She also recalls how the dolls acted in a way to extract stories that were otherwise lying dormant.

Yarns of the Heart: the project

The next chapter of this wonderful story could well be described as a metaphoric weaving together of people. It began when Aboriginal textile and arts worker Michelle Broun had a conversation with Pilar Kasat of CAN WA at the opening of their Narrogin office. Michelle mentioned that she had been involved with the earlier iteration of the doll making project in Narrogin. Hearing that Cecile Williams had been involved in this, Pilar asked CAN WA Operations Coordinator Nicola Davison to arrange with Cecile and Nalda Searles to organise some new workshops to be hosted in Narrogin.

This subtle, but nonetheless powerful, decision to reintroduce the idea of a doll making group allowed CAN WA staff to draw out local women's history of the *Marramucking* Craft Group and facilitate the reignition of the work. Soon it emerged that some of the doll makers from the 1990s group continued to make dolls from time to time. This prompted a new generation of young women, daughters and nieces to express their keenness to learn and take up doll making again.

'CAN WA's team included Noongar and wadjela staff who worked together throughout the project'

This approach of 'facilitating', assisting and providing resources such as staff, training, accommodation and materials was instrumental in stimulating action by local women. It would be inadequate to describe what CAN WA did as simply providing aid, taking directions or being 'laissez-faire' (hands off). CAN WA staff were very active in planning opportunities for *Noongar* women to have workshops scheduled. Indeed it was their suggestion that the project reignite. However, it would be equally unhelpful to

describe what they did as directive or dictatorial. Indeed, like the textile work that was to come, their approach saw staff taking on what could be called a 'weaving' practice, interlacing the elements and people, both giving and taking suggestions, moving backwards and forwards between leading and being led. CAN WA's team included *Noongar* and *wadjela* staff who worked together throughout the project. The textile workshops gave *Noongar* and *wadjela* a tangible way to work closely together, combining the skills and resources of an outside organisation with the history, stories and interests of local people to create conditions that would ultimately build a successful project.

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Equipped with this knowledge and enthusiastic about the idea of rekindling the work, CAN WA's staff rallied some of the old doll makers and invited Nalda Searles back to Narrogin. CAN WA staff member and local *Noongar* woman Sonia Kickett took up the role of holding the project. Her grandmother, Elizabeth Riley, had been one of the doll makers in the 1990s. She charged into working with a group of women, helping them arrange weekly workshops at a local community centre. She worked closely with Nicola Davison from CAN WA's Perth office who made arrangements for Nalda and her colleague Cecile Williams to return to Narrogin every few months, to support the women, encourage them to learn the techniques of their mothers, aunties and grandmothers and introduce new and more complex textile skills.

The new project began to regenerate some of the old stories. Women began to make dolls that celebrated the contributions of their parents and grandparents. Some retold stories that had been passed along. Some developed their own style and told new stories. In this way doll making began to allow women to bring together what the old people called *kura*, *yeye* and *boorda*, or a rich interrelationship between the past, the present and the future. It also provided a spatial

and active means of expressing the practice of *moort* or exercising family relationships and connections across the generations. Much of this was made possible because the stimulus for many of the doll characters was grounded in stories about *boodja* or the place of local country in the life of the doll makers. Making dolls literally 'animated' these accounts, helping join up stories across families, generations and country.

Eager to continue the tradition of cultural transmission of this work CAN WA successfully applied for ScreenWest's and the Film and Television Institute's (FTI) *Indigenous Community Stories* program, to come to Narrogin to help film and interview the artists and create a documentary. With the assistance of artist and director Catherine Simmonds, the film crew and women recorded the work of the old and new doll makers, capturing the 'back story' of this rich and intergenerational project.

All of this provided an excellent backdrop for a series of exhibitions targeting a wider audience. In May 2011 the group hosted a two-day event at the Narrogin Nursery Café and Gallery. The intention was to allow local women to showcase their work to their own community and carry out a practice run before the four-month exhibition at the WA Museum Perth. This first large-scale exhibition at a major cultural institute was called *Yarns of the Heart: Noongar dolls from the southern Wheatbelt*, and brought together both forty new dolls created by younger *Noongar* women, girls and boys and almost thirty dolls from the original workshops in 1994 on loan from the National Gallery of Australia, the WA Museum, and private collectors.

