Women’s wellbeing through creative arts and spiritual practice

Reclaiming a space for the emergence of self within community

Karin Mackay
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Figure 1: Looking out from the inside of The Women's Room Ancestral Connections Exhibition space of Braemar Gallery to the outside Earthspirit Festival 2009. Photo Sheryl Hardy
Doctor of Cultural Research
Portfolio

Women’s wellbeing through creative arts and spiritual practice: Reclaiming a space for the emergence of self within community

Written by Karin Mackay
For the award of Doctor of Cultural Research
Institute of Culture and Society
University of Western Sydney
Building EM Parramatta Campus
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT TO COUNTRY

Hello. Welcome. Today it has turned out quiet nice. I am both Gundungurra and Darug and I would like to welcome you to our country and I would like to thank our ancestors and acknowledge them past and present and of course I would like to acknowledge and welcome the non-indigenous people that are here today. Hope that you enjoy it. The reason I said Gundungurra first is because we are on Gundungurra land. Across the highway is my mother’s land and that is Darug. But they are the two nations up here. So please enjoy your selves today. It is great. Karin was telling me a story a bit earlier on and it took me back to my childhood. I am hoping she will get to say it today. Thank you everyone and I hope you enjoy it.

Aunty Carol Cooper, 30 August 2009

I rang Aunty Carol Cooper on the 12th September 2014 to ask if she would mind if I included her words and photo here. She agreed and said that she was proud to be included in this study.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank my doctoral supervisors who have guided me in their own unique ways through the gestation of the work. I have been lucky to have the mentorship of Professor Bob Hodge, a visionary scholar, who respected the borderlands of my creative work and always encouraged me to pursue my line of thinking just that little bit further. Professor Adam Possamai’s expertise on New Age Spiritualities gave me the courage to pursue the spiritual aspect of my work. Doctor Brenda Dobia was a grounding force on the panel who kindly shared her depth of knowledge in feminist spiritualities which was vital in completing the research. While not on the panel Margaret Somerville was a guiding light and our impromptu conversations influenced my thinking.

I would like to sincerely thank those that attended The Women’s Room groups and festivals between 2004 and 2011 who generously shared their lives, passions and creative inspiration, without which I would not have begun this doctorate. I would like to especially thank Sheryl Hardy, Rebecca Verpoorten Laws, Kim Waldron and Glenice Ware for their pivotal role in organising the 2009 Ancestral Connections Exhibition and Earthspirit Festival. Sheryl Hardy requires special mention for her brilliant photographs which captured many great moments at the festivals.

I would also like to thank integral members of our Blue Mountains Community who supported the Earthspirit festival over many years including, Coralie Faye, Lynn Trindall and Morna Colbran form Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre, Emily and John Cooper from Hands, Heart and Feet Drum and Dance, Devi Mamak from Ghowazi Belly Dancers, Amy Bell from Katoomba Homebirth, Karen Maber, Tracey Allen and the Mara Mob Artists, Jo Clancy from Wollomi Aboriginal Dancers, Fleur Magic from Burralgang Aboriginal Dance, Dayl Workman and Qabilla Belly Dancers. Also Caitlyn Hughes for her gorgeous lotus birth dance on festival day. The festival could not have occurred without support from Blue Mountains City Council and Braemar Gallery.

I would like to mention the women that generously shared their thoughts with me in the Ancestral Connections interviews including Karen Maber, Mary Cant, Sheryl Hardy, Amy Bell, Dayl Workman, Diarne Den Ouden, Vibha Gulati, Kate Tuckey, Glenice Ware, Rebecca Verpoorten and Maree Montes. Thanks to Fiona Saxton and Nicolette Pearson for their constant encouragement, Shirley Gilbert for her steadfast support of ‘just do it’, Katina Zammit, Paul Rooney, Anne Power for kind words and fellow doctorate travellers, especially Cheryle Yin Lo, Marion Sturges, Brendan Mahoney, Jacqui Willis, Ryan Al Natour, Cathy O’Callaghan, Louise Ryan and Bette Line who shared the journey. Also to Anneliese Senn, Elly Jane Chatfield, Melanie Moor, Carolyn Bennett as well as my many friends on Facebook who consoled me when I was down.

Finally, but most dear to my heart, is my loving family who have fiercely surrounded me with their protective love. They never doubted I could complete this work, even when I did not think I could. So to you Francis, my loving husband who fed me and my amazing children who are my greatest teachers, Jacob, Dylan, Amelia and Flynn Mackay. Thank you.

Karin Mackay
STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this Doctorate of Cultural Research Portfolio is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted the material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or another institution.

Signature

September 2014
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgement to Country ........................................................................................................................................ iii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................................................... iv
Statement of Authentication ........................................................................................................................................... v
Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................................................ vi
List of Research Outputs ............................................................................................................................................... vii
List of Figures .............................................................................................................................................................. viii
Abstract ........................................................................................................................................................................ 1

## Overview ................................................................................................................................................................ 4

- Doctor of Cultural Research structure and emergence of knowing ................................................................. 4
- Where research took place ................................................................................................................................. 6
- Research problem ............................................................................................................................................ 7
- Main questions .................................................................................................................................................. 8
- Research approach .......................................................................................................................................... 8
- Participants ...................................................................................................................................................... 9
- Context of place, embodiment and hegemonic power ...................................................................................... 11
- Projects that framed the doctorate ................................................................................................................... 18
  1. EarthSpirit Women’s Stories and Arts Exhibition and Festival 2009 ................................................. 18
  2. Ancestral Connections Project interviews .............................................................................................. 19
  3. Wisdom Tree Earth-based Spirituality Group ......................................................................................... 19

## Research Output Summary ................................................................................................................................. 20

- Published Academic Article 1 .......................................................................................................................... 21
- Report 1: Video and written report ............................................................................................................... 22
- Published academic article 2 .......................................................................................................................... 23
- Report 2: Virtual conference paper .............................................................................................................. 24
- Academic article (to be published) ............................................................................................................. 25
- Report 3: Book and intended e-book for community ................................................................................. 26

## Overarching Statement ........................................................................................................................................ 28

- Introduction .................................................................................................................................................... 28
- Emergence of The Women’s Room ................................................................................................................ 32
- Feminist orientation: Challenges for women living an embodied life ....................................................... 35
- Research methodology ................................................................................................................................ 41
  - An (Eco) feminist standpoint ...................................................................................................................... 42
  - Activist arts-based research ...................................................................................................................... 44
  - Ethnography .......................................................................................................................................... 49
- Findings ......................................................................................................................................................... 52
  - Creative cultural practices and cultural wellbeing as a fluid nexus ......................................................... 52
  - Diverse women reclaiming their own embodied wisdom ....................................................................... 56
  - Creative and spiritual practices become a creative critical activism within community .................. 58
- Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................... 62
- References .................................................................................................................................................. 64
LIST OF RESEARCH OUTPUTS

1. Academic article 1
   Reclaiming the sacred: A festival as a response to globalisation (22 pages)

2. Report 1 – Video and written
   Women coming together for cultural wellbeing: Ancestral Connection and Earthspirit Festival 2009 report (68 pages)

3. Academic article 2
   Art as a connection to the divine in women’s lives (16 pages)

4. Report 2 – Virtual conference paper
   Art as a connection to the divine in women’s lives (36 pages)

5. Academic article 3
   The SPICES art framework: A practitioner tool in deepening understandings of cultural and spiritual wellbeing (27 pages)

6. Report 3 – Creative process workbook
   Flourish: Lessons from the life’s garden: A guidebook exploring the creative process within community (111 pages)
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Labyrinth Belly Cast Amy Bell 2009 from The Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009

Figure 2: Looking out from the inside of The Women’s Room Ancestral Connections Exhibition space of Braemar Gallery to the outside Earthspirit Festival 2009. Photo Sheryl Hardy

Figure 3: Welcome to Country from Aunty Carol Cooper at The Earthspirit Festival 2009

Figure 4: My Spiritual Ancestors, acrylic on canvas, Karin Mackay, exhibited at The Women’s Room Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009

Figure 5: Community Group participation at The Earthspirit Festival 2009

Figure 6: Methodologies used to guide the doctoral research

Figure 7: Creative spiritual wellbeing nexus of cultural wellbeing

Figure 8: My Mother’s Gift, acrylic on canvas, by Karin Mackay, exhibited at The Women’s Room Ancestral Connections Exhibition, 2009

Figure 9: The Tree of Life Single Woman’s Talisman Series, ink on paper, Renata Muellur, 2009

Figure 10: The Three Wise Women acrylic on canvas Karin Mackay, 2014
What is life without possibilities brought forth through vivid imagination and perceptive insight? I see life differently to most people, I feel it more than I see it but my feet are planted in the rich soil of my existence and those who have gone before me. It is not always an easy way to live but I have come to accept that is who I am. If I am not connected to this magic, life has little meaning ... I seek out those who are also seeking this meaning ... even if they do not know it yet.

Karin Mackay, 2013
**ABSTRACT**

Patriarchal systems have cast women’s art and spiritual practices as ordinary, home-based practices as trivial and time spent on exploring inner life ‘narcissist’. Embodied knowing, intuitive senses and the emotional are not highly valued. Instead, neoliberal systems reify profit over people. Inbuilt assumptions that women will provide the caring labour in society casts women as the keeper of hearth and home so that the system can continue to function efficiently. Women who wish to explore their own deeper questions of life or their creative and spiritual selves are left facing a conundrum of how to gain meaning and empowerment when they face structural realities of lower value placed on women’s work and embodied wisdom. Any desire to acknowledge their embodied existence must be negotiated in light of the pressures of dominant ideals associated with women and work in a neoliberal global society.

In this research, I have sought to explore how and why women engaged in creative and spiritual practices to gain meaning and empowerment in their lives. I explore questions of why women’s creative practices have been considered less than, but move on from this to ask: *How do women engaged in their creative practice within their own communities?* and *How does this influence their sense of wellbeing?* The research questions how women might live in this world to thrive and flourish without feeling soulless, cut off from cultural traditions, identities and belonging or use self-nurturing practices such as sharing their stories, healing practices and women’s wisdom as a storehouse of empowerment.

The research took place at The Women’s Room community arts group in the Lower Blue Mountains in New South Wales, Australia. This group was made up of women who attended groups and workshops, as well as smaller community arts groups that would come together at an annual arts festival to celebrate their artworks and share their experiences. I was not a bystander in this research but was deeply embedded in the organisation which I had founded in 2004; although by the time I came to pursue this research in 2009 the group was managed by an elected committee. My perspective as a researcher was complicated because my multiple roles often bled
into each other, such as friend, President, artist, administrator, activist, wife, mother and researcher. The research methodology necessitated a critical feminist standpoint theory that acknowledged the points of view from the women and from my own decentring and centring in various roles. However, as the women were intently interested in exploring their relationships with self, community and nature, I also used arts-based and ecofeminist perspectives to unpack how these informed the research. As my role was participant observer, I needed to account for the power of ‘the seeing eye’ of the researcher and countered this with my own autoethnographic reflections.

Three creative and community-based research projects were undertaken at The Women’s Room which facilitated the coming together of women who wanted to explore their own set of diverse cultural understandings of creativity and spirituality which were expressed in unique ways within groups, exhibitions and festivals. Through analysing artworks and stories, undertaking 10 recoded interviews and using my own reflective ethnographic and autoethnographic approach, my understandings of the significance of the research emerged. My reflections began with wondering, generating and intuition rather than logic and reason, which was able to make sense of the messy, complex and sometimes chaotic experiences of women’s lived reality.

The research found that there was an interrelated relationship between the processes involved in creative and spiritual practices that enabled women to connect to what they described as a ‘divine life giving energy’. The creative and spiritual practices were not discreet activities but reflections of the complex coming together of multiple aspects of women’s lives. In this way creative cultural practices were able to incorporate women’s own diverse identities, art making practices and spiritual beliefs in what became a critical creative activism within communities where women could challenge dominant ideologies of what it was like to be a women, an artist, how to birth and what was considered sacred and relationship to place in a globalised world.

Creative cultural practices arose from a matrix of women’s embodied experiences that included painting, performing, storytelling, ritual, walking in nature and
connectedness. The sense of connectedness felt in a making moment made women feel whole and healed and at one with life giving energy. Creative and spiritual practices in this research are seen as interrelated processes that women seek for wellbeing, which are not separated from their everyday lives, community or the cosmos but embedded within a complex synergic nexus of events and relationships. I describe how creative cultural practices are the manifestations of relationships with place, people, creativity and spirituality, which bring together value systems, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and gender. I have come to use the term Cultural Wellbeing to describe the women’s becoming and emergence, self-reflection and possibly re-emergence and flourishing.

I establish how creative cultural practices become sites of expression which move beyond inner life exploration to a feminist communicative activism in the negotiation of a multifaceted identity. In this research, I argue that the interconnected processes involved in art and spiritual practices assist women in legitimising their own diverse forms of creativity and spirituality within their local community and which may become a force for critical creative activism. Engaging in creative cultural practices opened a space for re-imagining new possibilities and dialoguing with the divine energy to re-imagine and cope with challenges in their lives. When women gathered together in community, they were able to witness other women’s multiple identities, realities and challenging aspects of their lives which then gave non-verbal permission to express their own points of view. I found that the multiple aspects of women lives came together a creative/spiritual/wellbeing nexus and that ‘cultural wellbeing’ was a fluid process felt at different stages of life. Women’s cultural wellbeing reflected a convergence of embodied experiences rather than a static and atomised way of being.
**OVERVIEW**

The Doctor of Cultural Research portfolio is presented as a collection of six academic research outputs which explore women’s creative processes and spiritual practices through three community projects undertaken at The Women’s Room group in The Blue Mountains in New South Wales of Australia between 2008 and 2010. My role in the research was one of participant activist researcher and facilitator engaged in organising a range of groups, exhibitions and festivals. However, I was already embedded in The Women’s Room before the research projects had begun as the group had arisen from my own needs to connect with other women in 2004. As I was embedded in the research community, I witnessed the structural problems that women faced first-hand, which led me to this doctorate and my exploration of contemporary women’s desire to share their art and spiritual practices within community and how this benefited their sense of wellbeing.

In the following doctoral portfolio, firstly I contextualise how the Doctor of Cultural Research combines academic values and real life issues in an interdisciplinary way. I then explain where the research took place, what research problems and questions were explored and how the research projects were conducted. Next, I briefly discuss the methodological approaches that informed this research, which I deal with in more detail later in the overarching statement. The six academic research outputs are then introduced. The overarching statement, the crucial aspect of the portfolio, positions the research in the broader framework of a critical feminist orientation and presents the main themes and findings from the research outputs. Finally the six research outputs which make up the body of the portfolio demonstrate my engagement with sustained academic activity in my candidature and are situated after the overarching statement.

**Doctor of Cultural Research structure and emergence of knowing**

The Doctor of Cultural Research program, which this research has emerged, provides a unique opportunity for candidates to undertake a rigorous doctoral project that aims
to address real life issues and tests out practical oriented research problems. The doctoral program was purposefully designed to be interdisciplinary with the following aim:

*Bridge the differences between academic culture and its values, and the culture and values of a given work location, by producing work that combines scholarly depth and proficiency with clear relevance to industry issues and problems.* (DCR Policy 2014)

The doctorate provided scope to research creative process of diverse and creative communities as it was capable of supporting flexible and original methodologies that were able to more fully capture the experiences of the women at the centre of this research than a traditional PhD could have.

The program encouraged creative report outputs in an attempt to address the problem of traditional PhD structures, reproducing hegemonic institutional knowledge and constraining new knowledge creation and unable to effect real change (Hodge 2007; Somerville 2008). The Doctor of Cultural Research presented a radical alternative pedagogy in higher degree research as it acknowledges different, but equally valid, forms of knowing.

The doctoral research program then became a space for me to centre and decentre my multiple roles as researcher, participant, friend, woman and so forth. Moving in and out of the creative and academic fields, it held interesting tensions between academic and less academic fields (bell hooks 1984). My observations and experiences led me to journey between the intuitive creative and the rational logical, the written and the visual, what was performed and what was recorded, not in a dichotomous way, but in a dialogical performance of the liminal space (Bickel 2005; St John 2010; Mackay 2014). The research outputs were the result of projects within creative community activities that held fluid and multiple tensions as they were embedded in the real world contexts. My knowing emerged from these complex and often chaotic tensions rather than from an objective disengagement that would have stripped the outputs of their essence.
My becoming and the becoming of the doctoral research outputs was an unfolding of knowing about self and self in community and relationship with the other. This was not a beautiful unfolding, as pictured in my initial question or in the making of the eventual three research reports and three academic articles which comprise the final portfolio. Instead, the creating of the research outputs was a messy process that reassembling bits and pieces which eventually emerged into a coherent story of understanding in a ‘synergic nexus of coming together’ (de Carteret 2008; Mackay 2011).

Finally, since I was engaged in community creative and spiritual practice, it has been appropriate that the research outputs communicate in a language and style that is engaging and accessible for both academic and community audiences. Apart from bridging the professional/community/academic divide, the design of the program encouraged a feminist and post-colonial co-collaboration with participants, rather than taking information from them in replication of colonialist oppressions of old anthropological methodologies (Denzin, Lincoln & Tuhawai Smith 2008).

**Where the research took place**

The Women’s Room Centre for Women’s Wellbeing was a community art and spiritual group for women located in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales in Australia which operated from 2004 until 2011. The Women’s Room began as a series of creative groups and courses but grew quickly to encompass a range of community groups such as the Arty Mothers’ Group, the Wisdom Tree Earth-based Spirituality Group, and The Women’s Room Art Collective. It also had strong associations through its annual festival with the Katoomba homebirth birthing community, local tribal-style dance groups and local Aboriginal Dance Groups (Figure 5). The research aspect of this group began in 2008 and was finalised in 2013. The aim of The Women’s Room was for women to have a space and place to explore and express their creative and spiritual practices in whatever form this may manifest and then to share this with the wider community so as to develop understandings of women’s lived reality. Idealistically, this ‘open-to-all’ approach was intended to reject any ‘close out’ that women had experienced in accessing art spaces and workplaces.
Research problem

The initial problem experienced at my workplace in the community arts organisation of The Women’s Room where in my role as the President was when I noticed persistent misogynist attitudes towards women’s creative works and spiritual practices. After five years of facilitating women’s groups and developing a local arts and ecology festivals, I became frustrated at how The Women’s Room artworks were derided by some sections of the local community gallery committee for their form, feminist and spiritual content. The artworks were not seen as serious art, but were thought to be compared to community arts development, art therapy and craft. I felt this misrepresented what the women were attempting to achieve, that is, a careful exploration of their lived experience to then share this within the wider community with the aim of empowering themselves and inspiring other women. I decided to pursue further study so I could explore the significance of the creative process that women at The Women’s Room found valuable. I felt that this was important work because it allowed an expression of diverse viewpoints, spiritualties and genres of art practices.

