Essay

Danger Is a Signal, Not a State: Bigaagarri—An Indigenous Protocol for Dancing Around Threats to Wellbeing

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Abstract: This paper describes the health and wellbeing applications of a protocol designed from a Gumbaynggirr Australian First People's concept, Bigaagarri. The protocol reframes threats to health and wellbeing as part of a communicative system of environmental signals, rather than an individualised, behavioural fight–flight–fear response. Developed by a Muruwari Gumbaynggirr researcher, the protocol enfolds Aboriginal perspectives of health values and the physicality of personal location in place and social context. It combines Indigenous standpoint theory and lived-experience narrative research methods to translate Indigenous practices into generally accessible modalities. The paper connects the first principles of this protocol to literature, then, using code-switching between academic and informal settler and Indigenous voices, it introduces personal lived experience narratives that include utilisation of the participatory and immersive protocol seen in the graphical abstract image to mitigate suicidal ideation. This approach unsettles Westernised conceptions of health and wellbeing research that privilege disease-specific, single-solution approaches. It contests the dominant social imaginaries and narratives embedded in standard service models, which perpetuate the ongoing recolonisation of Indigenous identities, and common exclusion of others outside of the neurotypical majority. The Bigaagarri protocol is a potential way forward to reimagine preventive health landscapes, decolonise support for suicide and mental health through the embedding of Indigenous knowledges to lead to holistic approaches for wellbeing.

Keywords: cultural protocol; indigenous knowledge systems; indigenous standpoint theory; narrative and ethical theory; design; lived-experience research

1. Introduction

Bigaagarri is a Gumbaynggirr First People's concept that frames danger and threats to health and wellbeing as environmental signalling within bio-cultural systems, experienced as a shared relational phenomenon rather than a personal fight–flight–fear response. The Bigaagarri protocol was developed and shared by Muruwari Gumbaynggirr researcher Phillip Orcher. It was conceived alongside Indigenous understandings of land-based communication and traditional knowledge transmission described in Aboriginal pedagogy research (Yunkaporta 2019, 2023; Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth 2020) that connected the two Aboriginal authors (Orcher and Yunkaporta) through common cultural landscapes and the non-Indigenous (settler) author (Palmer) through long engagement with and implementation of that research in mental health and community settings. The research and reporting

of Bigaagarri claims space within Indigenous standpoint theory (Foley 2002). It elevates the collective lived experience of the Aboriginal research lead and his familial, kin, and community connections, entangled with the diverse life-worlds of his two research colleagues within a narrative research framing (Ntinda 2019, p. 412; Bruner 1987). Standpoint theory and lived narrative (story telling) are therefore combined to share the cultural concept and outline the development of the Bigaagarri protocol with its possible applications.

Bigaagarri facilitates yarning about health and wellbeing through an interactive process nested within ways of valuing (axiology), ways of being (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology), and ways of doing (methodology), which form a framework for Indigenous methods of inquiry (Wilson 2008). The Bigaagarri protocol therefore speaks to Indigenous systems of cultural concepts, practices, and processes which operate simultaneously. The final protocol is expressed as a highly collaborative, participatory, relational, and holistic pathway. The Bigaagarri protocol resists the separation of old ways and new ways. It positions Aboriginal people as agents embedded in modernity with long traditions of adaptivity reflecting cultural continuity in responsive relation with an ever-changing world (Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth 2020).

Our story therefore is more than a recount of research processes traversing perceived feedback loops between the ancient and the modern. At its heart, Bigaagarri embodies a culturally responsive practice that has been developed to transform the impacts of WEIRD (Western Educated Industrialised Rich Democratic) (Apicella et al. 2020) health interventions that continue to be generated through Anglo settler service logics (Higgins and Lenette 2024). It privileges the lived experience of Indigenous people and people experiencing mental ill-health and suicidality (as it might be termed) in dominant culture service settings, who have consistently called for more experiential, connected, and holistic systems of care (Banfield et al. 2024). These calls are consistently sidelined and remain distal experiences for many people with lived experience (who are also referred to in government policies and published literature as consumers, carers, peers, service users, and more recently as people bringing lived/living expertise) (Palmer et al. 2024). Sadly, it is the case that dominant wellbeing narratives (Elraz and McCabe 2023) emphasise the neoliberal values of individual responsibility and economic productivity as the desired outcomes that currently shape largely dysfunctional systems of care. While social and emotional wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are tied to community-led frameworks, the norms and values of universalising Western service logics still prevail, even within preventative and public health models which aim to work at community levels. There is an urgent need for reform in this area. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)'s release of death data for 2023, for example, showed that suicide is the leading cause of death among Aboriginal children and Indigenous suicide rates in general have escalated by 30 per cent in the last five years (Skehan and Dudgeon 2024). These unacceptable statistics confirm the need for decolonising approaches in mental health, suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention models of care and for the delivery of social and emotional wellbeing programs.