'As the dolls came to life so too did the relationships between women, their families and others in the community'

Perhaps the most meaningful element of this work is that the doll making group continues, meeting each week to hold and pass on old and new stories, bringing together women for mutual support and artistry and providing a means through which *Noongar* women can hold each other and their future aspirations. As Nalda Searles (cited in CAN WA 2011b) puts it, the consequences of this work are many.

The women who began as the original Narrogin doll makers need to be aware of how far the ripples from their wonderful efforts have spread. The dolls are now placed in collections all over Australia, in museums, art galleries, in people's homes and have even travelled as far as China.

What happened when people made dolls?

As the dolls came to life so too did the relationships between women, their families and others in the community. The dolls animated stories, memories and identities, drawing out accounts from the past and stimulating new ideas and aspirations. The textile work encouraged women to share important information about the health of individuals and families. The work in groups gave women physical space and kinetic opportunities to 'feel', experience and make manifest the business of doing community. Making dolls allows them to combine the symbolic and literal acts of weaving, stitching and knitting together their relationships. The crafting of dolls also provided a peaceful experience, safe, calm, comfortable and away from the burdens of everyday life. During the sessions there is often giggling, sometimes even raucous laughter. This provides an enormously important avenue for women to relieve themselves of the many and varied tensions in their lives, offering joyfulness, delight, even at times, bliss.

Reinvigorating old cultural practices and connecting to *boodja* (country)

Important in this project has also been the work the dolls do in helping form and reform people's identity and sense of how they sit within their communities. According to the women involved, designing and dressing up dolls allowed them to try on, experiment with and express different kinds of identities. Sometimes this also involved designing dolls to represent the multiple identities of others, as described by Lesley Riley:

I made quite a few different dolls, they all resembled my family. I first started making coloured eyed babies when my cousin had a little baby with coloured eyes. That was really nice to do. I made it a nice doll with nice tops. I used green cotton to do the eyes and red for the lips.



At times the dolls helped people to explore identity formation as Noongar, wadjela and other Aboriginal identities.

I've got two nieces and their father is a wadjela bloke. I haven't made any white dolls yet but I'd like to make them of my nieces.

The dolls also helped people communicate and express their family and personal connections to 'old' Noongar practices and forms of cultural expression.

One little doll I made I put kangaroo fur on it. I put some salt on it and scraped it down with glass to make it soft as we could. I made a dress and put it on the

doll and it was a really nice little doll and we named it 'Yorga' (woman). It was the only one of its kind. It resembled from the olden days before the white people came.

Some of the dolls were based on the identities of old leaders, loved ones and strong family members.

I made one male doll, it kind of a resemblance of my uncle Dooley and my dad and it was dressed in leather pants and it was the image of them, two in one. My uncle Dooley was really funny and caring and looked after the kids ... He was very generous and kind ... He has passed away now and we miss him.

‘The dolls
helped us
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put people
together’



Sonia Kickett talked about the way doll making also made it possible to celebrate people's lives, their achievements and show others how they too could become 'moorditch' or strong community leaders. In this way the 'doll models were like role models'.

One young girl that I know did a doll of her father, and she named it her Dad. She was telling her story about her dad and about how he was her hero and lots of other people's hero in the community. She used the doll to show others the things that she has seen that he has achieved that make her proud of her dad.

Producing dolls about important people in the community also encouraged people to shape dolls that represented themselves and how they would like to be seen by others in the community. Sonia Kickett provided an example of this:

The dolls were telling the stories about the old days and what people did. In a way the dolls were sitting there telling this to the younger ones. After they saw this a group of boys made these dolls, doing icons of themselves. Their dolls were like little icons for others to see.

As Geri Hayden said, being involved in creating the dolls provided an avenue for people to pass on important Noongar cultural content to young people. 'I wanted to make my doll about the Dreamtime because a lot of our kids don't know about the Dreamtime. I love my culture and I want to share it all the time with kids especially.'

Among many Noongar involved in this work, the business of making dolls provided people with a chance to reacquaint themselves with *boodja* or 'country'. In part this is because for Noongar over the generations *boodja* or 'country' is literally and symbolically an extension of family and self. This reflects long-established ontological traditions that connect the health of country to the health of persons. Bird Rose *et al.* (2002, p. 14) puts it eloquently when she says:

In Aboriginal English, the word 'country' is both a common noun and a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, grieve for country and long for country. People say

that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, and feels sorry or happy. Country is a living entity with a yesterday, a today and tomorrow, with consciousness, action, and a will toward life.