I decided to undertake research through the Institute for Culture and Society in an effort to understand and gain leverage for women’s organisations such as The Women’s Room. The doctorate set out to understand why this type of art and spiritual practices were not especially valued and acknowledged, and how this might be reflective of broader societal attitudes to women’s work. As the research progressed, I began to see the problems as much more complex and difficult to address in simplistic ways. The research problem attempted to address the challenges that women had to face when validating their creative and spiritual practices, the negative discourses surrounding women who wanted to take more control of their body and birth naturally at home, and women who wanted to embrace a spirituality that acknowledge the interconnectedness of humans with nature and the sacredness of life energy.
Main questions

I began by wondering whether society had become disdainful of the spiritual and physical transformation that women underwent in becoming a mother. I questioned why caring work was so undervalued and why the realities of caring work, was hidden. My questioning moved from my own experiences with a small group of women in a community group to broader questions of how women from diverse classes, ethnicities and sexualities used creative process to cope with life challenges.

Gender was central to the question because the stories told and art made addressed how the lived experience of being a woman had impacted on their lives. However, this raised further questions of which women were included and who was left out of the narrative. Regardless of the diversity of women’s class, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, marital state or desire to bear children, the biological aspect of being a woman comes with a tag that must be negotiated and I questioned how women negotiated their creative and spiritual selves in a society that valued profit over people. This doctorate asked the following questions: What is ‘real’ art? Who might be considered a legitimate artist? What is women’s spirituality? How can diverse women in a contemporary society use creative practices in their daily life for a sense of wellbeing?

At the heart of this research is the question: How do women legitimise their own epistemologies and ontologies while negotiating their physical reality in a patriarchal system? The research question asks: How can women live in this world to thrive and flourish without feeling soulless, cut off from cultural traditions, identities and belonging or use self-nurturing practices such as sharing their stories, healing practices and women’s wisdom as a storehouse of empowerment?

Research approach

As the research was based in a women-centred community space using creative and spiritual practices to explore their inner life, I needed to find a research approach that could incorporate gendered perspectives and art-based perspectives in relation to women’s experience in lived embodied contexts. I used three main strands to inform
my approach to the research: (i) critical feminist standpoint; (ii) action oriented arts-based research; and (iii) feminist ethnography with some elements of autoethnography. Standpoint theory was important in legitimising the points of view that women brought to the research which unveiled the spiritual and cultural diversity within their lives. Ecofeminist perspectives were helpful in critiquing how women’s structural barriers were embedded in the broader systems of power which was held by patriarchal neoliberal discourses.

An art-based research approach recognised that the making of art is a particular mode of finding out about the world which allows new knowledge to emerge through the formation of liminal spaces and making divergent connections. The arts-based methodologies I used meant I did not begin with logic but with and intuitive ‘wondering and generating’ (Somerville 2008). Through the creative process of art making, embodied spiritual feeling and outward risk taking of performance at a festival and exhibition, new knowledge was generated from the embodied intuitive and chaotic messy world of not knowing which came together in a moment of knowing the self differently in emergence of self and community.

My becoming and the becoming of the doctoral research outputs was an unfolding of knowing about self and self in community and relationship with the other. I was embedded in the research as a participant researcher and used ethnography and autoethnography to write about, video and think through what was happening in the research. The research process meant I needed to negotiate the many roles I was performing in a flow of centring and decentring my perspectives and therefore unfold my knowing. This was not a beautiful unfolding as it may appear from the eventual research outputs in the final portfolio. Instead, the creating of the outputs was a messy process that was not linear but a chaotic reassembling of bits and pieces which eventually emerged into a coherent story of understanding, in a ‘synergic nexus of coming together’ (Mackay 2011).

**Participants**

Participants for the research projects were organised around collective art groups as shown in the lotus blossom in figure 5. Individual women were from diverse cultural,
socioeconomic and religious backgrounds with diverse spiritual beliefs. However, to some degree they all shared a reverence for nature and a desire to explore inner life, as well as integrate the multiplicity of their cultural and spiritual identities. The research projects were drawn from the needs of women from The Women’s Room groups. In keeping with the empowering feminist ideology that underpinned the research methodology, collaboration and sharing of ideas were encouraged.

As expressed in the lotus blossoms (Figure 5), the central binding event was the festival incorporating The Women’s Room Ancestral Connections Exhibition held in 2009. While The Women’s Room was the place where groups and courses for much of the artwork and stories arose, The Women’s Room Ancestral Connections Exhibition and Earthspirit Festival was the container that made a ‘coming together’ of the diverse women’s’ creative groups possible.

Figure 5: Community Group participation at The Earthspirit Festival 2009
As can be seen from Figure 5, some groups are positioned towards the centre of the lotus blossom. The groups closer to the centre represent a closer alignment with The Women’s Room. Those on the outer petals, such as the performance dance groups and audience members, while still having links throughout the year, only came together for the annual festival celebration of women’s stories and art and represents a more distant connection to the women’s Room. (see Festival Report and Articles 1 and 2).

While The Women’s Room Organisation was collaborative in that it was run by a volunteer committee, the organisational structure was still largely determined by a small group of six women, in the roles of President, Vice President, Treasurer, Secretary, Volunteer Coordinator and Stall Coordinator. As the organisation grew from a small group running out of the studio at the back of my house, where I was the only facilitator, to community based venues with a variety of facilitators, my aim was to spread leadership responsibility to other group members.

As I was the founder of The Women’s Room Organisation and held the office of President my position in the lotus blossom was more towards the centre. I had the closest relationship with those groups towards the centre of the lotus blossom in figure 5. However, as I was the Founder, President and teacher at The Women’s Room and main organiser of the festival and exhibition, I had a close relationship with at least the leader of each group. I instigated The Women’s Room Mother’s Group in 2005 and facilitated this until 2008. During the research period between 2008 and 2009, Kim Waldron, Treasurer and a long term Women’s Room member, facilitated this group. Kim acted as artist facilitator, in the co-collaboration of the art entry for The Mothers Group titled “Mothers Mandala”, which became a vital illustrative work in the research (see research output 2, 3, 4, 5).

I was instrumental in the setting up and facilitation of The Wisdom Tree Group, an arts based spiritual process group, as it was one of the three research projects that were part of this doctorate. In the initial set up of this group, another long standing
group member, Robyn Bogart and I, worked together to organise the initial content and structure. The group was run through a supportive co-collaborative process, where each woman in the group would take turns to lead and facilitate a different topic each week. As I had considerable experience teaching in similar style community groups, I provide a workable organisational framework for the morning’s activities but how this was run, what was covered and even the structure of the activities were determined by the facilitator whose turn it was for that day. In other words I provided a guide but this could be changed by the facilitator if it did not fit with her plans. Although I began with a strong leadership role in this group, my intention was to allow the group process to work so that no one leader was needed. I explore the challenges experienced in this shared leadership process in a forthcoming article titled “Flourish of Fail: The myth of the safe democratic space in women’s community groups (forthcoming).

The Women’s Room Individual Artists group, also at the centre of the lotus blossom, was a collection of women, some of whom created together in the collaborative space of The Women’s Room studio but also many who created their artworks for this exhibition alone but had at one time attended a course or a workshop at The Women’s Room Organisation. There was significant cross over between this loose collection of women and the other groups in the lotus blossom, particularly The Women’s Room Mother’s Group, The Katoomba Homebirth Group, and the Goddess Parade group. Many of the women in this group had at one time participated in an earlier six week Meditation and Art courses that I had written and facilitated at the Women’s Room over a number of years from 2004 until 2009.

The Individual women artists had come to the Women’s Room for emotional and artistic support, some of which were inspired to begin their own art and spiritual groups from this involvement. The Katoomba Homebirth group was one such group, which was instigated by Amy Bell, but who was also involved at times with The Women’s Room Mother’s Group and who had also attended previous art courses at the Women’s Room. The fluidity of group membership was a common feature of the women who attended, however some women were only ever involved in their own group and were occasionally antagonistic towards other groups. For example, one of
the individual artists who had been involved in a Meditation and Art course was derisive of The Wisdom Tree Group stating that “it was new age crap”. So while there was fluidity in group membership, there was also clear boundaries and resistance to the ideas and activities of other groups.

**Context of place, embodiment and hegemonic power**

The concept of Cultural Wellbeing that emerged from the research was closely linked to relationship with place so it was important to address the cultural, religious and political context of place in the research. Women wished to tell their own stories of place and express their embodied art making practices, many of which were an expression of their relationship to nature, natural processes or their spiritual experience of place (Mackay 2014). Somerville suggests we need to interrogate our relationship to place as it can be a powerful way to understand contested stories that individuals and groups have historically experienced in the same place. The contested stories of place told through the women’s stories and art in this research challenged the dominant narrative of place, birth, motherhood, art and spiritual practices and how conceptions of women’s bodies, earth and nature are experienced through relationship to place. The diverse women’s stories of place were especially potent when were bought together at the one place at the Ancestral Connections festival as this unsilenced women’s embodied experiences. Creating a space for alternative narratives of place has been crucial in this research as they have challenged hegemonic power through the expression of diverse women’s lived experiences of place.

Post-Structual feminists have argued that women’s link to nature is problematic for women as it positions women as naturally bound to their biology, constraining them to their “natural” role as child bearer and carer (de Beauvoir 1949; Butler 1990; Lloyd 2007; Mcleod 2009; Kostikova 2013). However, this research presented an alternate perspective that did not view women’s bodies, sensations and embodied experiences as necessarily binding women irrevocably to hegemonic and disempowered constructions of “natural” woman. Instead, this research embraced women’s diverse constructions of the self, including their relationship to place. Throughout the research, embodiment became an important conceptual framework.
that allowed women to reimagine and reclaim their own conceptions of bodies, sexuality, art making and how to mother and birth. Importantly, place was implicated in their sensory embodied experiences of art making and spirituality in ways that were meaningful and sometimes even sacred to them. In turn bodily experiences both sacred and mundane became sites of empowerment and sometimes a critical creative activism.

As the women came from diverse cultural, political and religious backgrounds place held different meanings for them. I explore this more fully in report 2 detailing the festival experience and research output 4 ‘Art as a Connection to the Divine’ (Mackay 2014). Suffice it to say here that women wanted to define their own spiritual conceptions of place and challenge hegemonic patriarchal and sometimes colonialist ideas and rules of being in a place in the “right” way. For example women refused to apply for permits to dance down the main street in Springwood for the Goddess parade but went ahead anyhow. Another example was refusal of women to sell artworks, depriving the gallery of commission and using the space at Braemar Gallery as a performance space for a visible feminist festival which confronted the gallery management’s conservative views on women and acknowledged Aboriginal connection to this particular land.

Although diverse concepts of land prevailed there were nevertheless aspects of place that contributed to participants’ were important in influencing their experiences through the research. While I acknowledge that I could not possibly know all of these I can share perspectives that were bought forth from the research interviews, artworks and conversations to illustrate how the place was important in framing women’s lived experiences in this research.

**The Women’s Room Winmalee**

The Women’s Room initially began in a studio at the back of my property located in Winmalee, a suburb of The Blue Mountains, Australia. The studio was set up with a large table, easels and art materials for between six to ten people and set against the backdrop of The Blue Mountains National Park, a World Heritage listed region in
New South Wales, Australia. The internal studio space was intended as a women only safe space for artistic and spiritual exploration but the groups would often participate in outdoor rituals on the edge of the bushland. The activities in the surrounding bushland were an important aspect of the reclaiming of self and exploration of the relationship to nature as these involved listening to sounds and using physical, emotional and spiritual sensory perception in connecting to the self and cosmic life energy. Women would then translate these sensory bodily experiences to a physical form through creative expression such as painting, clay sculptures, writing and speaking. In this way not only were contested stories of place verbalised but women’s stories became multidimensional embodied artefacts that acted as powerful reminders of their alternate vision of place, which could be experienced at a later time and strengthen the reality of their contested story.

As the studio space was legally owned by me, it eventually posed problems for the collaborative structure of The Women’s Room Organisation. For example, The Wisdom Tree Group ran over eighteen months in this space but eventually broke down due to power struggles over how the group should be conducted. One of the contested issues was disagreement on whether to continue the group at this location or whether it should move to women’s homes. Gaining power through ownership of place demonstrated the still prevalent discourse of colonialist conceptions of exerting power, which was that whoever controlled the place would be able to set the agenda.

Although The Women’s Room aimed to deconstruct patriarchal ideas about ownership, the women’s tussle for control highlighted the struggle that they had in breaking dominant patriarchal models of hegemonic power and to find a suitable alternative. The relationship to place for this group also showed how Aboriginal conceptions of place of collective relationship to land was not embraced or understood by this group as they constructed place as owned by them, rather than as land and place being a collective experience. I explore the power struggles in a forthcoming article titles Flourish or Fail: The myth of the safe democratic space in women’s community groups.
Braemar Community Gallery Springwood

The gallery space where the festival and exhibition were held was owned by The Blue Mountains City Council and run by a volunteer committee of locals over the age of 55 years and mostly men. The exhibition space was relatively small with three rooms which could display up to one hundred works, dependant on size. The main outside space was a small grassed area framed by narrow paths leading to the front and side of the gallery. Braemar Gallery fronted Macquarie Street, the main street of the small town of Springwood, so the festival performances and stalls were visible to passing traffic. I have detailed the political, religious and cultural meanings of place that are attached to Braemar Gallery in research outputs 1, and 2, which deals with the Ancestral Exhibition and Earthspirit Festival. In these research outputs, I discuss the significance and the tensions between colonialist and Aboriginal meanings of place which were performed in a choreographed dance that re-enacted the colonial other entering the land while Aboriginal elders through naming the land as belonging to Darug and Gundagurra clans. Groups performed themselves into the space to reclaim and remake their own feminist and ethnically diverse conceptions of place. The festival became the container which allowed the reclamation and relationship to place to be experienced and expressed and in so doing became a way to challenge hegemonic patriarchal conception of place and embodiment.

The Blue Mountains New South Wales Australia

The Blue Mountains City area is located approximately 80km West of the City of Sydney. It is often described as a city within a National Park and is listed as a world heritage site. The towns that make up the city cling to the Great Western Highway, which was originally crossed in 1813 by explorers Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson and later constructed by convict labour. The bicentenary was celebrated in 2013 with council erecting new signage to honour the men who were able to forge across the mountains to the fertile plains of Bathurst and beyond. It was the search for productive land which drove the early settlers to cross the Blue Mountains and as the Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) states;
The period between May 2013-2015 marks the bicentenary of the first recorded European crossing of the Blue Mountains in 1813 and the subsequent impact of the road, and then European settlement, on the culture and country of the Darug and Gundungarra peoples of the mountains and the Wiradjuri people of the West. (BMCC website)

Although The Blue Mountains City Council website mention impacts on Darug, Gundungarra and Wiradjuri Aboriginal people, the focus remains on European settlement. Similarly on the New South Wales State Library website there is no mention of Aboriginal communities or impact on them but there is information on the men that sought to pastoralise the land. This demonstrates the still strong colonialist racial and patriarchal attitudes that are pervasive in the local and national psyche. While The Blue Mountains community has a strong Aboriginal, artistic and alternative culture, the majority of its residents are Anglo Christians. Placed in this context the activities of the Women’s Room Ancestral Connections Exhibition and Festival which drew support from the local Aboriginal community, local artists and ethnically diverse women, it was positioned as the ‘other’ rather than the dominant group.

The conceptions of the land as spiritual, life energy as Divine and feminist conceptions of what was sacred that were uncovered in the research challenged the discourse of land to be claimed, conquered and used as productive to support human consumption. The dominant discourse in regard to The Blue Mountains has not included much attention to the spiritual or sacred meanings people might associate with it. Instead it is seen as a precious tourist resource and sells this through promoting the place as

….ancient landscapes, towering golden hued stone escarpments, crashing waterfalls and magnificent eucalypts all set amongst inspiring panoramas, that will take your breath away.

(Blue Mountains City Tourism Website)
The Women’s Room enabled women to explore their relationship to place through expressing their own complex conceptions of self, including what was sacred to them. Through women’s collective sharing of their artworks and performances in the groups, exhibition and festival they were able to voice their own relationship to place, including local place, inner spiritual place and place within the cosmos. The women’s artworks became a critique and form of activism which was able to challenge hegemonic constructions of culture, politics and spirituality in a way that makes sense to them.

Projects that framed the doctorate

This doctorate attempts to explore how women must continually reconstruct themselves against a society that places high value on efficient productive work outputs but excludes the inherent value of women’s wisdom, creative or spiritual endeavours or how they use creative cultural practices to balance mundane, earthly responsibilities with a desire to express their deeper creative soulful selves. The projects investigated for the Doctor of Cultural Research attempted to address the challenges that women had with validating their creative and spiritual practices and countering negative discourses surrounding women who wanted to take more control of their body, birth naturally at home and challenge the assumptions surrounding women’s empowerment.

There were three projects that informed the doctoral research. The analysis of data from the projects is discussed in specific detail in the reports and articles within the doctoral portfolio. These projects were:

1 – EarthSpirit Women’s Stories and Arts Exhibition and Festival 2009

A yearly festival was organised by The Women’s Room management committee in which local community arts groups and individual women artists could share their stories, art, dance and performances. The theme of the festival that was part of the research was Ancestral Connections. Forty-two women exhibited 63 artworks, many of which explored themes of shared cyclical processes of womanhood through birthing, motherhood or growing older. All of the artworks referred to connectedness
to inner self or identity found through cultural traditions. Sixty-one of these artworks referred to the relationship between self, community and natural processes but more surprisingly referred to a divine energy.

2 – Ancestral Connections Project interviews

Ten women were interviewed about their involvement in the festival and were asked why they attended creative groups, showed work at the exhibition and how it influenced their wellbeing. Of the 10 women interviewed, all spoke of a connectedness to a spiritual energy related to their creative process. This necessitated a change in direction of questioning to focus more on what the divine was and how this influenced their wellbeing. Some related this specifically to being in nature or a connection to an animated earth. Surprisingly, no women mentioned ‘the Goddess’ as being ‘the Divine’ even though some women painted and wrote about ‘the Goddess’ in their stories and art at the exhibition.