In contrast to dominant models of care, the Bigaagarri protocol prioritises research-informed links between land, language, culture, cognition, and behaviour (Hunt and Banaji 1988; Evans 2009; Sharifian 2017). It draws together cultural concepts, practices, and processes for an environmentally driven, contextual awareness to ground discussions about wellbeing. In this approach, threats to wellbeing are reconceptualised within a field of agentic interdependence and brought into focus alongside strengths-based, narrative, and preventative approaches fostering collective and self-awareness. For this reason, the Bigaagarri protocol has been designed to be engaged with via three modalities: as *On Country Only* (following yarning methods) (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010); or as a

paper-based approach (using a purposefully designed artefact—as shown in the graphical abstract—to facilitate a yarn with text or symbols added); or as a digitally enhanced process which we will come to explain. We now provide some background literature to outline the development of the Bigaagarri protocol using Indigenous standpoint theory with lived narrative (personal storytelling).

2. Psychologies of Connection and Separation

There has been growing recognition in the academy that the cognitive and behavioural orientations of WEIRD cultures only represent the lived experience of a minority of the world's population (Henrich et al. 2010; Apicella et al. 2020). Western frameworks are often inadequate for describing or accommodating the psychological needs of most human beings (Henrich et al. 2010), and they dominate biomedical systems of knowledge and practice through what has been termed as 'psychocentricism' ((Rimke 2016) cited in (Ansloos et al. 2024, p. 2)). Our review of literature on WEIRD and non-WEIRD psychologies reveals that this can result in compartmentalised thinking about problems; separation of mental, physical, and social health needs from each other; and disconnection of approaches from communities and environment.

Non-WEIRD cultures tend to cultivate more high-context cognition and behavioural responses (Samovar et al. 2013), categorising things thematically (for example, kinship relation, seasonal relation, spatial relation, totemic relation) and demonstrating a broad focus of visual attention (Rhode et al. 2016) and a situational bias when it comes to causes in attribution (Varnum et al. 2010). An example of situational bias might be, 'Oh! That was a terrible thing she did! Something must be going on for her at home'. In high-context communities, these orientations do not exist in isolation within each person—they are formed within life-worlds of dense sociality, in which revolving feedback loops of information processing and behavioural responses are co-constructed, navigated, and known within collectives (Murdoch 1988). Knowledge production is collaborative and oral/experiential rather than print-based, with cognitive processes and behavioural patterns modified by our environment, language, culture, and relations, directing attention to particular patterns, connections, and responses to stimuli (Bender and Beller 2016; Cibelli et al. 2016).

WEIRD cultures and power systems are characterised by knowledge production that is dominated by print-based processes, which isolate concepts and language from the complexities of relational contexts (Havelock 1982). In the psychological orientation of these societies, there is a narrow visual focus and a dispositional bias in causal attribution that usually dominates cognition and behaviour (Varnum et al. 2010), which can present as collective pathologies such as racism and misogyny. An example of dispositional bias might be, 'Oh! That was a terrible thing she did! But they all do that—they are a violent people'. This orientation is part of what is termed field-independent cognition and behaviour (Murdoch 1988), which dissociates the mind and body of the thinker and doer from the field of interdependent relations in which they exist. From an Indigenous perspective informed by standpoint theory (Nakata 2007; Wilson 2008), this might be described as a pathology in which a person's ontology (what is real) becomes stifled by their relationally limited epistemology (what is true), which in turn affects their methodology (what is done), feeding back into an increasingly dissociative condition in their axiology (what is right).

However, note that even with an Indigenous theoretical lens applied, the print-based academic modality of this paper separates the concepts from each other and from their living context of oppression and exclusion, as detached and clinical observation and analysis. Shared narratives of collective and personal lived experience are therefore needed to understand the realities of Indigenous minds operating in hostile systems designed for low-context, field-independent thinkers. The wet reality of dispositional bias in dominant

culture systems is perhaps best expressed through a moment shared by the Aboriginal researchers while working on this project, when the lead researcher, who is darker-skinned, was stopped at a building entrance by security for a minute without any explanation offered, then was reluctantly allowed to enter. He summed up the incident with a phrase weighted with the despair of a multitude of similar encounters: *'I'm black all the time.'* (July 2023).

The power of this shared story demands that we begin code-switching in this paper, sharing lived experience narratives and finding cross-cultural common ground between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and readers. As described in Baldo and Deganutti (2024), code-switching is not only about an indexing of group identity, but rather 'bringing together and contrasting socio-cultural perspectives that are pivotal in the overall narrative.' (Baldo cited in Baldo and Deganutti 2024, p. 2). We find encouragement in the fact that most human beings across the global north and south have always lived within cultures of field-dependent or distributed cognition (Arnau et al. 2013) and that many non-Indigenous communities (e.g., in Russia and Scotland) still enjoy this orientation (Murdoch 1988). All people involuntarily or voluntarily occupied by WEIRD empires often employ code-switching or other anti-assimilatory behaviours and thus experience a shift between interdependent and independent cognition according to their context from moment to moment (Rodríguez-Arauz et al. 2017).