Further, Bird Rose (2004) observes that the process of creating art and craft about family not only involves artists sharing stories and 'going along together', it also animates their relationship with specific places and spaces. As many of the older participants acknowledged, making dolls allowed them to maintain their relationship with Elders and ancestors long passed away but still living as spirits and part of country. Important here is the conception for many Noongar that the dead are an integral part of the maintenance of life and experience of the young and living. In other words, the practice of making dolls (often about their ancestors) implicitly involves communion between the young (the living) and the old (the dead). It involves 'paying dues' to the ancestors, respecting the cycle of life in death and death in life and learning about their obligations to pass this on to those who 'come behind' (Muecke 1997, 2004).

These opportunities to 'return to the old people and reconnect with country' have become all the more urgent in the last one hundred years because many Noongar have become truncated and removed. Distance from country has equated to distance from culture, from health and wellbeing. As expressed by Geri Hayden, 'when we are away from country we get sick more often, healthy country, healthy people so we got to go back to country'.

So the symbolic act of visiting, spending time and nurturing country by creating dolls that 'come from country' is fundamental to healing. Indeed for many senior people it is axiomatic that country is tied up with healing and healing is tied up with country.

Healing, caring for one another and making comfort

In very powerful ways the process of doll making encouraged work concerned with healing and caring for the health of others. As they sewed and wove together material, women talked about important matters associated with the health of individuals and various families. As they sewed they talked, combining the business of art and healing.

Lesley provided a firsthand account of the important role the dolls played in her personal journey of recovery from grief and substance abuse.

Sitting back with the ladies and making dolls you ... think more positive ... My nan and me used to sit up during the night making dolls. She would tell me stories and I would make the dolls. She kept me company when I was going through depression and bad insomnia. Instead of staying in bed I'd get up and make dolls. When nan passed away I hit the drugs hard and wanted to die as well. But in the past year I went and got implants at a clinic to keep me away from alcohol, opiates and marijuana. I have been clean for four months.

In this way, old practices of combining narrative, textile work and care are being carried out. This kind of work is instrumental in the core business of a community maintaining its health, knowledge and social relations. As anthropologist Gluckman (cited in Suciu 2011) points out, this social practice involves taking a positive 'interest in the doings, the virtues and vices of others'. In 17th-century Europe this was highly valued, with those doing such work taking on the name of a *god sip* or a godparent, connecting others to a large network of social relationships. In this way the work involves what Jones (cited in Suciu 2011) calls 'relaxed in-group talk between people in informal contexts'.

'the process of doll making encouraged work concerned with healing and caring for the health of others.'

As the sociologist Norbett Elias (1994, p. 89) points out, a close and tight community requires a healthy flow of this kind of work to keep relationships strong. His classic study of the formation of social solidarity in a 1950s British village established that more 'closely-knit' communities relied on gossip (a word taken from 'god sip') to create 'ready-made channels through which news of public interest could flow' (Elias 1994, p. 90). Supportive social forms, what Elias described as 'praise gossip', is instrumental in helping communities reinforce social cohesion (Van Krieken 1998, p. 144).

The act of making dolls also involves creating a warm, soft and 'huggable' object that is ready and available to embrace, hold close, cuddle and use as a source of comfort. This is precisely what we expect dolls and cuddly toys to do for young children. This can also be so for adults, particularly those who are dealing with troubles. In a way, making a doll is the act of creating a friend who is ready and available during times of pain, trauma and distress to soothe, console, reassure, calm, relieve and ease the pressure of life.

Sometimes this can happen because the dolls are soft to touch, small and unobtrusive enough to enjoy in privacy and in intimate ways. Sometimes the dolls personified real people, representing mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles and grandparents associated with practical care in previous times. In this way, making the dolls involved creating, or rather recreating, something to act as a vessel to hold 'real identities', bringing back loved ones, to hold and hug, perhaps talk with, share and seek counsel from.

These dolls were introduced to others, used to animate stories, gently caressed and sometimes offered as a gift. In this way they were treated as old friends, coming back to help in different ways to heal, educate, narrate and make peace. As Geri Hayden put it:

It was like the dolls helped us talk old times. They helped us start talking about what happened when we was kids. It was really good because a lot of us didn't know where each other come from and who is the families and what families are together. The dolls helped us get a sense of belonging and they started to put people together.