3 – Wisdom Tree Earth-based Spirituality Group

The Wisdom Tree Earth-based Spirituality Group explored earth-based spiritual practices by using creative processes. It began in 2008 for five weeks but extended for a further 18 months until the end of 2009. The group was formed after discussions with several established members of The Women’s Room. A shared leadership structure was used and sessions were facilitated by group members taking turns. Each of the six women met once a fortnight on a Tuesday for three hours, one of which would lead the group and guide the morning’s activities. I was one of six members and an active participant in meditations, journal writings, rituals, ceremonies and creative practice. Three of these women agreed to in-depth interviews concerning their creative practice, while two women were resistant and eventually hostile to the research project and other members of the group.
RESEARCH OUTPUT SUMMARY

Six academic outputs emerged from three community-based projects in collaboration with The Women’s Room community group. The fluid real world contexts of the community research projects raised tensions which needed to be negotiated within academic spaces, not in a dichotomous way, but in a dialogical performance of the liminal space. Resultant research outputs were created and recorded as three academic published papers, a video report with accompanying written contextualisation, a virtual presentation and a creative process guidebook intended as an e-book. Below, I have positioned each academic article first, followed by a research report to demonstrate the continual tensions that I faced in negotiating the in-between spaces of inhabiting the two worlds which was moving between different perspectives rather than isolated modes of knowing. I have aimed to link pairs of academic articles and reports to show the relationship between similar findings, which are presented in different ways.

The design of the portfolio outputs represent a feminist and post-colonial co-collaboration with participants rather than taking information from them in replication of colonialist oppressions of old anthropological methodologies (Denzin, Lincoln & Tuhawai Smith 2008). Since my community was deeply engaged in creative and spiritual practices within community, it has been appropriate that the report output forms communicate in a language and style that is engaging and accessible for them. The academic articles provided the steepest learning for me in terms of language and style as I needed to present my creative non-verbal embodied knowing discovered through creative and spiritual practices to a linear textual space. I was in a familiar territory in the research reports which used creative and wondering processes to communicate. Presenting the research in these interdisciplinary modes was an important way for me to learn about, and from, the need to communicate with different audiences but also it was critical for the validity of the research as knowledge emerged from the projects through many subjective becomings rather than from an objective disengaged perspective which would strip
the outputs of their unique essence. The following is a brief summary of the academic outputs that are included in their full form after the overarching statement.

**Published Academic Article 1**


This article explored how women at the 2009 Earthspirit Festival showed their artwork or performed their dance because of a desire for personal empowerment to take visible action and become part of a local community and to inspire empowerment in other women. I argued that the pressures of globalisation, such as the dominant neoliberal capitalist discourse, have challenged the way cultural and spiritual wellbeing are lived. Women’s labour as well as cultural and spiritual expressions do not have a space to flourish as there is a general disregard for the deeply held soulful, creative and nature-based practices. Participants engaged in an ‘alternative political activism’ through the creation of a world apart from their usual institutionalised reality, allowing for possibilities of temporary power and control (Riley, Griffin & Morey 2010).

Women reclaimed what was scared to them by celebrating the rich diversity of creative and spiritual practices in their lives, rather than shamefully disowning what was often considered as ‘not good enough’. Women also reclaimed their own ways of knowing-specific to their embodied experiences and the woman-specific wisdom through birthing, mothering, playing multiple roles as woman and being in a woman’s body.

Creative cultural practices were embodied strategies that women used to connect to others for a sense of wellbeing (Ferrer 2008). Women negotiated their local and global identities in a critique of their role to express their multifactorial sense of identity and belonging which was both a becoming of the festival and exhibition and a becoming of the self for women. Reclaiming the sacredness in their lives from their
own local experiences is not a form of inward narcissism but is deeply engaged with global and local issues. Effectively, they were reclaiming a space, which had been colonised by the practices of patriarchal neoliberal globalisation where the local had become invisible

**Report 1: Video and written report**

**Women coming together for cultural wellbeing: Ancestral connection and Earthspirit Festival 2009 Report**

The 10-minute video report captures fragments of the day to contextualise the coming together of diverse community groups’ cultural arts practices through visual language that could not have been effectively communicated through text alone. However, I have also created a written component to accompany the video report to translate the visual language for those attempting to make sense of the symbolic representations that I perhaps was able to take for granted as an insider participant researcher.

The video report attempts to show an insider’s view of the festival day. The images I have captured show the unsanctioned Goddess Parade moving down the main street of Macquarie Road, Springwood. It was a reclaiming of a neoliberal colonised space by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, and an act of resistance towards a fragmented conception of globalisation. The synergic nexus of coming together became a central theme which emerged from the research where aspects of women’s lives, such as creative and spiritual practice, life experiences and the environment came together to influence their wellbeing, which was explored from different perspectives.

The video demonstrates how diverse groups came together to share their creative cultural practices and express what was sacred for them. Through convergence of artworks, music, stories, people’s energy, dancers and drumming, the colour and clamour of the festival became the container, a liminal space, of both the in-between and convergence at a particular time and localised place where participants could remake the self in relationship with community and cosmos.
Published academic article 2


This paper clearly establishes a reciprocal relationship between art making and spiritual practice, where art making instigated a spiritual experience or a spiritual experience in another context could inspire art making. Art making was a way of working through important issues in life, not in a linear step-by-step way, but through immersion in practice, allowing the unknown, unfelt, unseen and unimagined to enter consciousness and open up possibilities that may not have previously been considered. The experience of being in a spiritual moment and art making were ways for women to process complex, often disparate information, stimulation or sensation from their everyday lives and stimulated questions of deep importance, to rediscover the forgotten or to be propelled into new phases of knowing.

In the academic article, ‘Art as a connection to the divine in women’s lives’, I demonstrated how the creative nexus reaches beyond the inner and outer binary of de Zegher’s (2002) Matrix to move towards Bickel (2012) decolonising the divine to what I found to be a convergence of synergistic experiences of becoming at particular moments in time called ‘The Making Moment’. Similar to women’s creative process, in the research, I too used ritual like actions of intense-focus ‘doing in the moment’, which made it possible to engage in a kind of unspoken dialogue between the artist and the artwork, researcher and writing.

My primary discovery was that the creative process may be described as a dialogue with life energy and expressed through artworks that capture a synergic nexus of all that we are, our habitus, values, emotions, culture, spirituality, relationships to people and place, and our place in the cosmos in a moment in time and which was shown to be instrumental to their wellbeing.
Report 2: Virtual conference paper

Published virtual conference paper: Art as a connection to the divine in women’s lives

A virtual presentation was given at the International Arts in Society Conference in Budapest Hungary in July 2013. While the virtual presentation was given at the academic conference, it is available for public viewing on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mvaDAmUv1M. The presentation was requested by research participants for their own interest and by academics for use as teaching materials. I have used this video to teach Unit I at The University of Western Sydney in the Learning and Creativity Department to demonstrate how a creative process can be reflective of spiritual embodied experiences within nature.

This video focuses on how women from community arts group in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales in Australia used art in their search for a deepened understanding of their spiritual self, exploring contemporary challenges in their daily lives. Sixty-three artworks and stories by women from The Women’s Room Ancestral Connections Exhibition held in 2009 and 10 interviews with women artists informed the research. My research clearly demonstrates how and why some women engage in art making as a powerful way to transform aspects of their lives.

The art making experience was a reminder of the women’s own creative potential and their place in the cosmos. Art was one way of receiving joy, peace and wholeness experienced in the divine moment of connection when it is the giving into the artwork, an emotional energy that may then be captured, but also received when someone viewed the artwork later. As a connection to the divine, art was not necessarily a way to become divine, but experience towards the synergistic nexus running through life at a moment in time. It was a creative process exploring one’s being and location in time and the surrounding cosmos.
Academic article (accepted for publication)

Mackay, K.L. (to be published). The SPICES art framework: A practitioner tool to deepen understandings of cultural and spiritual wellbeing. *International Journal for Social, Political and Community Agendas in the Arts*

In this article, I discuss how various wellbeing approaches either fragment wellbeing into bits that are unable to account for the whole person or view wellbeing as a commodity or position it as moral virtue where the individual quest is seen as superficial and trivial. I argue that wellbeing has mostly been linked to economic success and independence while spiritual and cultural aspects are considered peripheral. I use the term ‘cultural wellbeing’ to conceptualise a set of beliefs, creative and healing practices that incorporate the human, nature and sacred relationship nexus for individuals or communities. I have aimed to position my emerging model of a spiritual-wellbeing nexus, which I have termed ‘cultural wellbeing’ within the debate of wellbeing definitions. My emerging model of cultural wellbeing acknowledges community, traditional cultural values and place (Mackay 2014).

As women chose to exhibit deeply personal transformational experiences, such as expressions of birth, mothering, adoption, family and connectedness to nature, ancestors and the sacred feminine, I needed to think about other models of wellbeing that did not only focus on the fragmentation of aspects of their lives but was able to consider how these worked together to influence wellbeing. The research demonstrated how women made sense of their identities, belonging, empowerment, roles as women within society, their cyclical biological nature, connection to the natural world, sense of place and place in the cosmos through their art. What became evident was that this artwork was about expressing cultural beliefs, identity and belonging to a real or imagined community, a bond to other women and a spiritual connectedness to nature. Three different approaches to art emerged, revealing concepts of cultural wellbeing. This has been called the Spiritual Intuitive, Channeled Expressive or Symbolic Expressive (SPICES) framework after the three approaches which it represents. Artworks, stories and artifacts were found to be one of three types of spiritual intuitive, channeled expressive or symbolic expressive approaches. The SPICES approach that I used was conceived as being helpful for
moving a practitioner’s ideas of wellness of his/her community from a didactic model to one that could acknowledge and validate diverse perspectives of wellness.

**Report 3: Creative Process Workbook and intended e-book for community**

**Flourish: Lessons from life’s garden: A guidebook for exploring your creative self**

*Flourish* is a book about the story of my transformation and learning through The Women’s Room community group. I use the power of story and art to express my emergence of self and learning through bringing fragmentary parts together (de Careret 2005). Although I initially used the creative process with women as my understanding of creativity emerged, I realised that these processes were reflective of many other cyclical life processes, such as pregnancy, birth and new motherhood, aging, seasons, and the emergence and growth of plants and their eventual decay. I noticed that the creative process also followed a cyclical process of emergence out of chaos, forms taking shape and a letting go or acceptance of what had been created. In the creative process, I witnessed a great deal of striving with only fleeting moments of recognition, knowing, contentment and flourishing. Despite this, these moments connected powerfully enough to the heart self to encourage the maker to pursue this feeling of connectedness over and over again because it offered a feeling of wholeness even if momentary.

I have created a workbook style of report for women from the research as I was often asked by them for a guide or workbook to use in developing their own creative practice and groups. Instead of including the works of women from the research, I used my own artworks and poetry made over the last six years, as well as included 12 lessons that I have learnt from my own creative cultural practices from facilitating creative arts groups over the last 10 years. I use the metaphor of a garden to encapsulate the essence of my methodological underpinnings of an ecofeminist emergence of becoming and similar creative cultural practices that I have used in the research projects courses and groups at The Women’s Room as these were found to be the basis from which women drew strength and empowerment for cultural wellbeing. This report closes the metaphorical circle which began with a questioning
of my own empowerment in patriarchal institutionalised society to external community arts activism and empowerment back to a cyclical reflection on what wellbeing is and how it behaves.
OVERARCHING STATEMENT

Introduction

This Doctor of Cultural Research is presented as a portfolio of six research outputs, which chronicles how a diverse group of women in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales in Australia, negotiated aspects of their cultural and gendered identities, in an attempt to reclaim the validity of their ‘women’s wisdom’ for a sense of wellbeing. The portfolio is made up of three academic articles and three reports, which highlighted diverse aspects of women’s creative practice within community. While different, each research output was guided by the question: How might creative cultural practices influence women’s sense of wellbeing within community? The main aim of the research was to explore how women in a community arts group located in the Blue Mountains used creative and spiritual practices to facilitate their own wellbeing and cope with challenges in their everyday lives. In essence, this doctorate addresses the inherited problems that contemporary women face when they attempt to balance mundane responsibilities with a desire to express their deeper creative soulful selves in a society that places high value on efficient productive work outputs but devalues women’s embodied knowledge and creative or spiritual endeavours.

Women have long been assigned the role of primary carers, relationship builders and keepers of hearth and home. Resourcefully, many women have taken these women’s qualities and attempted to celebrate, reclaim and imbue these with symbolic meaning and power (Bickel and Jordan 2009, de Carteret 2011; Bickel 2012; Rosunee 2012; Mackay 2011, 2014). What emerged from the research were alternate constructions of women’s empowerment stories. These stories were shaped and told within groups, exhibitions and festivals held over five years where women validated, critiqued and made visible diverse female perspectives. The themes explored included birthing bodies, roles as mothers, ancestral connections, sense of belonging and cultural identity, relationships to others, and spiritual connection to the natural world and cosmos.
Underpinning this doctoral research was an assumption that patriarchal structures embedded within the neoliberal economy demanded free labour in the form of women’s caring work. Women’s responsibilities were seen as raising families geared towards creating productive citizen workers (Swain, Warne & Grimshaw 2005; Dillaway & Paré 2008) and contributing to accumulating family and national wealth rather than foster spiritual and ecological relationships within community (Salleh 2009; Mies & Shiva 2013). The creative expression shared within this community showed how women were embedded in messy, fleshy lives and highlighted how they were captured in a complex web of structural power relations in the material reality of place (Somerville 2008; Braidotti 2013, Barrett & Bolt 2013).

While this research found that women were expected to maintain family cohesion and play the role of the good neoliberal ‘maternal citizen’ (McRobbie 2013), the creative and spiritual practices showed how women desired to challenge the status quo in a way that was empowering and supported their wellbeing (Mackay 2011). The research outputs emphasised how women created both physical and liminal spaces to explore what was important to them in response to what was expected on the basis of the neoliberal ideal of women (Mackay 2011).

A critical feminist perspective was used to explore how creative and spiritual practices influence women’s wellbeing from their own standpoint. Feminist standpoint theory laid the groundwork for women’s embodied lived experiences, to be recognised as legitimate epistemologies and ontologies of being and disrupt dominant ideologies that cast women as less than (Harding 2004). The portfolio showed how women explored their own experiences, emotions, histories, multiple roles, identities, belongings, empowerment and disempowerment through the medium of creative process and spiritual practice. While being unique expressions of particular standpoints, the individual women’s stories, art and spiritual practices comprised in this research gave multiple insights into how patriarchal neoliberal societal structures, as well as some feminist discourses, have conspired to empower, disempower and sometimes isolate women from each other (Dahlerup 2001; Daschu 2005; Gilbert 2013; McRobbie 2013; Pocock 2013). Specifically, I use an ecofeminist standpoint to uncover links between daily life, political structures,
corporatism and natural ecosystems that expose broader issues that women face in a patriarchal society (Salleh 2013).

An arts-based research approach (Finley 2003) helped me to understand how liminal spaces were opened through the creative process. The knowledge uncovered in these in-between spaces unearthed possibilities for women to re-imagining themselves in an empowered way and gave visible permission to others in the community to also explore emerging understanding of self. In my article, ‘Art as a Connection to The Divine in Women’s Lives’, I discuss how women used creative and spiritual practices as a way to connect to ‘life giving energy’, which when experienced in the moment, made them feel confident, at one with, whole, healed and at peace.

In this doctoral work, I argue that the interconnected processes involved in art and spiritual practices assist women in legitimising their own diverse forms of creativity and spirituality within their local community which becomes a force for critical creative activism. Through the sharing of stories, art and festival performances, the participants reclaimed a space in their community for their own diverse standpoints to be visible, which remade conceptions of who was a proper artist, how women could perform their identity, who could belong, what counted as sacred and what was valuable in their lives. I was not a bystander in this research; I was a participant researcher, as well as developing my confidence as an artist alongside the other women at The Women’s Room. I actively forged relationships with other community arts groups and exhibited my own stories and artworks at the exhibitions. I did not begin as an activist but my role became one of an active agent through performing a central role in organising the groups, exhibitions and festivals in collaboration with The Women’s Room management committee.

The research found that expressing and sharing of women’s creative and spiritual practices within community powerfully influence wellbeing through facilitating an embodied awareness of connectedness to self, others and place. I have adopted the term ‘cultural wellbeing’ to demonstrate how wellbeing was experienced as a dynamic complex nexus of life experiences, diverse cultural perspectives and relationships with others and place that was felt at particular moments in time.
Experiencing bodily sensations of connectedness through such actions as writing, painting, performing, ritual, being in nature or being with others gave rise to women’s awareness of the possibilities for the self and an emerging sense of empowerment and wellbeing.

This research serves to decolonise the matrixial embodied spaces of women’s artistic and spiritual experiences (Bickel 2012) and goes further to disrupt the space of assumed patriarchal genealogies through untangling female genealogies (Keary 2013) of cultural identity, belonging and experience within community. In reclaiming what was sacred through painting, performing and sharing their culturally diverse stories and spiritual perspectives, women positioned themselves as creative spiritual sensory bodies in relationship with self, others and the cosmos. In doing so, women challenged colonial western concepts of art as product, land as inanimate and women’s bodies as colonised by patriarchal systems (Starr 2009). This required me to think about how I could encapsulate and critique the emergence of the creative-spiritual-wellbeing nexus that was important in women’s lives.

Throughout the projects elaborated in this portfolio, I sought to highlight the emergence of women’s voices and creative cultural practices from a particular place and community as a form of valid knowledge in its own right (Somerville 2008; de Carteret 2011; Bickel 2012). It was important to reconceptualise what constituted arts and spiritual practices from a woman’s point of view as women challenged what it was to be a women, what were valid relationships, who they were, what was their cultural identity, how they should birth, what constituted artistic practice and what was encountered as spiritual (Mackay 2014).

Three main themes were addressed through research projects and outputs that make up this portfolio.

1. Re-imagining the self within community where the creative processes provided avenues for the emergence of self and Cultural Wellbeing.
2. The ways that diverse women reclaimed the validity of their embodied wisdom and spirituality.

3. The role of creative and spiritual practices as an expression of a critical creative activism within community.

**Emergence of The Women’s Room**

The research was instigated through my grounded experiences of motherhood and womanhood as a result of which I began to think about societal attitudes toward the physical and spiritual transformation of becoming a mother. As a working mother of four, I thought about the invisibility of women’s caring work (Mainardi 1970; Mies 1998; Salleh 2009; Sodano 2011), the isolation and lack of support that women experience through pressures of work-life balance (Pocock 2003, 2005; Pocock, Skinner & Williams 2013) and a sense that the spiritual transformational process of birth and motherhood remained largely unacknowledged (Gaskin 1975; Estes 1992; England & Horowitz 1998; Liss 2009; Bickel 2012). In response, I formed The Women’s Room Centre for Women’s Wellbeing, a woman’s community art and spiritual group located in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales, Australia, in 2004.