So cognitive and discursive shifts through code-switching is not only available to Indigenous people: there is no pure, essentialised state of pre-contact ways of being—it must be noted that all cultures are fluid products of histories that are continually unfolding and interacting with outside influences (Iliev and Ojalehto 2015). All cultures and people may transition from independent to interdependent cultural and cognitive orientations (Greenfield et al. 2003) and back again, creating new social imaginaries in dialogue.

In honouring the embodied, field-dependent psychology behind the Bigaagarri protocol as a potential change-making tool for all people to use, as well as the importance we have demonstrated of including voices of lived experience, we will begin now switching codes and genres within the paper. This is a necessary requirement, in that, for any question of what matters—which is the starting point for Bigaagarri processes—the preceding question must always be, for whom does this matter? This standpoint acknowledges, then, the interconnectedness between sharing stories as expressions of identities, self and values, and the ways in which this can foster connectedness.

3. Materials and Method

3.1. Contextual Awareness Bringing Bigaagarri into Being

> . . .*But seriously: together we will find that it's not the content that matters—it's the process and the relation. For that, we have to bring the stories together. . . Take a minute to retrieve one of [y]our stories, then, if you want to proceed let it weave in with a story from the web of relationships that is me-[you].* (Yunkaporta 2023, p. 7)

I-we accept this invitation.

First, I wish to acknowledge the many Countries that have influenced my ways of knowing, being and doing. This begins with my families' Countries that shape my values, protocols, systems, and processes as a First Nations adult male within the colonial systems of Australia. I identify first and foremost as a Muruwari/Gumbaynggirr Freshwater and Saltwater man. This means I have family connections to river people in what are called the Central West New South Wales communities of Goodooga and further inland of central southern Queensland, from the Grandmothers' of my mother's side families. The other side of me are the connections to the Saltwater people of Gumbaynggirr Country, the mid-North coast communities of Red Rock and Coffs Harbour in New South Wales. I also write this

paper with influences of Gadigal Country, where my upbringing was completed before fatherhood and within the context of the Wurundjeri Country of the Kulin nations, where my academic career has been nurtured.

In the context of this story, I write from illegally occupied lands, within what First Nations scholars have termed 'Indigenous–settler relations' that underly every interaction of my life. In Indigenous–settler relations, 'communication includes a holistic understanding of relationships that is not limited to personal relations but the relationships with Indigenous Nations and among communities' (McMahon et al. 2019, p. 4538). In under two centuries, ongoing colonisation has impacted First Nations people through acts of genocide and assimilation that directly affect my family's and people's Lore, customs, and practices such as hunting, speaking language, and most significantly spirituality. I recognise my own lived experience reflected in research papers exploring intergenerational trauma: the reality that poverty, trauma, and violence run through generations all dealing with the ongoing impacts of our colonial past and present. This unhealed wound is infected with the ongoing harms of stigma, discrimination, racism, suicide, and trauma of occupations, a particular pathology now being called by us compound trauma. In my experience this manifests as a constant psychic, spiritual, and physical pain, the weight of which creates cracks, fissures, and openings in identities and ways of being that allow a multitude of other ills to enter my life.

Wisdom from my freshwater and saltwater countries has helped me deal with the grief that is known in my culture as 'sorry business', which my culture frames as part of the inevitable process of the lifecycle of all beings. But many of our people die significantly earlier than they should because of introduced chronic diseases such as diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular conditions, and respiratory diseases. The Aboriginal Health and Medical Council of New South Wales recognises these conditions as the main contributors to the devastating loss of life within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, not only in New South Wales but Australia-wide (AH&MRC 2020). Social determinants of health contribute to this, systematically built into the daily lives of First Nations people since colonisation, along with dispossession limiting our ability to practice cultural traditions of health and care since first contact. Today, I introduce you to the Gumbaynggirr protocol Bigaagarri. This is knowledge I discovered within sorry business: times for family and community to mourn, celebrate, and regrow lives, during transitions to a new phase of life for all who are connected to a lost loved one.

My loved one was my matriarch, my mother who at 4 years old was finally afforded voting rights as a citizen when she came of age, in the 1967 referendum. She was 57 years old with an ongoing chronic condition of cardiovascular disease that was to claim her life at the age of 42. Her strength and spirit granted her an extra 15 years beyond her expected lifespan, yet this was still well short of the average life span of 85.4 years for non-Aboriginal women living in metropolitan Australia. My family has been robbed of decades of love and knowledge due to this systemic gap. Within the pain of processing the loss of a loved one and the frustrations of struggling within the social determinants that shorten Aboriginal lives, I was emotionally numb and disconnected from myself and wanted to share the pain and anger in a legal and controlled space. I arrived at the only outlet for me that presented itself, which was boxing.

3.2. The Footwork of Boxing as Grounding for Bigaagarri

Working within the controlled boundaries of boxing was the only time I felt present, the only time I felt something—not by inflicting damage to an opponent but when receiving blows. I could feel again, sensing that a new person was emerging from all the sorry business or grief. Upon reflection, this was a form of self-harm, and I was lucky to have

a boxing coach who recognised my lack of responsibility for defence and safety within controlled combat (sparring) situations. He expressed concern for my safety, not just physically but most importantly spiritually. This triggered a firm discussion of taking personal safety seriously or risking removal from full-contact sparring sessions. This was the beginning of what you will learn throughout this paper as the Bigaagarri protocol.