This was reminiscent of the way grass dolls were treated by the women of the *Tjanpi* Desert Weavers. Describing the meeting and greeting that took place when dolls were met at a new exhibition space Foster (in *Tjanpi Desert Weavers*, Fernand Cardoso and Clouston 2009) says,

A few days later the figures are unloaded and set up in the gallery space. Eight desert ladies arrive by plane. They greet the fibre figures like old friends, touching them tenderly and saying hello. They tell stories about them, rearrange them, sing for them, care for them, and joke around. These fibre figures are somehow family.

Here making dolls is also tied up with the relationship between culture and health (Brook *et al.* 1998). Research has long demonstrated that this relationship is critical (Brady 1995, Spicer 2001). For example, Spicer (2001) has concluded that there is a correlation between drinking and cultural loss among First Nation Americans. Likewise, Williams' (1999) research demonstrates that negative conception of one's cultural group is linked with higher levels of psychological distress, alcohol use and poor physical and mental health of African-Americans.

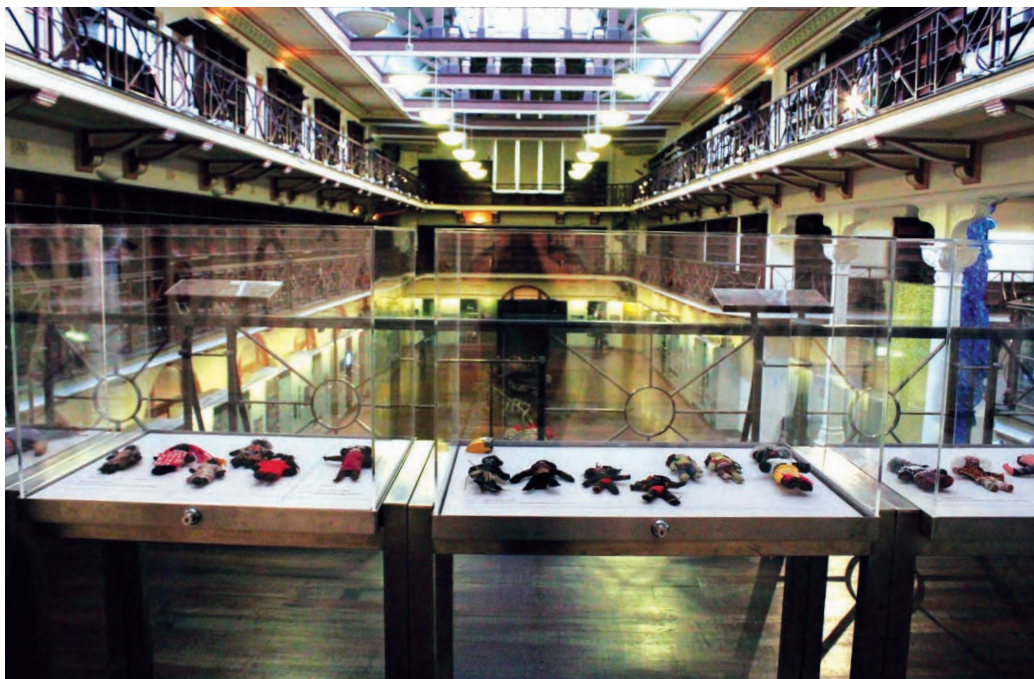
Research has also established that the reinvigoration of traditional cultural practices have been successful in remedying certain health conditions (Brady 1995, Spicer 2001). For example, Spicer (2001) established that the most common feature among abstainers was a strong sense of cultural identity. A range of social psychologists have demonstrated that strength in one's own cultural identity helps protect against and treat negative health behaviours (Chandler *et al.* 2003, Miller, 1999, Williams 1999a, Yancey *et al.* 2002, Williams R. 1999, Williams *et al.* 2003). For example, using language development and cultural practice as treatment has been

found to be very powerful in drug and alcohol therapy with Indigenous people (Spicer 2001). Even increased immunisation rates have been correlated with the maintenance of cultural practice (Anderson *et al.* 1997, Guinn 1998, Salant & Lauderdale 2003, Brook *et al.* 1998).