The Women’s Room was initially aimed at providing support and connections for birthing women, whom I felt were especially vulnerable to isolation and a lack of meaningful woman-centred support. I had become sensitised to these issues after experiencing a particularly difficult period of isolation, illness and disempowerment following the birth of my fourth child, described as follows:

_I had just returned home from a big city hospital, where my fourth son’s tiny gall bladder had been removed at 10 weeks of age, when I was hospitalised with a serious case of pneumococcal pneumonia. I was in and out of consciousness for the better part of a week and when I awoke, I was keen to re-establish breastfeeding with my baby. Upon asking the nursing staff for help using a breast pump, I was told this was not their job. I thought this showed a callous disregard for women and marvelled at how institutionalism could obscure individual needs. As I was still very weak and lived far away from family or friends, I wondered how I would manage to look after the kids, a new baby and routine housework when I returned home. When I reluctantly asked for help from the social worker_
My experiences led me to question the level of care, concern and understanding about whether women were supported, had the resources to cope, or were struggling at this stage of their lives. Initially, The Women’s Room was aimed at connecting women to their embodied experiences of birth and motherhood through sharing stories and art making. However, in the group’s first year it attracted diverse women at different phases of their life who were single, partnered, married, lesbian, bisexual, or had a variety of socioeconomic status and ethnic identities. This diversity shifted my preoccupation with women’s birthing and mothering experiences, in what Butler suggested was a ‘heterosexual matrix’ or Rich termed ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Lloyd 2007) to broader questions of how women from diverse classes, ethnicities and sexualities experienced and coped with life challenges.

One of the problems I witnessed in The Women’s Room community where research took place was a limited capacity for women to remain in regular meaningful contact with their extended family and other women because of the demands of childrearing, family life, cultural fragmentation, work commitments or sheer exhaustion. According to Pocock, isolation, tiredness, work/life balance and time issues significantly affect the lives of many Australian women, negatively impacting on their ability to socialise and develop friendships (Pocock 2013), and adversely influencing their wellbeing.

Coping with the massive changes of birth and motherhood is, for the most part, taken for granted in Australian society. It is expected that they will look after children, the elderly and the housework at the expense of wellbeing (Pocock 2005; Huppatz & Goodwin 2013). Western societal systems had relegated birthing women to the home and the world of caring for children but also the capitalist system pushes women into the workforce (Dillaway & Paré 2008), making it difficult to find the time and space to explore creative and spiritual practices in a sustained and meaningful way with other women. Mellor (1997) highlights how patriarchal institutions operate in a way that does not account for women’s biological material reality of birthing and caring.
responsibilities, excluding them from full participation and access to cultural
to knowledge. Similarly, Mies (1998) argues that patriarchal social systems are not set
up for women having children but for men who have a constant source of free
childcare and housekeeping labour at home (Folbre 2006). She suggests that all
women are affected by what she terms ‘housewifization’ even if they are not the ones
performing traditional roles as it delegates women as responsible for caring (Mies
1998).

I felt that society had effectively separated women from knowing each other’s
struggles and thought that if women could share their stories they would feel less
isolated and better able to cope with the more challenging aspects of their life. As
instigator and president of The Women’s Room committee, I saw my role as
bringing together diverse women with the aim of assisting them to find connections
on some level, be that with self, others, community or their own spirituality. Women,
at different phases of their life, joined the groups to tell their stories, share their
experience of being a woman, experience nurturing on a deeper level, build a sense
of belonging in community and connect with their intuitive creative selves.

As I experimented with the creative process and group work, I developed a series of
courses that typically would run for six weeks in school terms, incorporating
painting, meditation, clay work, story writing, sharing of stories, sculpting from
natural materials, performing healing rituals of release and affirmation in the
Australian bush and walking in the bush to acknowledge the sacredness of trees and
nature (Report 3: Flourish). From these creative groups and courses, The Women’s
Room grew quickly to auspice a range of community groups such as the Arty
Mothers group, the Wisdom Tree Earth-based Spirituality Group and The Women’s
Room art collective. An annual festival was introduced in 2006 (Report 1: Festival)
to build further community connections with the Katoomba homebirth birthing
community, local tribal-style dance groups and local Aboriginal Dance Groups.

Through providing opportunities for women to gather in small groups to explore
their inner life through art, The Women’s Room tapped into a well of creative and
spiritual practices that was not highly visible to mainstream society, but relied on an
oral and visual sharing of stories and art. The organisation became a container for holding ‘women’s wisdom’ and opened a space for these women to unearth their own becoming through a series of groups, workshops, exhibitions and festivals over a seven year period.

**Feminist orientation: Challenges for women living an embodied life**

Institutionalised patriarchal systems have devalued women’s everyday lived wisdom so that creative and spiritual practices are thought of as inferior to more formal genres of ‘proper’ art, religion and intellectualism (Edwards 1996; Parker & Polack 1987; Cleary & Aziz 2002; Anagnostu 2006; Rentschler 2006; Smith 2007; Nicholson 2011). Women’s art and spiritual practices have been seen as ordinary, home-based practices trivialised or time spent on inner life as considered narcissist (Featherstone 1991; Bruce 2006; Voas & Bruce 2007). The women’s stories, art and spiritual practices in this study demonstrated that the creative process was able to illuminate individual women’s diverse perspectives but also demonstrated how powerful assumptions remain associated with women’s work as lower in value (Mackay 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Huppatz & Goodwin 2013; Pocock 2013).

From the birth of my own four children and in my later role as a doula, I had witnessed first-hand the mistrust and sometimes disgust that women had in their birthing bodies and how eager some women were to abdicate power over their intimate life processes to the paternalistic care of ‘experts’ (Starr 2009). If women felt so disempowered in making decisions relating to such a momentous phase in her life as the transformative process of birth, then this indicated to me a pernicious disconnection from natural life processes and a deeply subconscious disempowerment, suggesting women’s loss of faith in their own wisdom about their body’s spiritual and creative capacity. The difficulty of exploring embodied wisdom is articulated through Bickel’s artistic exploration of her own body as she experienced a deeply internalised sense of shame (Bickel 2005). This echoes Mellor’s (1997) statement that ‘a women’s body has become her enemy’ and goes further to argue that the rejection of the female body is also a rejection of
embodiment and a denial of the realities of having a body, senses, emotions and humanities sensory relationship with the living world.

Post-structural feminists would argue that the focus on women’s biology is an essentialist stance as it positions women as responsible for nurturing, mothering, caring and being good at relationships, which may dangerously maintain the link that has historically oppressed women (de Beauvoir 1949; Butler 1990; Lloyd 2007; Mcleod 2009; Kostikova 2013). However, from the feminist standpoint I take in this study, I found that when women voice the embodied lived reality of their lives they redefine what the body meant to them. In sharing their own lived reality, sensory bodies and emotions, women were not confined to essentialist post-structural points of views but incorporated their body into a critique of their material reality.

As early as 1792, Wollstonecraft challenged the notion that women were subjugated to men and called for women to ‘return to nature and equality’ (Ruston 2013). According to Ruston (2013), Wollstonecraft meant that women should strive for ‘self ownership’ to undo their domestication caused by a socialisation towards satisfying the needs of men. While Wollstonecraft fought for women to be part of public life, she also suggested that motherhood duties should be maintained, positioning women as essential subjects (Berges 2013). Wollstonecraft points us to the very problem at the heart of this research and much feminist debate, which is: How do women legitimise their own epistemologies and ontologies while negotiating their physical reality in a patriarchal system? (Mellor 1997).

The association between women and nature is a powerful patriarchal ideology which has been used to position women as being subhuman (Ruston 2013) and legitimised women’s exclusion from the public sphere as ‘the other’ (de Beavouir 1949). Women’s sexual biological nature was feared by Christian male centric religions where her sexual earthly embodied physical form was seen as evil. Radford Reuther (2005) draws attention to the symbolic violence of western philosophical doctrines which routinely linked women’s shared procreative capacities to create new life with nature and how sexual woman, drawing male seminal power into herself, her womb
swelling into life, became ‘the very essence of sin, corruptibility and death’ (Radford Reuther 2005).

De Beauvoir’s (1954) answer to women’s oppression was to become free of ‘reproductive slavery’ as she argued that motherhood tied women so completely to her body that it made it possible for men to dominate her and nature. However, feminists such as Leighton (1975), McMillan (1982) and Hekmann (1990) argue that de Beauvoir’s devaluation of the maternal body positioned all women as being constrained by biology, thereby essentialising their experience and leaving no option for women, other than to abandon maternal limitations and enter the masculine world of ‘the other’. Heinamaa (2003) reads de Beauvoir differently, suggesting that women’s bodies were socially inscribed as a deviation of the masculine ‘norm’ and that focus should be in understanding the possibility of a different embodied basis.

Post-modern thought has been used by many feminists to undo oppressive binaries and to challenge assumed male power and the scientific truth of western knowledge systems (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002). Feminist activists from the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s were influenced by post-modern perspectives which questioned whose reality was privileged, which versions of reality counted as truth and how symbolic language had the power to include or exclude (Boude, Garrad & Brodsky 1994). Feminist artists, as part of the broader feminist movement, aimed to deconstruct the reifying of male genius masterpieces and the one truth ideologies of historical and religious epochs (Parker & Pollock 1987; Klein 2009). Specifically, feminist art collectives such as ‘Feminesto’ in the United Kingdom and ‘Womanhouse’ in Los Angeles in 1971, aimed to bring attention to hierarchical devaluation of everything women produced and challenged women’s access to male dominated institutions.

Chicago’s ‘Dinner Party’ is often cited as a critical example of validation for women’s work which opposes the cult of the ‘star individual genius’ as it wrote famous historical women into male history through metaphorically inviting them to a dinner party scene (Parker & Pollock 1987). However, this representation of famous women raised questions of which women were included and who was left out of the
narrative. While there was a desire to be inclusive and act with female unity, the reality was that only a few individual well educated white women were represented as ‘artists’. Feminist artists who had broken through to exhibit in male institutions had their cultural and class-based perspectives privileged. This is despite Black women’s art collectives being active in the same period, therefore, reflecting deeper structural aspects of some women’s power of class and ethnicity over others (Schneemann, Parker & Pollock 1987; Hill Collins 2000; bell Hooks 1984; Walker 1983; Sered 1994; Breines 2006).

While the spiritual and sacred have permeated art practice, this has for the most part been overlooked in feminist philosophy and criticism. Although Kristeva considers the melancholic in art (Miller 2014), Cixous the liberation of self through poetics (Jacobus and Barreca 1999), and Iragary (Joy 2006) explores divine love, critical feminist such as these scholars, have not placed as central the relationship between art and spirituality, and even less on how the art/spiritual relationship was implicated in women’s sense of wellbeing. Diverse perspectives have been left out of fine art discussions as the subjugation of the spiritual in art is a political battle for control over ideology, which has been used to secularised artworks to maintain the ideological separation of high and low art and censor alternative spiritual ideologies from the patriarchal dominant religions (Perlmutter & Koppman 1999).

The feminist spirituality movement was another strand of feminism that emerged from the broader feminist movement of the 1970s. Instead of pushing for access to male institutions, this movement aimed to value the unique difference of the female body through creating a female-centred spirituality. Feminists such as Cixous and Iragary took a Lacanian position by defining culture as patriarchal and represented through phallocentric language, which they sought to rewrite (Mellor 1997). Instead, they celebrated the difference of women’s sexual bodies and explored meaningful ways that women’s experience could be expressed symbolically. This position highlighted how embodied women had no place in patriarchal culture, which was politically limited as it lay outside of phallocentrism (Mellor 1997). Orenstein embraced being outside of a male-centred, culture arguing that ‘ecofeminist arts do not maintain that analytical rational knowledge is superior to other forms of
knowing’ (Diamond & Orenstein 1990). She sought to explore spiritual belief through the embodied performance of art and ritual within nature, suggesting that knowing can arise through non-verbal communication with the energies felt in nature and the cosmos.

The role of art in feminist spirituality movements was used to create a philosophical space for eurocentric female centred spirituality in what Raphael later described as a ‘cosmogenic womb’ (Raphael 1997). Raphael argued that women’s non-verbal creative processes in craft making could symbolically weave new ideas in an unmaking and remaking of themselves and their consciousness in patriarchy. She counters arguments of essentialism by defining the ‘cosmogenic womb’ not as a patriarchal construction of women’s docile fertility and birthing capacities but as generation and regeneration processes of the cosmos. In this way, the active principal of energy within the cosmos is what offers every human access to transformative processes, not just for women who have the capacity to birth. Lippard (1995) was one of the few in the feminist art camp to cross boundaries of art and spirituality, arguing that the connection between nature and art is not predicated on a woman’s nature binary but longstanding relationship that humans have with the natural world and the immanent energy within it.

Post-structuralists view gender as a diverse and fluid cultural construction which may be performed differently depending on the social contexts. Butler asks provocatively what happens when women speak for other women and what does this mean for feminist theorists discussing women’s issues. Post-modern thought, however, was problematic for the feminist project because gender was deconstructed in a way that feminist knowledge could not be unified as a body of truth (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002). According to Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), when feminists are lured into the academic agenda of male-centred philosophy, subjective embodied knowing is devalued and feminists are controlled in how they may think about thinking. Ransom (2002) argued that women’s diverse experiences and structural realities cannot be resolved only through theory but need to acknowledge the reality of their bodies.
Feminists such as Dashu (2005), Thompson (2006) and Gunnarsson (2011) argued that post-structuralist deconstruction of the category of women went to effectively silence the collective action of women who were still living with the reality of a birthing body, post-natal depression, isolation in motherhood, domestic violence, accessing power and work life balance. Although Butler (2002) sees gender as multiple performances of the self, she admits that it is necessary to use the category of women as a useful political tool, and that it does not need to abandon the identity of women but interrogated in light of their particular context struggles rather than universal ones.

Women’s creative and spiritual practices in this research made visible how the material reality of their world still casts many in traditional roles where the lived experiences of these roles may be the only way to express their creativity and power (Walker 1983; Bickel 2012). Patriarchal institutions operate in a manner that does not account for women’s biological material reality of birthing and caring responsibilities, excluding them from full participation and access to cultural knowledge (Mellor 1997). Birthing and biology is made invisible. Mellor (1997) argued that it was understandable that some women would turn to mothering and nurturing as the basis of their power as they had been cut off from their collective action through the deconstruction of gender and ‘scattered among men’.

Art making in groups and exhibitions demonstrated how women wanted to make physical birth visible but also acknowledged the interconnectedness of humans through the metaphorical birth of becoming where the life energy that animates nature was also thought to be the same as that which was felt in the creative process. Bickel (2012) demonstrated how art making, ritual and co-creating with the divine can create opportunities for women to explore their conflicting and multiple selves. In the process of making rituals within a group, Bickel and Jorden (2009) showed how a relational form of self-reflexive art inquiry can instigate possibilities for transformation. In this research, women experienced the making moment as a consciousness of being with the artefact with divine energy in a dialogue and thus capturing the nexus of who they were in their artworks and stories.
The reports and articles in this portfolio unfold the formation of creative spaces for women who wanted to embrace a spirituality that acknowledged the interconnectedness of humans with nature and the sacredness of life energy. I did not set out to ‘change the world’ through art or activism but came to realise, through the process of completing the doctorate, that my creative, spiritual and community work were acts of personal and community activism.

**Research methodology**

There were three main strands which informed my approach to the research: (i) a critical feminist standpoint; (ii) action oriented arts-based research; and (iii) a feminist ethnography with some elements of autoethnography. In practice, the frameworks informed each other as nested set of views that were useful ways of centring and decentring my emerging understandings (Figure 6).

![Figure 6](image_url)

**Figure 6** Methodologies used to guide the doctoral research
An (Eco) feminist standpoint

Similar to women’s consciousness raising groups of the late 1960s, I came to understand, through talking and making art with women in The Women’s Room groups, how my personal experiences were reflective of the tensions that many women still face in a dominant patriarchal society. These embodied experiences became a place where I could unravel how the personal became a site for political activism (Hanisch 1969; Edwards 1996; Fixmer & Wood 2005; Zavos & Biglia 2009). Although my research began as a personal experience of motherhood, my emerging role as a participant researcher offered new perspectives about how women’s experiences could not be collapsed into a singular story or remain fixated on individualistic linear perspectives, but rather opened up spaces for multiple identities and feminist standpoints to be explored.

A feminist standpoint theory underpinned the research design as it allowed the often silent diverse perspectives of women to be acknowledged through creative expressions at the groups, exhibition and festival. Feminist perspectives that do not adhere to the dominant discourses of ‘good mother’, ‘beautiful woman’, ‘normal sexuality’, ‘right cultural identity’, ‘proper art’ or ‘real religion’ often struggled to be heard or seen and as such can be marginalised. A standpoint methodology then offered me a way to gather women’s partial perspectives, as expressed in their stories, art and performance, and these are pieced together to gain insight into the broader feminist issues and challenges of the standard discourses surrounding women’s experiences.

As I was interested in how women remade or reclaimed their identity through their creative and spiritual practices for wellbeing, I did not want to deconstruct the construction of gender to the point of an unusable category but instead, I wanted to make this central to the question, because the stories told and art made addressed how the lived experience of being women had impacted on their lives. Regardless of the diversity of women’s class, ethnicity, gender, identity, sexuality, marital state or desire to bear children, the biological aspect of being a woman comes with a tag that
must be negotiated (Mies 1993) even though this negotiation may manifest in diverse ways.

The (eco)feminist framework was able to critique this biological tag and helped me to understand how patriarchal and capitalist systems were implicated in both historical and contemporary oppressions for women, diverse ethnic and socioeconomic groups and nature (Plumwood 1993, 2002; Mellor 1997; Salleh 2009; Mies & Shiva 2013). Specifically, I was able to problematise my position as an Anglo-Australian feminist researcher in relation to postcolonial perspectives which acknowledged the power I held because of my ethnicity, class and dominant human status in capitalistic society and which had the potential to oppress human and non-human others. Also, this allowed me to perceive my own and other women’s entrapment in the web of neoliberal patriarchal global society as both the oppressor and the oppressed.