The protocol developed from my understanding of what must happen before a boxer is ready to fight. Before entering the ring, a boxer's capabilities must be developed over time until the coach judges their health and endurance is sufficient to endure combat, but most importantly that they are equipped with the skill sets needed to compete with an opponent, to identify signs and signifiers of an opponent's strengths and weaknesses, as well as their own, to create effective strategies.

Over time, this training inspired the conception of Bigaagarri as a vehicle to be strategically aware of oneself, of one's own attributes and capabilities, and those of others. Bigaagarri is a way of dealing with complex, high-stress environments, modelled on techniques for recognising signs and signifiers within what may be seen as combat states. These might be ones that are expected within the controlled environment of a boxing ring but also in relation to everyday life. Although it may seem brutal, damage is minimised by good preparation: in boxing, the word 'dangerous' is only associated with scenarios that one is not prepared for. Thus, Bigaagarri is a tool for beginning to prepare oneself.

The word 'danger' does not exist at all in our Aboriginal languages as an abstract concept. As Aboriginal people, we name and focus on understandings of signals—the environmental and behavioural signs of factors contributing to potential risk. *Bigaagarri* in the Gumbaynggirr language is our word for this, roughly translated as a signal prompting awareness of danger or threats. Gumbaynggirr Country incorporates predictable signs and signifiers in people, times, and places through the living knowledge of contextual indicators that reveal the many threats facing Saltwater people in every season. It is a symbiotic signalling within the relationships of the Country.

For example, when the paperbark trees flower during what is known locally as the mullet run, it is known that the mullet fish begin to seek warmer waters to mate closer to the shores and riverbanks. What we know is that this brings the threat of sharks who hunt the schools of fish that gather in the smaller waterways where communities usually swim. For us mob in Gumbaynggirr, this means you stay back and don't go in the water when you see the Bigaagarri signal of white flowers in the paperbarks.

Indigenous cultures all over the world have lived in harmony with nature's predators and other dangerous plants, animals and phenomena since the beginning of time, practicing avoidance behaviours in seasonal cycles through an understanding of environmental signals. Australian First Nations people are no different. Despite the destruction of biodiversity during colonisation, Australia still has 66 venomous species ranging from land-dwelling and aquamarine species that our people have coexisted with for millennia. Each land- and water-based nation uses different terminology and concepts from the WEIRD concept of danger associated with these species and have distinct traditional environmental indicators to see the signs and signifiers to manage not only the threat of harm but manage environmental disruption.

Bigaagarri is just one expression of this Indigenous principle, from the mid-north coast of Eastern Australia, where the Gumbaynggirr nation identify as Saltwater people. Saltwater (the Ocean) plays host to blue-ringed octopus, jellyfish, box jelly and stone fish, coral reef snakes, sting rays, saltwater crocodiles, and last but not least, sharks. Bigaagarri signals are not just for our safety—we also have obligations to ensure the safety of the 'dangerous creatures' themselves, as these animals are totems and revered as deities that

we must protect and respect at all costs. This is considered Lore, a spiritual obligation to community, nation, and self.

As Aboriginal people, we do not have safety regulations and procedures, but instead we have systems of responsibility and profound awareness of constantly changing contexts of risk and responsive care. This is the Bigaagarri protocol—a contextual awareness of threats and dangers that help us to maintain a whole connection within health and wellbeing, to anticipate the risks for self and others ahead. When the paperbark flowers, you don't go in the water and you warn others as well, while caring for the sharks, paperbarks, and mullet in land management and ceremony. When you step into the boxing ring, you make sure you are healthy and strong and that you are trained to understand the strengths and weaknesses of yourself and your opponent, to respond with the best strategy. To move into contextual awareness through Bigaagarri means placing yourself in location, in country, on land, and engaging in a relationship with us.

In this instance, the footwork of the boxer grounds us in a circle of situated environmental awareness, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Concept drawing of the *Bigaagarri* protocol by Murawari/Gumbaynggirr researcher Phillip Orcher.

3.3. The Application of the Bigaagarri Protocol

Bigaagarri as a kinaesthetic, On Country yarning process, then, starts *first* by placing one foot down firmly on the ground in the centre of the first circle (as shown by the foot in the middle of the small central black circle in Figure 1). The four things that matter for one's wellbeing as applied to the topic at hand are written one, at the top of the toes; two, around to the right in the inner step of the foot; three, along the bottom of the foot around the heel; and four, on the outer edge of the foot. *Second*, the feet step out of the first circle and are placed into the second larger circle, where the four things that keep 'what matters' safe are written down. These are above the toes to each corner (as shown by the yellow second circle in Figure 1). The third circle adds four more elements into the picture—these are four things that threaten any of the eight things you may be trying to protect—in this outer circle, the feet then turn outward (as shown by the red outer circle layer). These last four elements represent the Bigaagarri—that is, the things that threaten individual and/or group wellbeing that we need to stay back from.