'making the dolls involved creating, or rather recreating, something to act as a vessel to hold 'real identities', bringing back loved ones, to hold and hug, perhaps talk with, share and seek counsel from'

Many, such as Miller (1999) and Yancey *et al.* (2002) have highlighted the link between positive and cultural socialisation and the improved health of communities. As Halloran (2004, pp. 2–3) points out, for individuals culture provides 'collectively validated ways to think about and value oneself, and ultimately behave towards the physical and social world'. Culture also functions to help one contend with the vast array of uncertainty and anxiety confronting





humans, helping to contend with isolation, identity and social change. In this way culture provides order, structure, meaning and purpose to social interaction. So, by definition, to live as an individual abstracted from culture is to live as one in a constant state of anxiety (Halloran 2004, pp. 3–7).

‘strength in one’s own cultural identity helps protect against and treat negative health behaviours’

Dockery’s (2009a, p. 3) study of the connection between Aboriginal cultural attachment and health found that those with strong involvement in culture have significantly better self-assessed health. The study also found that Aboriginal people with weak or moderate ‘cultural attachment’ are more likely to have been arrested in the past five years. Furthermore, people with strong cultural attachment are less likely to involve themselves in ‘risky’ alcohol consumption

(Dockery 2009, p. 19). This work is important for a number of reasons. It provides empirical confirmation that there are negative impacts on wellbeing if employment and other economic outcomes are pursued in the absence or expense of culture. It also strongly supports the conclusion that projects that include elements of Aboriginal cultural practice are likely to be an integral part of solutions to ill health and social distress (Dockery 2009a, p. 20). Particularly sobering is the evidence that involvement in the practice of culture serves as a strong elixir to mental illness. In particular, the work of Chandler *et al.* (2003) demonstrates that persistence of a sense of self and culture through time guards against youth suicide.

Coming together, dialogue and family/social contact

Another feature of the project was that the weekly sewing and textile workshops provided much opportunity for those involved to fulfill their obligations to maintain contact across family and generations. This reflects the continued importance of what many older *Noongar* refer to as responsibility to *moort* (family).

‘During workshops the expression of deep care for children and young people was very evident. The middle aged and senior women spent much time encouraging younger participants. As one woman said, “we want to hear much more from our young ones. We want to see them coming up and showing the rest of the world that our families are strong”

Although things have changed considerably since the point of contact with non-Aboriginal people, many *Noongar* retain strong family affiliations. This reflects the fact that *Noongar* were divided by birth into moiety groups. One’s place in the *Noongar* family system, automatically established by one’s parents’ group, allowed people to know how to relate to others across an extended family network. This often meant that children and young people were ‘grown up’ with large sets of obligations to many brothers and sisters, uncles, aunties, nephews and nieces. Importantly this system allowed outsiders and those new to a community to be instantly recognised, assigned particular responsibilities and enjoy support and certain rights (see Myers 1991, Folds 2001, Meggit 1987, Karrayili nd, Glass 2002). As Doohan (2008, p. 46) puts it, this represented a ‘powerful and pervasive aspect of people’s lives, providing a kind of map or blueprint of an individual’s connections to others and to country’.

Although these systems have changed considerably, many modern *Noongar* continue to take seriously the importance of reinforcing young people’s social obligations to family. This happened in different ways during the workshops, involving a combination of instruction, proximity with certain people, and expression. The following journal notation provides an example of this.

During a few sessions a couple of young men joined the women. At the beginning they seemed content to sit and watch what was going on, quite passive. Soon they were invited to make dolls. One

lad had been seated next to one of the experienced doll makers. She began to show him a simple stitch, how he could cut out the body and a waistcoat for the doll. He took up the opportunity, not too self-conscious given the fact that all present were busy and sharing in the same task. Soon he was involved in a conversation with the women about school, his plans for the future, his knowledge of the wellbeing of Noongar his age and his interest in other projects (Palmer, evaluation notes, September 2011).

During workshops the expression of deep care for children and young people was very evident. The middle aged and senior women spent much time encouraging younger participants. As one woman said, ‘we want to hear much more from our young ones. We want to see them coming up and showing the rest of the world that our families are strong’.