As I was interested in exploring how woman’s structural and material realities within a located place influenced their wellbeing and empowerment, the emerging work on material feminism was also useful. Localised place-based perspectives are emerging as an important response to the post-modern and global decentring (Gruenewald 2014; Somerville et al. 2011) which has, at times, made women’s diverse cultural experience invisible. The material turn (Dolphins & Tuin 2012) has emerged from an earlier standpoint and ecofeminist perspectives due to the realisation that the hierarchy of western Metaphysics has privileged the rational, immaterial over the emotional empathetic connection (Gottlieb 1996). New materiality scholars, such as Braidotti (2013), Bickel (2005), Barrett and Bolt (2013) demonstrated the importance of the situated experience of place in what has been termed ‘cartographies’ as it can open new creative, visionary and action oriented alternatives (Dolphijn & Tuin 2012) through arts practice based research (Irwin et al 2006).

The research sought to bring together diverse women’s perspectives on homebirth, being single, mature, sexually vibrant, adoption, disconnection, relationship to nature, multi-layered ethnic and spiritual identities, to illuminate other ways of being as a powerful way to challenge the prevailing views. However, the research did not
remain located in participants’ inner worlds but moved into the cultural fabric of community to interrogate their place within society. For instance, after analysing the artworks and stories at the festival, the multiple perspectives challenged the prevailing view that a focus on birth and motherhood was essentialist the difficulty with one identity. These women were not victims of their biology but women who wished to negotiate their becoming as complex beings in a material and ecological world.

Braidotti argued for more subtle and complex debates when thinking through feminist realities and contended that the new-materialist framework was helpful in discussing the ‘concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power’ (2008). The action and activist methodologies used in this study echoed the feminist material turn which advocated the expression and actualisation of practical alternatives rather than foreground linguistic deconstructions and similar to Braidotti advocating a creative and spiritual critical resistance to hegemonic forms of religion and spirituality (2008).

**Activist arts-based research**

As I began facilitating women’s creative work in groups, exhibitions and festivals, I realised that my role became one of an activist/artist/researcher. The process of making art within the groups challenged societal perceptions of what is was to be a woman, an artist or what it was to be spiritual. Finley would suggest that this is an arts based activist approach When the artworks from the group processes were exhibited in the local community this made visible diverse and often silenced perspectives (Finley 2003). While women held diverse cultural beliefs, sexualities, ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds, there was a need to negotiate the label of women in a global society. Finley (2003) argued that art-based research methods provide spaces that are a negotiation of the public and the private which can unveil oppression and transform praxis. The creative and spiritual practices used to explore inner life became visible sites for women’s fluid and complex negotiations of their gendered becoming within community. Even though women desired to explore different lived experiences and identities, they often appreciated similar stories and recognised the women’s struggle to integrate the multifaceted roles and expectations.
Creative cultural practices were used as a way to challenge functional expectations of women and assist in re-imagining and enacting change in their lives to enable wellbeing.

I have used arts based strategies in the research which I would describe as participant action research in a co-emergent process (Bickel 2009). While in 2004, I initially provided the impetus, energy and physical space for the group, this evolved and diversified over time to the formation of The Women’s Room Committee and the subsequent management of exhibitions and festivals, which steadily grew in size and complexity over five years from 2005 until 2010. Courses and group began to be facilitated by other women as early as 2005. By 2009, when this research was conducted, there were multiple groups and facilitators. I would describe this as a co-emergent process because it was through my relationship with other woman artists, spiritual seekers, and friends that we together grew over time to feel more confident and supported in our arts practice until we felt able to exhibit our work together in a group exhibition, which then led a festival and the formation of other groups such as The Wisdom Tree Group (Mackay 2015). Involvement of performance groups, as shown in the lotus blossom in figure 5, demonstrate how as a group, we grew from the inside out to emerge as legitimate artists who then reached out to other artists and dance groups that were part of the same community.

Artist participants at The Women’s Room art groups, while not setting the Ancestral Connections theme for the festival, were asked if this was something they wanted to explore at the exhibition. The questions were informal and asked while I was in the group process of facilitating art making and practicing my own arts practice within the art group rather than a formal research focus group discussion. This approach was reflective of my fluid roles of friend, mother, woman, artist, teacher and research roles, which is reminiscent of Bickel’s A/r/tographic approach used to analyse artistic experience. The A/r/tographic approach encapsulates the messy but interlaced roles of artist, researcher and teacher. Together, these roles are viewed as important in capturing the complexity and sometimes contradictory perspectives of the artist, researcher and teacher roles in the research process, each informing the other.
The roles that I experienced in the research process still did not quite fit neatly into the A/r/tographic construct as I had developed close friendships with those involved in the groups where intimate details of our lives were shared both within the group process and in everyday life contexts. In addition to the A/r/tography approach my research involved the roles of friend, mother, wife, Anglo woman, spiritual seeker and community worker, which together cannot be understated in constructing my perspective on analysing the artworks and stories. It is for this reason that my research frames the methodology as participatory action based research. I have viewed Participatory Action Based research as being on a continuum from looser participation of art groups to intimate friendship as well as a deeply reflective collaboration of the many roles my self, performed in the context of this research and which influenced the analysis of the research data.

A range of creative strategies were used within the projects to document and understand how women’s wellbeing was influenced by their creative and spiritual practice. Some of these strategies were gathering together and sharing stories in creative process group work, making collective art in groups, making art as part of a collective, performing dance and ritual at a festival, exhibiting stories and art at a festival, spiritual practices to inform art and art to inform spiritual practices and using videos and photos to document the experiences. The artefacts, performances and spiritual practices did not always conform to traditional constructions expected of women’s roles, art or spirituality. Instead, these practices became liminal sites for remaking new meanings within community and performing a critical creative activism (Mackay 2011).

I did not begin with logic but with intuitive ‘wondering and generating’ (Somerville 2008) through the creative process of art making, focusing on female embodiment and women’s empowerment. Somerville calls this ‘post-modern emergence’ where new knowledge is generated from the embodied intuitive and chaotic messy world of not knowing what comes together in a moment of knowing the self differently (Somerville 2007, 2008). Making art in a connected creative process was a way for women to actively partake in their deepened becoming in relationship with their world and the divine energy of the cosmos. The art making moment allowed women
to process the complex aspects of their life and think deeply about what was important to them through connecting, capturing and dialoguing with divine energy.

The research highlighted the power of sharing stories and art by acknowledging and expressing the complex dynamic identity of what we each contained within ourselves. Phoenix de Carteret (2008) discussed how there are many silences within the self that conflict with the lived embodied experience, as well as explained how conversational storytelling and writing, even if fragmentary, reflect the complexity of meaning-making and how spaces for knowing the self emerge. Similarly, when women shared fragments of their lives at groups, exhibitions and festivals, a liminal space was opened with possibilities for knowing the other, whether that other was within the self, others in the community or the divine other. The liminal space allowed a remaking of the self, offering alternate possibilities of becoming, such as becoming stronger, more expressive or more vocal, to be seen.

My research participant role uncovered an important interrelationship experienced between art and spiritual practices that facilitated a women’s connection to a divine energy. Like Raphael (1996), I found that women were ‘a conduit to the divine’ through their art making and spiritual practice, not by becoming divine, but through conversational dialogue with what women described as a ‘divine force that animates all life’. The spiritual connectedness felt by these women was experienced through specific art making moments where women of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds articulated connection to a ‘divine energy’ rather than any culturally specific ‘goddess deity’. My approach to understanding their creative cultural practice was more like Bickel’s Divine Standpoint Theory (2012) where the matrixial embodied spaces of women’s artistic and spiritual experiences are decolonised through women exploring the silenced aspects of their spiritual self by consciously co-creating with spirit through their art and spiritual practice.

I too aimed to decolonise meanings of art and spiritual practices through providing women with a space to explore their ancestral connections at the exhibition and festival. In the lead up to these events, ongoing groups and workshops created spaces for women to share their stories, art and rituals in smaller groups and then if they so
chose, in the larger public space of the exhibition and festival. I furthered de Carteret’s (2008) knowing through fragmentary storytelling and Bickel’s (2012) decolonisation of the divine by bringing women together to disrupt the space of assumed patriarchal genealogies through untangling female genealogies (Keary 2013) of cultural identity, belonging and experience within community where the research led me to argue that creative and spiritual practices can empower women to challenge functional expectations of women and assist in re-imagining and enacting change in their lives to enable wellbeing.

In an attempt to capture the synergic dynamic I had felt as a participant at previous festivals, I videoed the Earthspirit Festival. What was captured on the video could be played and replayed as I moved in and out of various roles. I used the video data to later reflect on, and journal about, the festival day. As the researcher, I would edit this video for presentations at conferences but as president of The Women’s Room, I looked for a different selection to report back to the festival community on the Facebook site. I noticed different things that I thought I already knew about after each viewing of the video.

The videoing of Aboriginal dancers at the Earthspirit Festival project posed an unanticipated problematic where the act of capturing imagery of Aboriginal dancers using video had the potential to reproduce past racist oppressions through the colonialist gaze (Mackay 2011). However, in my research process, I asked Fleur, from Burralgang Aboriginal Dancers, if I was able to video her dance, where she then explained the strict Aboriginal protocols surrounding the use of imagery of Aboriginal people. Our conversation opened up a dialogical space where notions of the patriarchal colonial ‘seeing eye’ could be renegotiated to incorporate more critical understanding providing ‘opportunities to disrupt unchallenged assumptions’ (Harvey 2004). It was important then not to disconnect from my other senses or hide behind the camera in an attempt at pretend objectivity but to fully engage with my participant insider status and the multiple roles that it afforded me.

The Women’s Room creative cultural practices made a space to reclaim ‘the nothingness’ that had been associated with women and land. Mary, one of the
research participants, explained that when she creates she feels as if she is in
dialogue with the clay and that she is making the formless clay into something. In
this way she is also remaking herself.

When I do my art I am in ... this is what I call a different dimension,
where I am just absorbed in the work. I have my music on. I have my tea
after tea. Because the music is what inspires me and just the creation, the
creating from nothing to something. It is almost like strange...but like the
piece comes alive. It sort of communicates.

The creative cultural practices used by the women of this research were firmly bound
to their everyday lives, their community and the cosmos. Women were embedded
within a complex synergic nexus of events and relationships like embodied wisdom,
storytelling, spirituality, relationship to place, creative practice, empowerment,
transformational process of ritual and working through challenging life experiences.
The creative cultural practices became embodied strategies that women used to
connect to self, others and divine energy for a sense of wellbeing. Women negotiated
their local and global identities in a critique of women’s roles to express their own
multifactorial sense of identity and belonging which was both a becoming of the
festival and exhibition and a becoming of the self for women.

Ethnography

Like Raphael in ‘Thealogy and Embodiment’ (1996), I found it necessary to study
and write about what I have needed to know from an embodied standpoint in order to
make sense of broader feminist issues. More importantly, I came to understand that
the embodied and emergent approaches taken in this research had been able to resist
the separation of body/mind/spirit (Grosz 2011) to make it possible for a critique of
‘concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power’
(Dolphijn & Tuin 2012).

I was an insider, participant observer, feminist artist, activist and researcher. The
intimate access that I gained helped me uncover and critique issues that women face
in their material reality through being part of my own and their emergence and
becoming (Grosz 1994, 1995; Marshall 1999; Somerville 1999). An insider
autoethnographic approach was not an easy space to occupy (Colic-Peisker 2004; Tedlock 2005). On one hand, the researcher benefited through having access to shared understandings and intimate details that ‘being with’ can uncover. But on the other hand, the relationships can be disrupted by an awareness of unequal power relations where scepticism of the researcher role can create tensions.

Angrosino and de Perez (2005) articulated that ethnography necessitates ‘negotiating a situation identity’ that is a dynamic process where researcher and the researched are in a continual state of remaking their relationship in changing world. Similar to Bickel (2005), the research necessitated moving between various identities such as mother, friend, leader, participant, artist, filmmaker, organiser and researcher, which are never stable. What I found in the research was that I would inhabit some of these roles concurrently, which created confusion as the intentions and needs of each other.

The role of participant observer was challenging, because I knew many of the people I filmed and interviewed. Like the centre of the lotus blossom in Figure 5, the groups, artists and performers surrounded me, making it difficult to discern boundaries when looking out from the centre, making either myself or others invisible at times. The fluidity of my identities opened up new opportunities for creative exploration, however, it also blurred the boundaries between those that could obscure the diverse perspectives they could offer. Bickel’s (2012) A/R/togrophic approach encapsulated emergent complex perspectives through the sensory becoming of herself as an artist, researcher and educator in place. I found this perspective useful in understanding how my roles bled into each other, as well as how moving between the roles could be joyful, painful or confusing but was always experienced as an emotional sensory becoming and knowing.

In this research, I move from A/R/togrophic of the self to the co-A/R/togrophic of moving between roles within community where women would come together to explore the tensions and dilemmas in their own lives. I found that more than the co-A/R/togrophic approach, art and spiritual practices from the research disrupted the idea of fixed roles altogether and invited women to go beyond to explore imaginal selves. For example, I was a collaborative participant in the Wisdom Tree Earth-
based Spirituality Group before I became a researcher. This was my community, friends and collaborative partners in the creation of this group where we discussed inner life and intimate experiences. Therefore, when I also become the ethnographic researcher taking notes, there was agreement by all but hesitation by some. When in the midst of the group, I found it was easy to develop ‘blind spots’ that were unique and interesting qualities, as well as problems that remained hidden.

To counter the blind spots and make visible power relations, I used the critical strategies of centring and decentring my multiple perspectives. I used processes such as videoing, recording, painting, and journaling to document my thoughts and the research events. It was not so much the initial replaying, rereading or first viewing that were helpful in developing my understanding, but the repeated and varied perspectives over time that were able to disrupt blind spots and clarify situated knowledge. For example, I used journaling for the duration of the 18-month Wisdom Room Group to think about alternative perspectives and also to record observations. de Carteret (2008) wrote about the messy process of journaling as fragmentary bits of knowing that emerge from a corporeal materiality and the relation of the encounter. For my understanding, I used writing and painting about my embodied experiences with others but what I also noticed was the need for time to allow connections to form.

These observations were mixed with critical reflections on my own roles, the content and dynamic relationships in the group. Moving in and out of the group identity created tensions, as well as opened up opportunities to imagine new realities and change to occur. The documenting of these notes was useful in time but not immediately. Time was needed to allow new perspectives to bubble up into consciousness and provide clarity. Somerville (2007) calls this approach ‘post-modern emergence’ where new knowledge comes from chaotic matrix gradually and messily until threads are found to form some kind of cohesion. Coming together at the festival and groups was entangled with centring and decentring of the self in an attempt to understand the emergence of the inner self into the communal self and the cosmological self.
I witnessed one such moment, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women artists met for the first time. Both had an interest in painting holy mother Mary Marion’s and shared a deep respect for iconography. The Aboriginal women approached the Anglo women and gave her a bracelet with images of Mary on delicate varnished square beads on a simple elastic band. An acceptance and exchange was made, a connection and understanding for a moment. However this did not translate into an extended relationship. Once apart, each returned to their respective groups.

I do not know what may have changed within either woman in that exchange. However, the space between the inner and outer liminal offered hope that a seed of understanding and connection could be planted to open up future understandings. According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), the self-other relations of ethnography necessitates that authors use their own experiences to look more deeply at the relationships that they are viewing. In the above interaction, it was my own framing of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives that made me take note of the tensions and possibilities for empowerment, however, I recognised that I could never know completely the meaning of this exchange for the individuals involved. In that way, the ethnographic becomes autoethnographic because it always remains from the point of view of the teller.

Findings

Creative cultural practices and cultural wellbeing as a fluid nexus

The material reality of women’s lives demonstrated inequality and disregard for women’s work, creative and spiritual practices and lived embodied wisdom. The effect of patriarchal and neoliberal systems on most women is that she is time poor, isolated from other women and continues to carry the load of caring and housework responsibilities regardless of work status (Pocock 2005). For women who wished to explore their deeper soulful inner life or express themselves creatively, the reality is a great struggle to find time, space, resources and adequate support. The research demonstrated that when women came together they felt supported, part of the community, energised, empowered and inspired (Report 2: Festival).
Mies and Shiva (2013) contend that what takes precedence in a patriarchal neoliberal system is the corporate bottom line profit, efficiency targets, standardisation and conformity. Individual worker’s needs are seen as a personal responsibility (Hockey 2014), and emotional and spiritual wellbeing is relegated to the private sphere. Decoupling the private sphere from work life disconnects where and how products are made and who makes them, as well as hides the real cost of production, creating a disconnection between wellbeing and the demands of corporations that devalue the cultural and spiritual aspects of life.

The wellbeing referred to in this research was conceptualised as a set of beliefs, creative and healing practices that incorporate the human, nature and sacred relationship nexus for individuals or community. While there is extensive research to suggest that art processes and the unconscious imaginal can unearth our inner knowing from a psycho-spiritual art therapy perspective (McNiff 2004, Allen 1995, 2005, Cedrus 1999), there is less work theorising how the nexus of cultural influences come together to forge a becoming of self in relation to community through the liminal experiences of the co-creative process and performance as influenced by the synergies of cosmogenic energy cycles.

In the process of this research, I began to develop the concept of creative cultural practices and cultural wellbeing in an attempt to show how the interrelated aspects of women’s lives contribute to their wellbeing (Figure 7). Creative cultural practices emerge from the need to express the self in community and are important because they are expressions of people’s belief systems, traditions and ideas, and are often used in art, stories and ritual celebrations. Huss (2009) provided a compelling argument for the empowering role of the arts-based paradigm for the wellbeing of impoverished and marginalised women as images can convey ‘verbally silent but visually loud’ challenges to power holders.

The doctorate focus became an investigation of how creative cultural practices influenced wellbeing rather than attempting to narrowly define a specific kind of wellbeing. What influenced women’s wellbeing was an exploration of their inner life (Heelas 2008), their being and becoming (Raphael 1996; Jantzen 1999) and their
emergence of understanding the unknown and in-between spaces of themselves and community through creative arts praxis (Somerville 2007; de Carteret 2008), their sense of shared stories of constructing identity and belonging, and the material reality of their life experiences.