The things that threaten what matters subsequently become the focus for developing a mud map (or in settler terminology, 'a plan') within the protocol about what could help or be enacted to prevent or address the threats to wellbeing. The Bigaagarri protocol therefore highlights the threats/danger that are present for a person or a group in one's environment and what one needs to bring these into contextual awareness, to stay safe and sidestep

where possible. This kinaesthetic application is important for On Country work, as it creates a relation with people to the Country they are on and creates an embodied experience between the teller and listener. Additionally, as Myers (2025, p. 337) has described, this process itself becomes one of storying place (or spatial storying) where 'intangible forms of living and cultural knowledge of the environment' can be sustained. As we have noted earlier, all communities have different signals and signs of Bigaagarri and different names and ways of knowing Bigaagarri, so sharing this process On Country enables co-learning about place, culture, and people to emerge. Additionally, the approach is beneficial for supporting emotional wellbeing and connectedness as one's agentic awareness is redirected toward bodily placement, sharing knowledge and local systems, with threats being externalised instead of the question–answer nature of Western framed risk assessments. These shifts are essential for suicide support and mental health programs.

The Bigaagarri protocol as described above from Figure 1 has been applied On Country for yarns with people about the priorities that matter for their social and emotional wellbeing and using the second modality of a paper-based process. The paper-based modality was applied in a recent implementation co-evaluation, where an integrated lived-experience research team examined the experiences and implementation factors within mental health and suicide crisis support services that have been co-designed and delivered as cost-free, referral-free walk-in models in Australia (The ALIVE National Centre 2024).

In the paper-based process, non-Indigenous staff gathered to discuss priorities within the service model from their perspective and identified things that mattered to them in their roles. They identified the things that kept what matters safe, and then the threats to those eight things were also discussed. Using a diagrammatic outline of Bigaagarri on paper to guide this conversation, workers contributed what mattered to them, what kept these things safe, and what might be threatening these eight things. This helped them to share insights into the implementation challenges of a new model of care for mental health and suicide support. Here we share the text versions of what was elicited in this conversation in Table 1 to illustrate the application and development of the paper-based process.

Table 1. Using the Bigaagarri protocol to yarn about new service innovations.

What Are Four Things That Are Important Things for You in Your Role?	What Keeps the Four Important Things Safe and Contributes in a Positive Way to Your Work?	What Is *the Bigaagarri* to These Things That Matter and What Keeps Them Safe?
Space and physical environment. Training and development. Using my lived experience. Diverse teams.	Access to in- house support services from a psychiatrist. Lived experience specific training for staff, in particular, for the clinicians. Promote supervision and liaison between wellbeing coaches (alternative name used for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peer workforce) and clinician. Listen to staff for the renovations to ensure safety from guests.	The recruitment process for clinicians including key supportive and administration officers to ensure that they want to stay. Ensuring clinical leads are meeting their professional body's requirements aligned with lived experience service delivery. Overall alignment of all process being used.
Lived experience role. Supporting others and providing hope for others. Assisting in linking into other support. Being myself.	Comfortable and nice space to work in. Support from team members/staff. Providing time off if needed without making you feel guilty or bad for needing the time. Giving us, as workers space to talk.	Not enough training on dealing with violent or aggressive guests. Unrealistic expectations of case load. Lower pay rates compared to other organisations.

What Are Four Things That Are Important Things for You in Your Role?	What Keeps the Four Important Things Safe and Contributes in a Positive Way to Your Work?	What Is *the Bigaagarri* to These Things That Matter and What Keeps Them Safe?
My lived experience. Supportive space, supporting people. Sharing skills with guests to live the life they want to live. Networking to find community supports. Happy supportive place staff/boss.	It's a good space to see guests. Coffee and biscuits are good to engage with guests. Goal training resources. Good tools to support me in my role.	Recruiting the right clinicians to ensure stability and build experience for them with lived experience. Funding. The safety of the guest and staff. Primary health network data are not shared with us so we cannot get a sense of how to deliver service.
Team environment. Fun. The space. Bring lived experience to work.	Not being micro-managed. Room to be myself. Space to express myself. Foster identity.	Lack of resources. Clarity of roles. Lack of security. Needing to recruit staff.
Therapeutic safe space for guests and staff to work. Recovery-focused. Supportive team.	Constant supervision. Funding, Training. Flexibility. Availability of management.	Structures and processes are not clear. Instability of clinical leads. Lack of psychologists. Internships and assessments.

The application of Bigaagarri using paper-based modalities meant that the staff could share what mattered for them in a new model of care and the research team were able to develop a contextual awareness of the environment within which staff were working. It also meant that the signals of what threatens staff wellbeing could be established for future consideration. In contrast to an interview method where opportunities and challenges may be discussed, the protocol enabled deeper insights into what threatens individual roles, cultures and norms because people were focused again on the process and practice of Bigaagarri rather than the being self-conscious about information shared. Sharing personal perspectives on roles and what matters can be challenging to discuss for lived-experience workers where power asymmetries and speaking up are often experienced as risky and threatening.