This work across the generations makes it possible for children and young people to be ‘held’ by their seniors. McCoy (2008, p. 22) discusses this in his book based on fieldwork in the Western Desert region, describing the importance of the *Kukatja* idea of *kanyiminpa*. *Kanyiminpa* is ‘expressed in a number of interconnected ways. It includes nurturance but it also involves older people taking responsibility and offering protection for those they hold. This relationship between the generations is named as “respect”. *Kanyiminpa* is also expressed in relationships that involve teaching and learning where older people help young people “grow up the right way”’.

McCoy (2008, p. 28) claims that this business of ‘holding’ young people, this practice of exercising ‘respect’ towards others, creates social bonds and social obligations to reciprocate. In response when they get older young people will adopt the same practice and attitude towards their children. As one *Kukatja* woman puts it (cited in McCoy 2008, p. 28), ‘they’ll respect you back, as they grow up. They won’t just leave you’. As another puts it, ‘if you hold that person, that person will return that respect to you’ (cited in McCoy 2008, p. 18).

This is similar to the way craft work with spinifex and other desert grass gets used by *Anangu* women’s craft group *Tjanpi* in Central Australia.

At its core *Tjanpi* is about family and community. While out collecting grass, women take time to hunt, gather food, visit sacred sites and teach their children about country. *Tjanpi* work is work that more than accommodates social and cultural obligations; it encourages them (*Tjanpi Desert Weavers*, Fernand Cardoso and Clouston 2009).

Stories, remembering and imagination

One of the key reasons for the establishment of CAN WA's project was to encourage local people to find ways to retell old stories and create new ones about their future. This experience of storytelling, the *raison d'être* for a great deal of arts practice with community, both gives people the chance to bring to the present the elders of the past at the same time as help create the elders for the future.

'This experience of storytelling...gives people the chance to bring to the present the elders of the past at the same time as help create the elders for the future'

This objective is consistent with longstanding *Noongar* traditions of educating their young, transmitting culture, building leaders and managing decisions through the act of storytelling.

As one person involved in the project put it,

I still remember my old grandparents and their noonies (relations) teaching us young ones the old stories. Them stories had all kind of lessons for us kids. We learnt about the seasons, how to show our respect, how to care for country and how to get on with each other through them stories, and usually while we were sitting around the reserve camp (Palmer, evaluation notes, September 2011).

'Bringing out old stories' is important for encouraging healthy communities in a number of ways. Combining storytelling with tactile and active work (for example making dolls) both helps people recall their lives and give life to the audience of the storytelling. It demands that

people exercise a range of senses. In this kind of work people listened to each other while they made, inspected, touched, cuddled and even talked to the dolls. Here doll making acts as a form of mnemonics, improving and bringing to a more public forum people's memories of life as *Noongar* from the Narrogin area.

At the same time, the dolls helped stimulate people's imagination for how things might be different, creating a sense of possibilities, stretching their mind to take on new insights and new ways of configuring a future. According to Sonia Kickett this is precisely what happened to her during the process of making dolls.

When I was making one doll my mind was thinking 'where I could be at this time?' I ended up making a doll I called the 'Getaway Doll' because I was thinking about going to Fiji to get away from all of my stressing. When I was making the doll my mind just de-stressed and I felt really peaceful ... every time I worked on the dolls I went on my own little trip to Fiji.

'At the same time, the dolls helped stimulate people's imagination for how things might be different, creating a sense of possibilities, stretching their mind to take on new insights and new ways of configuring a future'

Storytelling combined with doll making is also an important practical way of challenging people's tendency to recoil from social interaction with each other. In other settings people might describe this as network building. As one woman put it, 'us ladies involved (in the doll making) are *moorditch*, we are solid now because we have sat together, working and raising back up our memories of the old relations. This is something that gets you really talking and sharing together'. Narrative work and storytelling is also important because of its ability to call forth and help people contend with emotions, trauma and difficult situations in a safe and non-threatening way.

Critical in the workshop environment was that people were free to use distinct *Noongar* language forms that were familiar to them. The stories were littered with *Noongar* English, full of *Noongar* words and grammatical expression. As consequence, the language and cultural content used during the storytelling was often evocative, in part because it is 'authentic' and relevant to the experiences of people, in part because it allowed people to inject into their discourse 'in-house' humour, phrasing, meaning and much figurative speaking (see Lakoff 2005).