I have used the term ‘cultural wellbeing’ to explore how people use their learnings from life experiences, stories, imaginal creative processes, spiritual beliefs and practices in relation to their local place to develop their own spiritual and creative practices for wellbeing. This perspective recognises the role of social capital networks (McMichael & Manderson 2004), the complexity of wellbeing where the self is remade while interacting with others (Byrne 2003) and that wellbeing is a consciousness of relationship to land broader than the physical (Koori Elders et al. 1999; Somerville 1999; Slater 2002; Grosz 2011)

The research found that art was not defined as a narrow product but a set of diverse creative processes of making, doing and being in relation to women’s inner life, community and cosmological beliefs (Gray & Schubert 2007, Dissanayake 1998) argued that the arts rhythmic-modal experiences evolved to enable our human way of life in relationships with others. I established how creative cultural practices became sites of expression which moved beyond an inner life exploration (Heelas 2008) to a feminist communicative activism in the negotiation of a multifaceted localised identity.
The stories, art and spiritual practices that women used in their everyday lives were the manifestations of relationships with place, people, creativity and spirituality that brought together value systems, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and gender (Figure 7). Women brought their own set of diverse cultural understandings to their creativity and spirituality which allowed for the diverse expression of self within community. What the research showed was that there are many spheres influencing women’s lives and that these spheres are not static but forever changing, some having more influence than others at different phases and within different contexts. As I have depicted in Figure 7, what influenced their wellbeing most was family, their relationship to their place, the transformative process of spiritual connectedness.
of story (de Carteret 2011), their ability to engage in creative process and sharing their experiences within community.

Art making can be a way for women to express their belonging to place, to feel a connection to their inner being and the energy that animates all that is in the cosmos, not by becoming a divine ‘being’, but by experiencing the divine ‘energy’ of life in the art making process, becoming aware of their selves and making community.

What was unique about the findings from this study was that it demonstrated how the multifaceted aspects of women’s lives from past and present came together to be felt and captured in the making moment of art and spiritual practice. In this way, art and spiritual practices were not just a product or artefact but an expression of who they imagined they were at that moment in time. Most wellbeing models atomise different kinds of wellbeing, such as social, economic, subjective and physical into separate spheres which do not adequately account for the multiple and synergistic influence of life that affect women’s wellbeing. This study found that wellbeing was a complex process of becoming rather than static or sustainable phenomenon.

**Diverse women reclaiming their own embodied wisdom**

This research made visible diverse women’s epistemologies and ontologies of material and spiritual becoming through sharing stories, art and performance at groups, exhibitions and a festival. Women’s physical artefacts like paintings, poems, sculptures and performances were the physical manifestation of their invisible ontological felt experiences of becoming and emergence. Women’s conceptions of themselves were not fixed but fluid physical and spiritual embodiments of becoming in relationship with themselves, others and cosmological force in what became a critical creative action strategy, to disrupt acceptable forms of art and spirituality and as experience informing embodied knowing.

The research highlighted the power of sharing stories and art, and acknowledging and expressing the complex dynamic identity of what we each contained within ourselves. Sharing stories and art within community offered a space for liminal connectedness, allowing a knowing of the other, whether that is within the self, in the
community or in the cosmos. A remaking of the self offered alternate possibilities of becoming, such as becoming stronger, more expressive, speaking out or to be seen and acknowledged. Although women were from diverse backgrounds with different cultural beliefs, sexualities, ethnicities and socioeconomic circumstances, there was a collective otherness of women in what was negotiated within community in response to the label of ‘women’ in a global society.

Women wrote, painted and performed their diverse cultural, classed and gendered constructions of the divine, which was not a singular deity. When asked about their concepts of spirituality in the ‘Ancestral Connections’ interviews, they cited the energy contained within and surrounding these artefacts, rather than fixated on ‘a goddess’. Women did not become a cosmic divine female ideal in the way that Irigaray (1993) and Jantzen (1999) have suggested, but experienced a felt force in the making moment which they described as ‘divine energy’. Women constructed meanings of their spiritual and physical experiences in a matrix of western and non-western dynamics of identity, time, place and culture (Bickel 2012).

Bickel (2012) argued that the concept of the divine had been colonised by a dominance of religious and political secular discourses, leaving little room for diverse concepts of the divine to surface. She argued that subject experiences of the spiritual self had been fragmented and that through embodied experiences, the divine can be encountered, integrating other fragmented aspects of life. The divine experienced by women in this research decolonised the divine through opening up diverse perspectives of what was divine to the women through creative processes, rituals and coming together.

The divine emerged as multiple manifestations of a life energy force, which was not specifically a female force, but was able to encapsulate many divinities and reflect on the women’s diverse identities. The artworks, stories and performances, while demonstrating women’s diverse conceptions of the divine, were able to capture their emotions and beliefs, as well as represent all that they were in the making moment. The creative process was a powerful way to dialogue with divine energy and a way for women to recognise the difference within them. It also brought together multiple
identities and healed potential fragmented subjective selves. Apart from holding multiple ideas and identities of self, the sharing of diverse concepts of the divine within groups and exhibitions unveiled multiple spiritual perspectives and explicating the synergies of coming together of creative-spiritual-wellbeing nexus in what I have termed ‘cultural wellbeing’.

**Creative and spiritual practices become a creative critical activism within community**

When women came together to express their lives through stories, art, performance and spiritual practices, they enacted a critique on their lived experience that did not stay with the self but moved into community to become a critical creative activism that provided an iterative synergic nexus with their community. Women used the imaginal, visual and performative to inform the wider community on how they wanted to create, birth and what was sacred to them. In the process, they gave unspoken permission to other women to also tell their stories and share their art. Women challenged societal roles and the dominant neoliberal project to reclaim their women’s wisdom. When women felt that many aspects of their identity were acknowledged and connected to life energy, there was a synergy of wholeness.

The approach to women’s art and spirituality in the research did not seek to establish an historical truth like some matrilineal goddess spiritualties have, but instead inscribed art as sacred metaphorical stories (Hoff Kraemer 2009) to help imagine new possibilities for remaking the self. Diverse creative cultural practices like spirituality, being in nature, women’s wisdom and art making helped women to re-imagine their everyday lives in more fulfilling and empowered ways where they could legitimise their own diverse forms of creativity and spirituality, and in the process, create real or imagined communities of belonging.

In the lead up to The Women’s Room Ancestral Connections Exhibition in 2009, I created a painting to express my hopes for the future and acknowledge the struggles of my female ancestors, as well as expressed the special creative gifts I imagined each of them had or may have used for their own cultural wellbeing. In this painting, they are connected with a lacy spiritual energy that goes beyond time and space to
show that, although in physical reality they each experienced separation, they were still connected (Figure 8).

![Figure 8: My Mother's Gift, acrylic on canvas, by Karin Mackay, exhibited at The Women’s Room Ancestral Connections Exhibition, 2009](image)

My ancestral mothers have had a history of being separated from their daughters. Each generation of women had to say goodbye to their daughters to travel to a new country, to move to a new town far away, through death and divorce. Some believe that it takes seven generations to repair the hurt and pain of generations gone past, that damage done will take this long to heal. Each woman has had to deal with their own challenges and may have had to make many sacrifices to do the best that she can for her daughter. Each woman carries her magic, her special gift that may not be recognised by others. The special gifts that these mothers hold make each generation a little stronger until finally the pattern of mother leaving daughter can be broken. My daughter is the seventh generation. I hope my gift is enough for her. I hope we break the pattern.

In exploring my own cultural wellbeing, I had learnt about my creative capacity through the earth and how trial and error were part of this process. The mud was like the matrix, reminiscent of the ancient beginnings of life from where all matter begins and possibilities arise (de Zegher 2002, Ettinger 2006). These formative experiences became deeply embedded in my own matrix and becoming, where the mud earth clay
represented imagined ancestors who were deeply connected with the land and its spiritual creative potential. My imagined ancestors continued to fulfil a need in me for belonging into my adult years that my disjointed family relationships could not. After I had my own children, I traced my female ancestral line back from my daughter for seven generations in the hope that I break the curse of separation from mother to daughter so that my daughter and I could reconnect and reclaim our female legitimacy and power. Keary (2013) argued that to use a feminist genealogical methodology disrupts the linear discourse of patriarchy and creates a space for women to ‘reconstruct themselves as self-referential subjects’.

This research found that women’s engagement with imaginative and creative processes far from being irrelevant or impotent in creating change in women’s lives, as has been suggested by Eller (2000), Bruce (2006) and Featherstone (1991) were powerful ways to unearth the inner lives of women and instigate a critical creative activism. Burns (2008) specifically argued that imagining other possibilities is an important strategy for resisting and/or surviving ‘the messiness of global living’, similar to those experienced by Dayl Workman in negotiating her multiple identities. Women experienced the divine through being in nature and in art making moments which created a synergy that brought together the nexus of their life experiences. The matrix of their genealogies and convergent creative-spiritual-wellbeing nexus (cultural wellbeing) influenced how they negotiated their wellbeing and where they located their empowerment.

In an attempt to validate, acknowledge and reconnect with their own forms of physical embodied knowing, women in this study wrote and painted about birth, becoming wise women, struggling with the structural reality of their lives as mothers and women and reclaiming their natural biological self as empowered and celebrated. (Mackay 2011; Mackay 2014) (Report 2: Virtual conference paper). However, this was not an uncritical celebration but an expression of the complexities of choice made available to women in contemporary society, as expressed by one of the artists, in her ‘Single Woman’s Talisman Series’ where one of the participants, Renata, comments:
Women today have more freedom and power than at any other time in recent history. Women have greater independence and with this, the burden of having to make more choices. This particularly applies to the choice of having a partner, a synergistic other half, the desire to fulfil a biological urge and the pressure to make the right choice. A lot of emphasis is placed on this issue and may lead to a yearning, anxiety, and eventual despair. (Renata Mueller 2009)

Figure 9: The Tree of Life Single Woman’s Talisman Series, ink on paper, Renata Muellur, 2009

The research presented here questions how women might live in this world to thrive and flourish without feeling soulless and cut off from cultural traditions, identities and belonging. It illuminates the use of self-nurturing practices such as sharing their stories, healing practices and women’s wisdom as tools of empowerment. The collective artwork and stories from the groups, exhibitions and festivals demonstrated a desire to remake and reclaim legitimacy of the way they chose to birth, perform their gender, claim their diverse cultural identity and know what was sacred to them.
The emphasis on ‘women’s wisdom’ and ‘women’s wellbeing’ that emerged from creative practices undertaken at The Women’s Room was a different kind of empowerment to the radical anti-male or liberal feminist struggles for women’s access and equity in the workplace of the 1960s and 1970s (Simms 1979). Instead, women’s wisdom empowerment was gained through knowledge of, and practical skill in, expressive arts, stories, creative processes, spiritual practices, birth, motherhood, menopause, sexuality and relationships and spiritual connectedness to life’s energy. This wisdom was highly valued and used in everyday life, which made this kind of knowledge powerful. This research demonstrated to me how women use and legitimised their own diverse forms of creativity and spirituality within their local community in their quest for wellbeing and empowerment.

**Conclusion**

Women’s creative processes, stories and art are not considered of great importance in a culture focused on patriarchal systems of capitalist production that values individual capacity for profit over collaborative systems of support (Mies & Shiva 1993; Bennholdt-Thomsen & Mies 2000; Shiva 2005; Mies 2011; Shiva 2013). Women’s everyday lived experiences of birth, motherhood, aging, spiritual and creative processes, and art have remained devalued and marginalised because they are not marketable commodities or deemed significant to the cultural conversation (Block 2009). Infiltrating women’s psyche were structural constraints, such as caring responsibilities reducing time spent producing artwork, coupled with the societal discourse of their creative process work being ‘less than’, ‘self-focused’ or ‘not addressing issues of importance’ (Liss 2009; Lintott & Sander-Staudt 2012).

Although I started with my personal story of motherhood, this research moved beyond my own experiences to critically reflect upon the unacknowledged stories of the women who attended The Women’s Room and how these highlighted the inequities in women’s lives. I have attempted to show women’s perspectives in the projects, reports and articles with the aim of empowerment and acknowledgement. However, during the research, I realised that simply showing women’s stories and art for empowerment or using women’s words was still problematic and not as easy as it first appeared. For example, when I wanted to document the Burralgang Aboriginal
dancers at the Earthspirit Festival, I had not considered how my filming might reproduce a racist colonial gaze of ‘othering’ or how taking ethnographic notes at the Wisdom Tree Earth-based Spiritual Group privileges my view and distances me from some of the women. If I were to repeat this research, I would include more opportunities for women to film or reflect on their experiences so that the perspective is more ‘theirs’.

Through the process of facilitating, participating in and researching this group, I found how women’s creative cultural practices shared within community can go some way to countering the dominant narrative of women’s work as worthless and to reclaim women’s wisdom as a legitimate form of knowing. Women were able to value deeper forms of connectedness, creativity and spiritual practices through remaking, reclaiming and retelling multiple stories of identity and belonging in community, including women’s stories of empowerment and disempowerment.

Art making was an important way for women to work through their issues of identity, strengthened relationships to others through real or imagined belonging to community and making sense of their place in the cosmos. Through making art in connection with the divine and community, women could challenge the dominant ideologies that marginalise women’s experiences. Making art in connection with the divine was empowering for women because it made their innermost thoughts and feelings visible whereas in the past, they may have had to be silent. I found that the nexus of different aspects of women’s lives was felt in an art making moment which opened a synergic space for women to process complex, often disparate, emotions, sensations and current knowing, enabling them to imagine other possibilities for their lives as well as live with the paradoxical dissonances that life brings.

There were also stories of abuse of power, failure in leadership and tension between women in the groups which are important to acknowledge. Although it is beyond the scope of this portfolio, I have begun to address these tensions in a forthcoming article ‘Flourish or Fail: The myth of the safe democratic space in women’s community groups’ where I explore further questions about how we might flourish in a way that does not diminish others’ wellbeing. Despite the ultimate breakdown of The
Women’s Group Organisation, the coming together in groups was to lead to many transformative experiences for women, which validated their lived experiences, opened a space through art and spiritual practices to imagine new possibilities and challenged prevailing discourses through their own agential becoming within community.

The materiality of women’s cultural experiences is one of being in, un-becoming, becoming and emerging from located places in response to surroundings (Grosz 2011; Gunnarsson 2013; Bunch 2013; Somerville 2008; de Carteret 2008; Bickel 2012). The group embraced oppressive symbols associated with women, such as motherhood, sacred feminine as shadow, lunar goddess, nature creatrix and fertile producer of babies, and remade these into symbols of power and female strength. Creative cultural practices like story, art and ritual were shown to be important strategies women used to bring together multiple aspects of their lives through what I termed cultural wellbeing.

Seeking cultural wellbeing through an exploration of the inner life was found to be important to women’s emotional health as it was able to acknowledge women’s embodied wisdom and diverse spiritualties. However women did not stay focused on the self, instead moved from self exploration to community sharing of art and spiritual practice in what became a creative critical activism. The exploration of cultural creative practices, rather than being a narcissistic embrace of inward spirituality as Bruce (2006) and Featherstone (1991) have suggested, enabled a serious critique of both women’s own lives and a ‘big picture’ view of a world based on relationships with self, others, community and cosmos which incorporated past, present and future generations in a hopeful remaking of themselves and their world.

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I began this painting about midway through my doctoral studies as a way to comment on my emerging sense of the enormity of the task ahead of me. Three women stand in the centre, placed within the whole cosmos. The cosmos is not only what is known about but also represents the dark matter of the unknown universes beyond current comprehension. I have felt that my work in this doctorate was to reach towards the unknown while also living a grounded life. The bridge symbolises the aim of bringing together and supporting multiple aspects of the self. In the distance, I have painted stairs leading to a Greek-like acropolis or Parthenon, to acknowledge past scholars but also to represent the long journey ahead of me. The three women in the centre represent three aspects of me. The one on the left is the shy girl who is seen as pretty but not able to seriously contribute to the conversation. The women on the right is strong, hardworking, hands on and practical, a force to be reckoned with, while the central figure is my intellectual self and the embodiment of my learnings. Each part of who I am has been brought to the doctoral work. I have not wanted to silence any of these aspects of life, for to do so would undermine the far ranging emotions that I have experienced through this work and which are part of its existence. The tree in the background with the red fruit is the tree of knowledge. I have reclaimed this from the Adam and Eve story as a potent symbol of strength and passion for life rather than a symbol of fallen woman. I am yet to understand the reason or role of the two other women in the painting. The artwork is not yet finished and the way my artwork seems to work is that I understand the meanings behind these images more in hindsight. I feel that this is as good a place as any to finish and like the metaphor of the unfinished painting, although my doctoral journey is nearly complete, we as humans are never finished becoming but just add our part to the ever changing conversation.
Reclaiming the Sacred:
A Festival Experience as a Response to Globalisation

Karin Mackay
University of Western Sydney

Abstract

Pressures of globalisation such as the focus on the growth of productive economies, consumerism, and long work-hours have fragmented cultural beliefs and practices worldwide. Devaluation of deeply held soulful, creative, and nature-based practices in the dominant neoliberal capitalist discourse has challenged the way cultural and spiritual wellbeing are lived. Instead of being completely subsumed into the neoliberal global discourse, local responses incorporating global themes are emerging in the form of the “neo-tribal” festival experience. Although festivals have primarily been seen as places of consumption, this misunderstands the drive to participate in a festival experience. This article investigates a women’s arts and ecology festival held in The Blue Mountains, Australia, where members of the local community celebrate the return of spring. Findings suggest that this festival was a site for reclaiming a localized sense of connectedness, where participants reclaimed what was sacred to them. I will argue that consumerism is secondary to the desire for a sacred synergy of connectedness at this festival where critical creative action challenges the neoliberal and patriarchal discourses in the negotiation of global culture.

On a sunny Sunday morning, on 30 August 2009, I stood on the path leading to the local community gallery in Springwood, a small town in the world-heritage listed Blue Mountains of Australia. To one side of me, Gaia was setting up his brilliant red tent, where he and his wife Eleanor would serve chai tea on tribal rugs and colourful cushions. Inside the gallery, sixty women’s artworks were displayed, accompanied by personal poems and stories, exploring the “Ancestral Connections” theme of this year’s art exhibition. Today was EarthSpirit festival
day, where converging local women’s art groups, performers, and an eclectic audience celebrated the return of spring. This year, instead of taking an upfront role introducing performers, I was behind the video camera to record what was happening at the EarthSpirit festival as part of my doctoral research into women’s wellbeing. My involvement in the arty, ecology, spiritual and natural birth communities of The Blue Mountains led to my questioning the assertion that new spiritualities and neo-tribal movements were narcissist consumerist practices impotent in creating change (Featherstone 1991; Bruce 1998, 2002, 2006; Voas and Bruce 2007) or that we no longer share religious experience together, but believe without belonging to a particular religious community (Davie 1990, 1994).