Moving from the kinaesthetic and paper-based approaches to the digitally enhanced process will see Bigaagarri extended as a participatory and interactive process using augmented reality. This stage of work has commenced with co-design planned with Gumbaynggirr and Aboriginal communities. The digitally enhanced process brings augmented reality into the protocol so that 'a bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence [can be] developed through vicarious and bodily absorption of cultural knowledge and multi-sensorial participation within the living environment' (Myers 2025, p. 378). As Azuma (1997, p. 356) cited in (McMahon et al. 2019) explains,

> '*Augmented Reality allows the user to see the real world, with virtual objects superimposed upon or composited with the real world. Therefore, AR supplements reality, rather than completely replacing it. Ideally, it would appear to the user that the virtual and real objects coexisted in the same space.*'

Given that what threatens the things that matter for people and what keeps them safe do coexist, augmented reality within the Bigaagarri protocol is a logical step for creating an immersive experience that can bring together the land, cultural, and environmental links underpinning the approach. The digitally enhanced process of Bigaagarri is currently in development and will be co-created as an online platform to implement preventive, experiential, arts and cultural evidence models (PEACE models). This platform will provide

communities and health care workers with access to the Bigaagarri protocol, whereby the three questions can be completed as part of an online tool, and then saved within a closed database for future access. In addition to things that matter and what keeps them safe and what threatens these being gathered in the online database, the platform will house community-created visual assets that enable augmented reality to supplement holistic health conversations for future planning for wellbeing. This provides an experience of Indigenous values, protocols, systems and processes for wellbeing (The ALIVE National Centre 2024). The design and development of this platform will ensure that a closed, secure database supports the facilitated conversations so that Indigenous Data Sovereignty is established and maintained throughout. What this means is that reflective of Indigenous knowledge systems, the Bigaagarri protocol is adaptive to environmental contexts and supports people in expressing their lived realities, as a relationally responsive standpoint (Foley 2002).

3.4. Retrieval

> *Take a minute to retrieve one of [y]our stories, then, if you want to proceed let it weave in with a story from the web of relationships that is me-[you].* (Yunkaporta 2023, p. 7)

I weave my story into the web of relationships for us-all here, as a first-generation White settler woman, born into this modern nation state constructed as Australia. I have come to live with privileges borne out of threats and dangers to my own wellbeing, but also borne of threats and dangers to the wellbeing of others through my connections with colonial pasts. How do you engage with *Bigaagarri* when your own culture is the shark in this scenario? I never really had opportunities to deeply connect with place. We did not learn about Country as symbiosis, Country as communication, Country as story, and Country as protection—we always knew of another land that some called the motherland, but that's a hard concept to share when you are here, and she is there.

The motherland is where family *were*, where our heritage *was* from, where some family stayed but some were also moved here. Who were they and who are we? I reckon in lots of ways we searched for something that connected us to here from there. Maybe we took a wrong turn there in our search for place. I had a transitory childhood moving from place to place, home to home, it was more important that we could be somewhere rather than nowhere. When we finally had one place, it was in the working-class suburbs of Logan courtesy of government housing—those days, Logan felt like a town far, far away from the big city of Brisbane now recognised rightly as Meanjin—Turrbal and Yuggera Country.

Those days, it was fun to hang out under the streetlight together and run around like one big family with the neighbourhood kids, when your own family was torn apart. Those days it was hard to front up, never quite having the right clothes, the newest shoes, or having money to get the bus into school. Maybe it's why I walk a long way these days to wind down from the stressors of the world and decompress from the weight of being—past into present and what we carry with us and all that.

Sometimes, as you got old enough, you'd get all dressed up in all your fancy clothes to go to the city for a day on the train and make an outing of it all. You'd also get all messed up too if you didn't have the right group to hang with, and if you looked at people the wrong way in the streets sometimes. But somehow, we all kept each other safe. Was it this or was it that which led my story further afield, to the wilds of Brazil where we spoke Portuguese, danced away the nights with armed watchman on the streets at night. I'd never seen a gun before, but they said it is important to keep the street safe—except when the guns are outside the schools and you're looking at today's newspaper cast over the most recent victim. There it is in black and white. It's 1991, I am back, the city calls and the dance halls are lit up more—but I am still nowhere and something is always in disconnect.

There was *Bigaagarri* all around—if you were not so contextually aware, you would not know it was inside your home; if you couldn't find it there, you could find it on the streets. But that's not the way you treat a lady settler woman, and that ain't no way to act with good manners and stiff-upper-lip English culture—it is how it was, and it was how it is. Have I introduced my relation with you? A need for an unlearning is calling to us. In my unsettling of the settler, I think on how my grandmother lived to be 100 years old—that means, she was born in 1913, it is only 125 years after colonisation (1788) here in Australia. The haunting of an intergenerational web woven into the spectre of the present. Switch.