The storytelling opportunities that emerged from this project are reminiscent of similar work carried out by Aboriginal women in Central Australia. Describing some of the *Tjanpi* (spinifex grass) artistry work *Anangu* elder and artist Josephine Mick observes,

A woman keeps so many memories in her head, about where she has travelled to ... where she grew up, the stories she was taught. So it is very good when she goes back to her own country to collect Tjanpi to make baskets from her own country ... Tjanpi has tjukurpa (story) too (Josephine Mick in *Tjanpi Desert Weavers*, Fernand Cardoso and Clouston 2009).

As Carson (cited in Kearney 2002, p. 125) says, a story creates conditions for a cycle of social contact. Partly this is because a story sets up a relationship between a triad (which according to Simmel is the beginning of community). Every story involves someone (a storyteller who is the first person) telling something (a story about a second person) to someone (a listener who becomes the third person) about something (a real or imaginary world that takes all three to another place) (Kearney 2002, p. 150).

One of the most important achievements of a story is that it, 'communicates new possibilities, illustrates new perspectives, takes people to new places in imagination, and connects imaginatively and metaphorically with a sense of new meaning and purpose' (Parkinson 2009, pp. 19–20).

'us ladies involved (in the doll making) are *moorditch*, we are solid now because we have sat together, working and raising back up our memories of the old relations'

Stories also have an important part to play in the transmission of community values, ideas and culture. The Ancient Greeks understood this, often using mythology and storytelling as a way to teach lessons about virtues and ideas about morality. In part this is because a story can establish patterns in human behaviour and evocatively convey a moral idea without appearing to dictate or moralise (Kearney 2002, p. 20). This is a powerful means of education, particularly when combined with other forms of story activities such as dance, song, ritual, walking and performing (Kearney 2002, p. 36).



Conclusion

In Narrogin the practice of doll making provides us with many metaphors to help think about how to help communities reconfigure themselves, heal and set new directions. In this case those involved in this project have literally re-stitched old fabric and in so doing helped re-stitch old, slightly broken and worn out relationships. They have knitted together different cloth at the same time as unpicking stories and identities reconfiguring what it means to be *Noongar* in the 21st century. This has helped people sort through family health and some social unrest. They have spun and re-spun yarns, weaving together old and new stories, finding ways to bind themselves together.

Members of the group have regularly come together to make soft and cuddly friends to help console and nurture their families and act as comfort during tough times. They have made new friends for themselves and others, fashioning them out of old fabric and old yarns and in the process helping strengthen family relationships.

'They have knitted together different cloth at the same time as unpicking stories and identities reconfiguring what it means to be *Noongar* in the 21st century... They have spun and re-spun yarns, weaving together old and new stories, finding ways to bind themselves together'

There is strong evidence from within the project and from the available research that this kind of work has important social consequences. Work in similar settings has been helpful in **strengthening people's sense of connection with one another**. Indeed, the act of sewing in community is in part the act of weaving together people's relationships. **The social scientific evidence also demonstrates**



a high correlation between 'Indigenous cultural activity' and positive social consequences such as cardiovascular health, good diet and renal function, crime prevention, participation in mainstream employment and training, and suicide prevention. Given the depth and strength of this project's support for cultural transmission, language maintenance, arts and narrative, we can say with real confidence that there is great efficacy in the work.

The *Noongar* doll making project is a story that involves people exercising particular kinds of practices and processes: coming together each

week, passing on knowledge and skills in making things, building together, choosing fabric, being in the company of others, yarnning and storytelling, passing on information about others, cutting, sewing and designing, showing and showing off. Yarning the dolls also involved yarnning together. Cutting up old textile and reshaping it to form dolls also involved reconfiguring relationships. Weaving together the various elements of the dolls helped people weave together their lives and stories. From their conception these dolls are destined to be loved and cherished for life.

Part of the beauty of this story is that many of the things that these people did when they made the dolls are the very things that we need to do to make and keep healthy community.

For the full list of bibliographic sources referred to in this essay, go to:
www.canwa.com.au/canwa-resources/publications/project-publications/

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Dr Dave Palmer teaches in the Community Development program at Murdoch University in Perth. He spends a fair amount of time in regional and remote Australia, looking for examples of projects that are having a positive impact on people's lives. He has come to the conclusion that to work successfully with complex communities one needs to be artful, use a repertoire of creative methods and learn to improvise. Dave has been travelling along with CAN WA over the last two years as part of an ongoing research project to help understand CAN WA's particular approach to the arts, performance, culture and community development.