The global neoliberal discourse of productivity and progress permeates every aspect of contemporary life, and would seem to be inescapable. As Bauman notes, most factors that determine local living conditions are a “conglomeration of processes, that operate beyond nation-state borders, where capitalism acts as a parasite using local resources, until they are exhausted” (Polychroniou 2009: 110). Dislocation and powerlessness is characteristic of modern societies, with a central organizing principle being a “marketplace of anonymous strangers where these strangers are mobile and disconnected” (Turner 2001: 148). Depressing and disenchanted as these views may be, the phenomenon of global sub-cultures is emerging in an attempt to rewrite local experience and resist neoliberal aspects of globalisation (Mayo 2005; Starr 2005). St. John contends that the neo-tribal festival movement is one such sub-culture, which has emerged as a form of globalised dance and spiritual practice, where people converge for an event combining visual arts, drum, dance, performance, and communal ritual in a sensory participatory transcendence of liminal space and time reminiscent of Victor Turner’s communitas (Partridge 2006; St John 2006, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Ryan 2010). In contrast to most neo-pagan and neo-tribal festivals, the EarthSpirit Festival did not take place far from the city (Pike 2001) but on a main street at the front of a community gallery, suggesting a desire, not to retreat from the world, but to become visibly part of it, in what Erick Davis (2005) would call a collaborative effort to reclaim visual space. Festivals are not without their own political tensions and it is precisely this dynamism, which makes them significant for the study of political-cultural dialectics (Cohen 1982: 198).

While consumer practices are an intrinsic part of festival culture, perhaps the focus on consumption has misrepresented other motivations of festival participants. I will argue that participation in the festival experience was an attempt by women to take back local control over personal and global processes that made them feel disempowered and disconnected. Discussion will include how women made themselves visible and reclaimed what was sacred to them in a negotiation of their local and global worlds through: (1) consumption and the
not for sale; (2) making visible through critical creative action; (3) remaking and reclaiming the sacred; and (4) coming together in a sacred synergy.

Multiple Roles, Centering and De-centering
My investigation of The EarthSpirit Festival focused on how women’s stories, art, and performance influenced participants’ sense of belonging and wellbeing. The festival was an annual event where artists, performers, stallholders, partners, family, and friends, along with members of the local community, gathered to celebrate the return of spring. The festival had grown from a series of creative process groups at The Women’s Room. This was a local grass roots community group that I had founded for women to explore their “deeper soulful selves” using a creative process and where I had been the president since its inception in 2004.

Typically, women in the study were between the ages of twenty-five and sixty, with at least a basic secondary education and came from diverse ethno-religious backgrounds such as Hindu Pakistani, Ghanaian, Earth Spiritualist, Maori, Indigenous Australian Aboriginal, Polish Lutheran Christian, Spiritualist Catholic Pagan, Anglo Australian Buddhist and Tree worshiper. These women could be loosely described as artists, performers, homebirthers, spiritualists, environmentalists, teachers, social workers, nurses, and mothers who were interested in creativity, spirituality, and ecology.

The six women who comprised The Women’s Room Committee of 2009 met monthly at the Vice President’s house to discuss the festival organization. Women were invited to exhibit through word of mouth, email lists, Facebook, The Women’s Room’s website, advertisements placed in the local newspaper, and through fifteen-hundred printed invitations distributed to local shops. Exhibition of artworks was open to any women who paid an entry fee of 20AU but besides this there were no formal selection or rejection criteria for artworks. Women who exhibited were from The Women’s Room Mother’s Group, The Wisdom Tree Earth Based Spiritual group, the Katoomba Homebirth group, and individual artists from The Women’s Room. Five dance groups were invited to perform on festival day. These were; Burranglang Aboriginal Dance Group, Wollemi Dancers, Hands, Heart and Feet African Drum and Dance, Ghawazi Caravan Tribal Style Belly Dancing Troupe, and Qabila Belly Dancers (see fig. 1). Men were involved in some aspects of the festival as performers, volunteer helpers, or audience members, but the main focus was on women’s performance and art.
I performed multiple roles at this festival, such as artist, speaker, mother, wife, friend, group member, organizer, and researcher. As a participant, I exhibited artworks and was also part of The Wisdom Tree group. As an organizer, I liaised between community groups, committee, gallery, and local council, and undertook associated administrative tasks. As a researcher, I observed my community, reflectively journaled about the festival, analyzed the artworks and stories, noting themes. On festival day, I videoed the artworks and performances and informally interviewed eighteen participants and asked why they attended the festival.
The video camera became the central lens through which I viewed the festival. I used the video camera to signal to participants that I was in research mode, rather than as organizer or friend. My focus was on capturing performances and asking participants why they attended the festival. I filmed from before setup and intermittently until the last performance. Although videoing was intended to capture the views and perspectives of participants, it still captured only a partial view, seen through my own lens and influenced by what I filmed, where I walked and who I interviewed. The viewing of participants through the video had undertones of the voyeur. Parameswaran (2008: 413) draws upon Wiegman’s critiques of the “seeing eye” as being intricately linked to the “peep hole” of imperialism’s racial and gender oppressions, historically used as a “rationalized vision,” which artificially “detaches from other senses to produce disengaged scientific observation.” I experienced my initial naivety regarding “the seeing eye,” when I asked Fleur, from Burralgang Dancers, if I could film their performance on festival day. Fleur explained to me that she would have declined permission if I had not approached her about this before festival day as there were strict protocols surrounding viewing and distributing indigenous images. The discussion with Fleur prompted a realization that my Anglo ethnicity, behind the camera, represented an historical voyeuristic colonial oppression that had consequences far beyond the festival day. Fleur wanted to know how it would be used, who it would be shown to, and requested permission be sought at any stage of this process. The videoing problematic had opened up a dialogical space where “the seeing eye” could be renegotiated to incorporate more critical understandings and, as Harvey (2004: 171) suggests, opportunities to disrupt unchallenged assumptions. It was important then not to disconnect from my other senses or hide behind the camera in an attempt at pretend objectivity but to fully engage with my participant insider status and the multiple roles that it afforded me.

What was captured on the video could be played and replayed as I moved in and out of various roles. I used the video data to later reflect on, and journal about, the festival day. As researcher, I would edit this video for presentations at conferences but as President of The Women’s room I looked for a different selection to report back to the festival community on the Facebook site. I noticed different things that I thought I already knew upon each viewing of the video. Apart from the video, I also analyzed the artworks and stories by noting the occurrence of themes, such as what was considered sacred, global themes of another place, and birthing and motherhood.

The role of participant observer was challenging, as I knew many of the people that I filmed and interviewed. Like the centre of the lotus blossom in figure 1, the groups, artists, and performers surrounded me, making it difficult to discern boundaries when looking out from the centre, making either myself,
or others, at times invisible. The centre for me became the place of negotiation of self and other, local and global, where stepping in and out of multiple roles of researcher participant, mother, and friend gave me alternate perspectives. This at times painful process recognized that de-centering is important in gaining new perspectives but that re-centering is just as necessary for these perspectives to be brought to light. The performance of multiple identities created tensions that could not be easily resolved as my roles, such as artist-mother-researcher or friend-spiritual seeker-researcher, were performed concurrently, creating hybrid forms of knowledge that would not have been possible with a myopic perspective. Similar to Colic-Peisker (2004: 93), I found the insider’s view helpful as it provided deep background knowledge of the women’s values and reasons for attending the festival, but this was also problematic as it was easy as an insider to align my thinking to participants’ ways of thinking and possibly overlook perspectives from an outsider’s view. I used journaling as a way to continually challenge my perspectives through de-centreing and re-centring.

Consumption and the Not for Sale

The festival was held in an historic commons building owned by The Blue Mountains City Council, intended as a space for local artists to exhibit their work. The cost to hire three rooms and the small garden was prohibitive for most non-professional artists as it cost 900AU. The gallery’s exhibition agreement stipulated that all artworks must be for sale. Works sold would incur a 37% commission for professional artists or 27% commission for non-professional artists. While it was standard practice to be charged commission at commercial galleries, many women commented that this was rather expensive for a community gallery. On several occasions, I had raised the issue of holding the exhibition at another venue because of the difficulties experienced with the size of the venue, the cost, and the resistance from the gallery to the whole festival experience. The gallery benefitted from the festival, as it raised considerable income for them, but they were not supportive of its explicitly feminist and process-focused content. The Women’s Room committee staunchly affirmed that they wanted to continue to exhibit here as they felt it was a commons space in which they had the right to exhibit.

Although The Women’s Room Committee had advised all artists that artworks needed to be for sale, thirty-one of the sixty artworks were not for sale. The choice not to sell could have been due to the low value that the women placed on their own artworks as most were listed at less than 200AU. If a woman exhibited an artwork at this price, as a non-professional artist, she would receive 146AU, less any costs she had incurred for canvas and paints. Weighing up the personal versus monetary value, she may decide that it was not worth
selling. Like over half of the other women exhibiting at the festival, Glenys’ “Red Shoes” artwork was also not for sale. The artwork looked at the life, birth, and death cycles of an older women reflecting upon what was to come in her future. Glenys had been inspired by “The Red Shoes” folktale, about crafting an authentic handmade life, at The Wisdom Tree Spiritual Group. On festival day, she proudly showed me the handmade red shoes that she purchased from one stallholder and explained that they reminded her to be true to herself. Artists like Glenys were exerting their own power and control over their production and consumption, which demonstrated a resistance to the gallery and The Women’s Room committee requests to list works for sale, and a consumption that was conscious of personal meaning. The decision to list their artworks as “Not For Sale” suggested there were reasons other than financial reward for exhibiting their artworks.

Artists and performers may have used the festival as a way to promote their work rather than sell their production outright. Some artists were commissioned to produce works for interested buyers after the festival. Performers also may have used the festival as rich ground to recruit for the classes they held during the week. However, Hands, Heart and Feet Group, which had volunteered to organize the Goddess Parade, had performed multiple times on festival day and returned each year without payment or mention to the audience of their classes. Ghawazi Caravan Belly Dancers also performed at the festival without payment, even though they were a professional troupe that commanded high fees elsewhere. Dale, from Qabila Belly Dancers, had volunteered to act as master of ceremonies on the microphone all day as well as perform without payment. Both the Indigenous Aboriginal dance groups, Burralgang Wiradjuri Dancers and Wollemi Aboriginal Dancers, were clear that they required payment for their performances, however both groups offered a community rate as they knew the Women’s Room had little funding. While some artists and performers benefitted financially from the promotion and sale of their work, this did not completely explain the commitment of time and effort invested in the festival over several years by many of the performers and artists with reduced or no financial reward.

Participants’ decisions to sell or not sell their artworks, to perform without fees or at reduced rates, seemed to suggest a conscious consumption where consideration was given to other aspects, such as, “Who am I supporting?,” “Can they afford to pay?,” “What is the purpose or symbolic significance of the service or production?,” and “What is my relationship with this person or group?” Immense value was placed on personal meaning and relationships, unlike a typically neoliberal agenda of profits over people. However, this conscious consumption only extended to the local and did not appear to consider the global implications of where the shoe leather came from, or where the artwork canvases were made,
or who made the fake plastic flowers in the dancers’ hair. Even so, Fontenelle (2010: 272) argues that “responsible consumption,” in the form of purchasing or not purchasing consumables, implicitly contains concerns about global, social, cultural, environmental, or economic impacts. Consumption clearly occurred at the festival but it was less like the narcissist consumerism that Featherstone (1991), Bruce (1998, 2002, 2006), and Voas and Bruce (2007) identify and more like what Moghadam describes as “projects of people” (2005: 357). Even when an attempt was made to resist aspects of neoliberal consumerism, the organisers, gallery, and participants were inescapably caught in its web.

Making Visible and Critical Creative Action

Processes of globalization have been linked to the breakdown of cultural traditions and a rewriting of human relationships with the environment (Shiva 1993, 2005). Dominating the globalized world are patriarchal and westernized systems of capitalism which focus on transnational corporations, and the benefits of free trade across boundaries, where the person is seen as a unit of production, for the beneficial growth of developed-world economies. Local processes, people, spiritual concerns, and cultural knowledge can become invisible, absent, overshadowed, colonized, or not acknowledged (Prigoff, 2000: 122). Mies (1998) and Marchand (2003) have identified women’s caring role, the production of life, and unpaid housework as an invisible undervalued resource in the global economy. They argue that both women’s free labour and the exploitation of natural resources by westernized industrial systems, have been pivotal in wealth creation and success of global capital markets.

Figure 2: Mother’s Mandala

Feminist perspectives, addressing invisibility and acknowledging female biological experiences, were prominent in many artworks displayed at the festival. Thirty-eight of the sixty artworks explored themes of single womanhood, fertility, birth, motherhood, or aging, and consistently addressed the unacknowledged disjunctions between their own value systems and what they perceived was valued by the patriarchal productive citizen focus of globalised society. The “Mothers Mandala,” painted by The Women’s Room Mothers Group, was an illustrative example of women expressing frustration at a
system that did not acknowledge their multiple roles in society. In response to their invisibility, they sought solidarity through a critical creative expression of the lived reality of their existence. Each woman painted an individual segment within the whole mandala circle, depicting placentas, embryo-like eggs, fertile wombs, and tribal-like hands and feet (see fig. 2). The mandala was like a global world unto itself, symbolizing a larger community but also clearly delineated individuals’ creative efforts, making human production visible. The Eastern mystical concept of the mandala had been modified to codify their own type of sacred balance in life and was used to express the challenge in maintaining multiple expected societal roles. This demonstrated a critical creative action that moved beyond the individual, to become a communal creative practice, addressing issues of connectedness with self, others, place, and universe. The story accompanying the mandala clearly expressed a negotiation between the localized self and global processes of the productive citizen to make these women visible, as it read:

The Mandala is about uniting our experiences as individual women, mothers, and all the other diverse roles we have in our lives. It also recognizes the connection our individual experience has with our ancestors, our future, our children, and also our place in the natural world.

The Women’s Room Mothers group meets fortnightly to share our varied experiences as women, workers, mothers, artists, daughters, friends, aunts, sisters and so on, through making art. The group focuses on valuing and respecting our parenting role in a society that often doesn’t recognize the importance and value of mothering.

The Katoomba Homebirth Group was more strongly politicized than The Women’s Room Mother’s Group, as they had met considerable resistance in their efforts to birth their children at home. The system of surveillance, imposed by the westernized medical health system, had made their actions of homebirth illegal and expensive, as midwives that attended homebirth, under Australian law, could not be covered by insurance (Starr 2009). Michelle, one of The Katoomba Homebirth group, explained to me that she

Figure 3: Belly cast with birth labyrinth
had shown her belly cast at the festival to make others aware that birthing at home was about choice and regaining control over her body at the local level, instead of experiencing what she viewed as an impersonalized and hostile medical system. It might be expected, then, that the belly casts were painted with angry slogans, claiming “Our choice; Our way.” However, the belly casts depicted spiral birth labyrinths, trees, rivers, fish, stars, and moons, symbolically linking birth to natural processes of growth and fertility. One of the belly casts was painted with realistic pink nipples and fleshy skin tones, juxtaposed by a birth labyrinth on the belly (see fig. 3), which created a visibility of changes and strains on a woman’s physical body but which also alluded to the underlying spiritual transformation of becoming a mother. Homebirth was a critical endeavor that resisted dominant discourses on how to birth and be a “good mother,” embodying a deeper philosophical value system of birth as a natural, spiritual, and heterosexual act, which incorporated these women’s sense of identity and belonging. While the festival opened up the possibilities for the anti-establishment ideology of homebirth to become visible, this group had also excluded women who could not, or did not wish to, identify womanhood with birth. This was evident in the story that accompanied their exhibit titled, “Birth—The Link Between all Women.”

Birth is the common thread from the beginning of everything. When we bring forth new life we remember all the mothers before us and those yet to come.

In the negotiation of western patriarchal controlling paradigms of birth and motherhood, the exhibition of the belly casts served as a critical creative action, expressing homebirthers right to birth in a way that reflected their value system. However, this was limited by conceptions of who was a mother and what was natural, which inadvertently contributed to the maintenance of the patriarchal hegemony they were resisting.

The Burralgang Dancers also used a critical creative action to resist and incorporate the globalised western system that had impinged on the expression of local cultural beliefs. On festival day, Fleur from Burralgang Aboriginal Dancers spoke about the meaning of the dances and Wiradjuri words to the mostly western audience before each performance. She explained that she had met resistance concerning her interpretation of cultural knowledge and that while the dances and language were based on traditional knowledge, traditions were not static but changed over time. The complex interplay between maintaining the local cultural traditions and incorporating the global influences was evident in the group’s performance of both traditional and contemporary genres. In the more traditional performance, dancers painted with ochre symbolically gathered
seed (see fig. 4). The second dance was a contemporary hip-hop number with girls wearing black pants with the Aboriginal flag on their t-shirts. The festival became a place to negotiate aspects of global culture through the re-education of the western audience and the remaking and reclaiming of culture by the Wiraduri dancers.

Figure 4: Burralgang Aboriginal Dancers

Remaking and Reclaiming the Sacred

Wuthnow (1992) argues that the quality and location of the sacred has been influenced by processes of globalisation, which is deeply embedded in human experience. The sacred, as experienced at this festival, was a diverse and fluid concept, so defining what festival participants held as sacred was complex, because they did not follow a universal religious doctrine, but individually defined what was sacred to them. Aupers and Houtman (2006) would describe this as self-spirituality, as spiritual seekers draw upon multiple traditions, styles, and ideas simultaneously. Self-spirituality has mostly been seen in consumerist terms, such as Lyon’s (2000) “spiritual supermarket,” Possamai’s (2003) “religion a la carte,” and Hamilton’s (2000) “pick and mix religion.” In some respects, scholars’ who argue this ‘pick and mix’ religion is a consumerist practice, narcissistically focused upon the self, have an entirely valid point. From an outsider’s viewpoint, the individualized beliefs and the search for spiritual transcendence at neo-tribal festivals would appear to remain self-focused or at times indulgent. However, an insider’s view uncovers the underlying motivation for participants to make things sacred at such festivals in a desire to create community ritual (St. John 2006, 2010a; Pike 2011; Gilmore 2005). Even though there was no universal religion binding the participants, the artworks, stories and performances drew upon similar spiritual themes of the natural, earthy, or “tribal” that pointed to
an underlying value system that bought these artists together to explore spiritual understandings of their life and place in the cosmos.