3.5. Fields of Risk and Response

I am a Pama, belonging to the Apalech clan, with distant relations in Nungar communities and what we call Lost Mobs. Lost Mob refers to Aboriginal people who have been irretrievably separated from ancestral relations and have not yet been reclaimed culturally through marriage or adoption. Most of us have these ambiguous entanglements of fragmented and undocumented relations, as a result of the clumsy genocide that continues to displace and remove us after two centuries of British occupation. For so many of us, our identities are as precarious as our existence and I feel the agony of this every minute of each day.

I write these words from a condition of uneasy locatedness on Bunurong land, on disputed territory where I am welcome on the fringes but not in uptown circles in this city. So, I hover here, in a settler state named after the long-dead queen Victoria, pining for my family home over three thousand kilometres north in a different state, which also names itself the land of the queen—Queensland. The latest Queen recently died and passed ownership of our lands to a King.

I have enemies here who carry the voice of the king and wield it over me with the implacable cruelty unique to narcissists, who can only process the shame of their violent ways by projecting it onto their victims. They enjoy the spoils of their conquest while screeching assertions that they themselves are oppressed, marginalised by marauding minorities and uppity fellas like me. The best of them moan empty apologies or acknowledgements and clutch their real estate like pearls, while the worst of them feel emboldened by the majority vote of the referendum that denied First Peoples a voice, and they shout words at me in public that I haven't heard uttered aloud since I was a child.

So now my young, neurodivergent children ask me what 'filthy abo' means and I am booed off the stage in cosmopolitan Melbourne with jeers of 'fucken coon!'. I fight three men in the street one night who also name me that way, and find myself in handcuffs with pepper spray in my eyes, a dozen injuries and an Alsatian dog hunting me when I almost escape, running through thick scrub and swimming along a polluted creek.

My community knows me as *weenth*, which is our word for both deaf and crazy, because neurodivergence in our culture is understood as a condition that interferes with a person's ability to listen. Listening is everything in our way—the foundation of thinking, right relation, care, and knowledge. So, madness and deafness are labelled the same way. This sounds insensitive but it signals the way people arrange relationships and responsibilities around me On Country and in community, so that I am in harmony with place and people, and always able to meet my obligations to care for myself, family and land.

However, in the city I have been diagnosed with culture-bound syndrome, and my particular ensemble of symptoms are unique to Aboriginal people experiencing displacement from family and community. These symptoms overlap partially with my diagnosis of bipolar affective disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) but bring additional horrors such as fugue states and memory loss, suicidal ideation, self-harm,

suicide attempts and memory loss. I am Country, and this embodiment means my being and behaviour echo the afflictions of improper relation and degradation on the lands I move through in my itinerant existence.

The hellscape of my brain chemistry is hard to live with, and I am often confused between correlation and causation, signal and noise. I forget my culture in those moments, puzzling over how I might be co-creating this reality as an individual with a broken mind. But then I see the tiny mounds made by those they call *booran* in this place.

> *I am crawling along the creek bed, warrior skills activating as I make myself invisible to my pursuers. Torchlight and barking fades as they miss me and seek in the wrong direction. The side of my face pressed to the mud, I have an ant's view of the bank and see their tiny paths and where they have placed their homes as they care for the waterways and direct their flows. They are high in the trees now, eggs stored under the bark against the rain that will come tomorrow, stars in the clear night sky signalling the end of their mating ceremony time and the passing of their winged transformation and love dances. Bright flowers reflect the celestial signs, their scent bringing out seasonal foragers and calling in itinerant species, birds and insects and people like me. Bugs and skinks are climbing the bank, fleeing the flood that will come tomorrow. A warmer breeze nudges me downstream and all the signals and timings of this place form the grammar and vocabulary of the land. The voice of Country. It gives me instruction for how I should crawl and swim down the gully and then up the far ridge to safety.*

The voice stays with me later, the signal stronger than the noise of the shouted orders and questions and the sirens and the muted hum of the engine in the back of the paddy wagon. The signal is there in the jail cell, amplified acoustics as I sing it and stomp it and clap it in the rhythms of the waterways I feel beneath the ground. The voice comes through me in ancient language without pause, deafening my keepers until they can't take it anymore, and they transfer me to the psych ward. I don't remember much of it, and I read the witness statements like they are bad haikus written about a different man, a stranger.

> *A big man screaming*
> *'Aboriginal land here!'*
> *Scared he might come in.*

But I remember every word from the voice of the creek, because I carve them all into wood in the weeks after. A shield, a bowl, a boomerang, made from the wood of invasive European trees that choke out our waterways. Our cultural objects hold truth and memory for us, and so I know what is real.

I stand in the centre of three circles Brother Phil made for me, and maybe I'm cradling the bowl to keep and nurture things, or maybe I'm holding up the shield and blocking other things, or maybe I'm swinging the boomerang and it's whistling through the air, cutting the voice of the king. Whichever, I only hear the voice in here, the signal of what is real amidst all the noise of the unreal. I'm a carer who also needs care, and that only works when I stand like this, and find ways to listen. Applying Bigaagarri to my own suite of treatment protocols, which included therapy and medication, my family and I were able to heal the symptoms that standard treatment could not reach with 'high-risk' and 'danger zone' frames: suicidal ideation and self-harm. Since then, I have enjoyed almost a year without psychosis or suicide attempts, and without arrests or admission to psych wards.

4. Discussion

Switching Back

Bigaagarri brings us three to a shared lived-realities of what matters, of what keeps that safe, and what threatens those things. This is enriched by insider and outsider knowledge of settler contexts to recognise signal systems of ongoing threat from colonial harms and pathologies at the population level as well as at the level of our entangled personal relations. This enables bringing together a framework of experiences to bear on the problems at hand which serve to support decolonisation of distress, trauma, violence, and health and wellbeing and how we respond in relation to this. In the centre of Bigaagarri, we catch our breath, duck and keep our guard up. In the second circle, we step up to defend what matters, blocking and counterpunching, keeping things safe. In the third circle, we step up to meet the threat and jab, then move strategically back and forth through the circles, weaving and turning, always ahead of our opponent.

In the centre, we hear the marsh flies and cover our skin against their bites. In the second circle, we pay respects to the crocodile who has started nesting and the marsh fly who has signalled this for us. We think of our children's safety, playing in the mangroves. In the third circle, we know how cranky the crocs get when they're nesting, and we move away to high ground and freshwater Country to find the seasonal foods and medicines our families need, which are now abundant there in this season. Then we're back in the centre again, taking care of our wellbeing together, doing ceremonies that matter above all else, while also watching for signs of snakes and wild pigs like Figure 2 shows.

Figure 2. The Bigaagarri protocol and the circles of wellbeing.

Moving through the three circles that have permitted us to share lived experiences of what matters and the lived realities that threaten this, we have traversed the landscape of Bigaagarri to find collective safety in stories shared. We have heard how our stories enliven this protocol for working with individuals and communities to find pathways to wellbeing and for holistic care incorporating an Indigenous standpoint; this decolonises the suicide and mental health spaces. It offers a deep way forward for interactive conversations about individual and community wellbeing and re-framing dominant preventative approaches across physical and mental health (including suicide) which remain steeped in biomedical assumptions formed from the narrow focus of Western colonised cultures. We can almost things see differently. The protocol has been created in and out of the lived experience of a Muruwari | Gumbaynggirr researcher and his familial ties and kin and Country connections. It is expanded by the Indigenous standpoint of a displaced Pama and the unsettling of a settler relation connected by lived-experience, working through cross-cultural code switching for cognitive shifts in awareness.

The Bigaagarri protocol provides an Aboriginal-led approach to centring Indigenous modalities, so that forms such as 'yarning', storytelling, and structured physical activity in cultural contexts can also provide modes of engaging in health and wellbeing conversations, in connection with Country and culture (Laycock et al. 2011). Central to Bigaagarri is a process of self-knowledge that incorporates and acknowledges identity-forming relations through images, movement and the spoken word. Non-print modalities in Indigenous research have resulted in the emergence of many yarning methodologies in recent years (Ober 2017) and Bigaagarri is a protocol compatible with these methods. The protocol can be implemented within community and healthcare settings using oral, kinaesthetic and visual approaches on Country or in digital landscapes as we have explained. The use of augmented reality in future iterations of the digital platform development will support connections between biophysical worlds with land and community. This aspect of immersion is envisaged to support healing oriented and trauma-violence informed approaches to conversations for care which privilege the relational over and above transactional ways of working.

Mad studies (LeFrançois et al. 2017; Beresford 2019), owing much of its foundations to queer theory and Indigenous methodologies, validates our lived experience narratives and has made room for us to share the Bigaagarri protocol in culturally appropriate ways. While mad studies remains a contested space in terms of who embraces which terminology, our stories give life and nuance to our reporting (Bruner 1987). In turn, this supports the reimagining of preventative approaches at the community level and understandings of wellbeing through the inclusion of experiential and cultural evidence. This will enable Aboriginal knowledges about threat and protection strategies to flourish in local communities and beyond. This work is grounded in a commitment to engaging in anticolonial research methods (Hart et al. 2017) to address the epistemic violence of settler societies inflicted upon Indigenous Knowledge and practices, and against Indigenous peoples through the enforced supremacy of Western educated industrialised rich democracies (WEIRD) knowledge and practices (Fish and Gone 2024). It expands participatory methods beyond colonial applications to ensure that people can be agents in their wellbeing and protection from threats with grounding in Indigenous knowledge systems (Hart et al. 2017).

5. Conclusions

As we continue upstream to train and prepare for future threats to our wellbeing, we pay our respects to the Indigenous knowledge systems that prepare us for the inevitable conflicts and trauma ahead, and the knowledge keepers who will coach us. We look to the tree lines, the fresh air brushes past us and we connect an exterior landscape to our interior worlds, our feet are grounded firmly here. Like boxers, we train for strength and strategic skill, collectively fostering situational awareness and agency in systems of mutual care. We hope to introduce many more into the circles of the Bigaagarri protocol, moving together through freshwater and saltwater landscapes of meaning, regenerating systems health in land, community and ourselves in right relation.

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