Dance performance at the festival was one way of reclaiming the sacred through a negotiation between the intensely personal inner world and global symbols of the neo-tribal, mystical, and natural. Caitlyn, from Hands Heart and Feet African Drum and Dance Group, performed what could be described as a solo “lotus birth dance” to the beat of the West African style drums. She wore a full black skirt, with beads slung around her neck and adorning her ankles. Bright pink fake flowers were swung around her hips, accentuating her pregnant form. A singular pink lotus blossom was painted on her exposed naked belly. As she performed in front of the crowd that encircled her, she cupped her breasts, raised her arms to the sky, and with legs apart in a semi-squatting pose, she swung her arms to touch the ground (see fig. 5). The lotus blossom seemed to be a reference to a natural birthing philosophy, where a spiritual and physical opening up in preparation for the birth was highly encouraged. Ina May Gaskin’s (1975) homebirth community, from the 1970s, had popularized “lotus birth” by drawing upon the Eastern mystic symbolism of opening to ever greater levels of consciousness to assist women in visualizing the baby emerging through the birth passage. The local homebirth group had further modified the lotus to symbolize the physical, emotional, and spiritual transformation for a new stage in their existence. Caitlyn’s actions in the dance alluded to the forces that were beyond her control, a plea to the sky, the touching of the earth, which spiritualized the everyday act of birthing and mothering and reclaimed this as a sacred process that embodied the transformations she would experience.

Figure 5: Lotus birth dance

A sacred family or an earth mother was a consistent theme in the artworks and stories as was an imagined global “tribal” family. Evoking global themes by using the word tribe was particularly evident in the non-indigenous dance performers,
like Qabila Belly Dancers’ use of “Qabila,” a word associated with tribe in Arabic, or the wearing of full skirts and veiled heads by Ghawazi Caravan Tribal Style group who drew on Bedouin imagery, and finally Anglo Celtic Hands Heart and Feet Group who identified with “African tribal drums.” Of the sixty artworks and stories, eighteen sacralised the family and forty-five depicted earth mother or sacred earth. Tribal Maori Moko designs and curved swirls were evoked by one woman artist, who expressed mystical ancestral connections that claimed my tribe, my people, my mother earth in her artwork titled, “The Hill Where I Belong.” Karen Maber, an Indigenous Australian woman, exhibited her painting and poem, reifying her ancestors and linking this to the cosmos. Part of this read:

The Rivers are my ancestors they give me fish to feed
With the wisdom of the ages deep with a planted seed
When in times I feel alone, my ancestors lost from me
I remind myself they live again in the stars, the land, the sea.

Another artwork, “Walk Gently On Me,” similarly linked the universal globalized image of earth with a sacred quality, depicting a woman walking on the oceanic hair of an anthropomorphized beach headland Goddess (see fig. 6). This artist sees that she is part of a larger earth family and writes:

My blood, body cells, skin and bones have been born through millions of years of the earth’s journey. The trees, the mountains and the oceans have made me; they are my skin, bone and hair. I have come from the once swirling oceans, from the fish that swim there, from the birds, reptiles, grasses and trees. I am ancient but I am here now. We are one. Walk gently upon me.

Figure 6: Walk Gently On Me
Remaking and reclaiming the sacred through connecting to an imagined global community was one way for the women to feel a sense of belonging and to take back control over their deeply soulful practices, which had been challenged by a dominant neoliberal discourse. Using the tribal and natural by some artists to evoke images of a global family was embedded with unacknowledged issues of western power and skated perilously close to the old racisms of Orientalism (Said 1985) and Rousseau’s image of the perfect pure primitive life (Alley 1978), which made the “other” non-western realities invisible. In the case of the festival, the other was not located elsewhere but within the self, as participants grappled with their own intra-personal struggles and continually experienced the tensions in their multiple local-global identities such as indigenous-non-indigenous, western-consumer-earth lover, and mother-artist-worker. Artists and performers created hybridized sacralised forms of the ancestral, tribal, or nature family, because they perceived an inadequacy in the value placed on family (Wilkenson 2001) and nature (Plumwood 2002) in western neoliberal society.

Exerting local control over what was sacred extended to the resistance of exhibiting some items in the public domain, as these were considered too sacred. The Wisdom Tree Earth Based Spiritual Group met once a fortnight to meditate, create, and share their everyday life experiences. This group used a creative process that would generate journal entries and artifacts, such as spiritual bark protective mats, wands, brooms, clay talismans, and poppet dolls. Initially, group members wanted to exhibit a selection of their artifacts. However, they eventually decided that because the artifacts were infused with powerful energies they should not be displayed or handled by the public. A group member said about these items,

It feels to me if you put energy into an inanimate object anyone can use it and then there is no control as it then has a life of its own and may be misdirected. It is not in my power to physically place energy into something unless I have charge of it.

The everyday experiences of birthing, mothering, and being and growing older drew upon global themes through art, story, and performance to connect to an imagined global community at the local level. By reclaiming what was sacred, participants took back local control over processes that were beyond their control. Responses to the sense of disconnection experienced in the globalized world, like invisibility, focus on being a productive income-producing citizen, and challenges of living a life deeply connected to natural cycles, were negotiated through the expression of what was sacred to them. The stories, artworks, and performances from the festival seemed to indicate that participants sought to redefine, sanctify, or spiritualise aspects of their ordinary life experiences. Pargament (2000) warns that just because something is considered important
does not make it sacred. However, when it is invested with sacred character by community, self, or world, it will then be transformed into sacredness. The festival participants took the everyday important things in their life and made these sacred by identifying, articulating, maintaining, and experiencing the sacred as transformation. This often manifested in sacralising nature, natural processes, the tribal, and the ancestral. An underlying value system seemed to connect participants together in the desire to make a sacred process of life by linking these to processes that occurred in the cosmos. In this way, participants were reaching for a sense of connectedness and spiritual belonging in a local-global renegotiation of embodied sacred experience.

**Sacred Synergy**

Synergy is when the parts of the whole come together and in so doing create something more than the sum of the individual parts and in this way create a greater force than what all forces might achieve separately (Jaffe 2010). The festival was a container for shared experience, bringing together diverse art, performance groups, stallholders, and audience members from the local community. Vachereet and Joubert (2008) describe how the group becomes the container of experiences founded on a common imaginary, drives, and desires which develop trust. The shared imaginary was performed, painted, written about, and experienced in embodied improvised moments and ritual-like acts. In the contemporary struggle to seek what is sacred, Hill (2000) identifies four stages in the search process: (1) identifying what is sacred and worthy of devotion; (2) articulation of what has been identified as sacred; (3) maintaining the sacred with religious or spiritual experience; and (4) transformation into sacred by the search process. With the coming together of participants at the festival into the communal space, a common imaginary was created in a greater force than what each could experience alone.

Although different ideologies abounded among those performing and exhibiting at the festival, there was a clear indication that connectedness was thought of as being special and while not specifically stated as sacred seemed to correspond to Hill’s (2000) first and second stages of seeking the sacred, while the third and fourth stages were in the processes occurring on the day.

Sheryl and Glenice, two of The Women’s Room Festival Management Committee, when asked what they thought was the best part of the festival, replied,

> At the end [of the day] all the woman dancers coming together, the impromptu getting up and having a bit of a go . . . that was so special . . . big beaming grins, kids and everyone getting in there and doing it, that was nice . . . that was good.
The coming together validated each group’s global imaginary more than if they had performed this only in their own groups. The Goddess Parade was a ritualized performance at the start of the day, celebrating the return of spring, which brought together participants from The Women’s Room Mothers group, The Women’s Room Artists, The Wisdom Tree Spiritual Group, Hands Heart and Feet African Drum and Dance, and community members. Four women from Euro-Anglo backgrounds led the parade with their handcrafted Goddesses of straw, decorated with hand printed fabric, clay jewelry, flowers, and symbols sacred to them (see fig. 7). Behind them were Hands, Heart and Feet African Drum and Dance group, who, despite the name, were not African but white Anglo-Celtic men and women. Although the leaders of the group had learnt this style of drum and dance from their West African mentor living in Australia, the group had created their own unique style. They wore an eclectic mix of tulle skirts, beaded headdresses, and flowered hair accessories, tassels, and pom-poms, that were not West African, but a creation of what group members conceived as their kind of “tribal” (see fig. 8).

Indigenous Aboriginal dancers met the Goddess paraders at the gallery in a symbolic act of two tribes meeting. An Aboriginal Indigenous elder performed a welcome to country, naming the land as Aboriginal and speaking of land as sacred. While this does not make right the colonialist oppressions generations of Aboriginal Australians have experienced, it was a significant symbolic act, which shifted the holding of power in the performance moment. Participants in the Goddess Parade and the Indigenous dancers took back local control by performing their sacred and renegotiating global processes that had impacted on their lived experience of the sacred in their local community. The festival space was not just a place for individuals and groups to reclaim their sacred. By these groups coming together in a mutual celebration, the festival space gave multiple permissions to enact the sacred in a localized hybrid way.

Instead of bringing forth a fragmented clash of ideologies, the festival was the container for a cohesive but diverse whole. This is not to deny that tensions
existed between or within groups, as this was part of the whole that contributed to its structure. What each group brought to the festival was their own idea of what was sacred to them. For some, this was connection to ancestors, for others a Goddess or God, the process of birth, or being part of a larger cosmos of past, present, and future. What the performance and artworks indicated was an underlying belief in the sacredness of nature, which manifested in various forms like the tribal, the ancestral, the neo-romantic, and the cyclical process of life, birth, and death. Although the sacred was conceived of individually, the bringing together of these ideologies created something greater than its parts. This was elusive but could be described as a “spirituality of connectedness,” which acknowledged that something sacred happened when individuals and groups connected at the local level and ritualized everyday acts deemed as sacred. This would be contrary to Davie’s (1990, 1994) belief without belonging thesis, as the festival was a container for a spirituality of belonging and coming together. Davie’s modification of her thesis to “vicarious religion” is an important acknowledgement that shared religious practice is still important at particular significant times in people’s lives (2010: 263).

![Figure 8: Coming together of dancers and audience](image)

**Conclusion**

Although contemporary festivals have often been viewed primarily as places of commodification (Crespi-Vallbona and Richards 2007; Getz 2009), this may disguise the inherent complexity in the neo-tribal festival movement where consumerist practices, co-exist alongside anti-capitalist agendas, creativity,
and spiritual practice. Consumerist practices are present at the neo-tribal events. However, participants also engage in an “alternative political activism” through the creation of a world apart from their usual institutionalized reality, allowing for possibilities of temporary power and control (Riley, Griffin, and Morey 2010). Pike (2011) also acknowledges the complex interplay between consumerism, counter-culture, and new forms of spirituality that arise at neo-tribal festivals and events. While consumer practices seem to be an intrinsic part of festival culture, perhaps the focus on consumption has misrepresented other motivations of participants, such as to become visible players in a globalised world that recognizes the sacredness in the everyday and the need to share this within community. The multilayered experiences of festival culture would seem to challenge the assumptions that festivals and the spiritual practice occurring here are as consumptive and narcissist as Featherstone (1991), Bruce (1998, 2002, 2006), and Voas (2007) would suggest.

Reclaiming the sacredness in their lives, from their own local experiences, is not a form of inward narcissism but is deeply engaged with global and local issues. Women at the festival showed their artwork or performed their dance because of a desire to take visible action and become part of a local community, not only for personal empowerment, but also from the desire to share their work and inspire empowerment in other women. Effectively, they were reclaiming a space, which had been colonized by the practices of patriarchal neoliberal globalisation, where the local had become invisible (Mies 1998; Shiva 1993, 2005; Marchand 2010). In response to this invisibility, women used the global process of increased interconnectedness to make communication between these smaller groups possible, in this case via The Women’s Room website, email and social networking sites such as the EarthSpirit festival Facebook page. The common imaginary for participants at this festival was fuelled by access to ethnic cultural imagery, global food, music, dance, spiritual concepts, and migration. However, the festival participants were not only receptors of global culture but critical agents in their own lives. The festival experience became a place for participants to comment upon their lived reality in the neoliberal world and ask questions such as, “How do I exist and in this world, how will I birth, how will I believe, where have I come from, and what kind of a world will my children be living upon in the future.” No longer was it about individuals exploring their inner lives alone but a coming together of a community to share and be in dialogue with other women and the larger community.

The festival experience validated participants’ multiple conceptions of the sacred by performing these in a communal space. The sacred was not one universal agreed upon concept but multiple scattered viewpoints that, when bought together, formed a unique pattern in a cohesive but diverse whole. In bringing together the multiple aspects of the festival experience, a new picture
was formed, a new performance was made, and a new story was created, which became the sacred to them. The sacred experience was not static but performed moments in time, as participants were continually questioning, creating, changing, and remaking the sacred. This is consistent with a postmodern global perspective, where there is not one ultimate truth, the centre continually shifts, boundaries are breached, flows and networks of knowledge and people increase, and a new time and space continuums are experienced. Conceptions of the sacred were looser than traditional religions, as the power in defining what was sacred was not centralized by one body but by the synergy of the groups coming together to form and reclaim their own sacred reality.

The festival experience was one of re-centering, remaking, and reclaiming what was important to participants, which became sacred by the act of sharing ideas of their sacred within community. Instead of Davie’s (1990, 1994) concept that communities believe without belonging, the festival was a place where groups and individuals came together in various stages of the search process to create a shared imaginary in a sacred synergy. The sacred synergy of connectedness in the festival experience was not just about artists or performers coming together in their own tribe but about bringing together groups with diverse political and artistic persuasions, which would not normally come together, in a creative tension, opening a dialogical space that required new creative ways of communication.

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The Earthspirit Festival and Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009

Women Coming Together for Cultural Wellbeing

A Report for The Doctor of Cultural Research (DCR)

Report Author Karin Mackay
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The Earthspirit Festival and
Ancestral Connections Exhibition
2009
Braemar Gallery, Blue
Mountains Australia

Karin Mackay
Doctoral Candidate
Institute for Culture and Society
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents 1
List of Figures 2
List of Appendices 3
Acknowledgements 3
Earthspirit Festival Acknowledgements and Contributors 4
Overview of the Video Report 6
Introduction 7
Background 8
Counter Culture Festivals in Australia 8
Festivals and Ritual 9
About the Earthspirit Festival Theme 9
The Project 10
The Earthspirit Festival and Ancestral Connections Art Exhibition 2009 10
The Women’s Room 11
Artists Performers and Community Groups 13
The Partnership with Blue Mountains City Council and Braemar Gallery 15
Aims of the Project 18
Key Questions 18
Methodology 19
Activist art and an Ecofeminist approach 19
Methods 20
Invitation 21
Festival Management Committee meetings 21
Creativity Courses and Workshops 21
Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009 22
Earthspirit Festival 23
The Video Report 23
Video Transcript and Analysis. 26
Findings 44
Coming Together as a Spiritual Practice 44
Women Negotiating Identity and Belonging 44
Critical creative activism: Resistance and response to globalisation 45
Stories, art and ritual for emergence of self and cultural wellbeing 46
References 47

Figure 1: Front Cover Dancers and audience members coming together in a circle on the lawn of Braemar Gallery
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Front Cover – Dancers and audience members coming together in a circle on the law of Braemar Gallery .............................................................. 5
Figure 2: Caitlyn’s lotus dance in the circle outside the front entrance of Braemar Gallery .......................................................... 6
Figure 3: Video Still of the Earthspirit Festival Video Report ................................................. 7
Figure 4: Doctoral project overview .................................................................................. 8
Figure 5: Odyssey Festival in Wallacia in 1971 near Penrith ............................................. 9
Figure 6: Spheres of Influence at the Earthspirit Festival and Ancestral connections exhibition 2009 ................................................................. 10
Figure 7: The Earthspirit Festival and Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009 participants .................................................................................. 11
Figure 8: Braemar House. The site of Braemar Gallery 104 Macquarie Road Springwood on Gundungurra Aboriginal land ........................................... 12
Figure 9: Site map of Braemar Gallery and grounds .......................................................... 13
Figure 10: The Gathering of the Goddess Parade. Foundation Square in Springwood ...... 14
Figure 11: Goddess Parade heading dancing down macquarie Street Springwood........... 15
Figure 12: Kim Waldron and her handmade Goddess sculpture about to join the parade .................................................................................. 16
Figure 13: Hands Heart and feet African Drum and Dance nearing Braemar Gallery ........ 17
Figure 14: Creators of the Goddesses look with delight at the approaching parade .......... 18
Figure 15: John and Emily Cooper from Hands Heart and Feet performing introductory story dance ................................................................. 19
Figure 16: Jo Clancy showing her Dragonfly dance to Burralgang dancers and audience members .................................................................................. 20
Figure 17: Wollemi dancers .............................................................................................. 21
Figure 18: Aunty Carol Cooper welcoming everyone to her ancestors country ............... 22
Figure 19: Ghawazi Caravan Tribal Style Belly Dancers .................................................. 23
Figure 20: The end of the day when dancers and audience come together in an impromptu dance ........................................................................ 24
LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ancestral Connections Exhibition Catalogue
Appendix 2: Representative stories and Art from the Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009
Appendix 3: Sample of Group Creative Process
Appendix 4: Invitation Bookmark
Appendix 5: Invitation Email
Appendix 6: Media Release
Appendix 7: Guiding Questions to Participants and Audience Members

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Karin Mackay
Doctoral Candidate
Institute for Culture and society
University of Western Sydney
EARTHSPIRIT FESTIVAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Funding
Blue Mountains City Council Cultural Partnerships Funding Grant

Venue
Braemar Community Gallery

Organisers
The Women’s Room Committee
Karin Mackay President Rebecca Lawes Vice President Sheryl Hardy
Volunteer Coordinator Kym Waldron
Treasurer
Glenice Ware Stalls Coordinator

Mistress of Ceremonies
Dayl workman

Photographers
Sheryl Hardy
Karin Mackay

Video
Karin Mackay
Adam Gersbach

Welcome to Country
Carol Cooper Gundungurra and Darug elder

Dance and Performance groups
The Wollemi Dancers Aboriginal Dance Troupe
Burralgang Aboriginal Dance Troupe
Hands Heart and Feet African Drum and Dance Group
Gahwazi Caravan American Tribal Style Belly Dance
Urban Qabila Belly Dancers
Tarik Sawires Egyptian drumming
Spring Goddess Parade Group

Artist Groups
The Women’s Room Artists
The Women’s Room Mothers Group
The Wisdom Tree Earth Based Spiritual Group
Katoomba Homebirth Group

Living Art Projects
Glorious Goddesses
Ghanaian Beading
Ancestral Stories Workshop
Woven Women
Mask Making Workshop

Individual Artists
Renata Mueller
Kim Waldron
Aubre Hudson
Rebecca Verpoorten Lawes
Glenice Ware
Kirstie Dare
Karen Maber
Dayl Workman
Karin Mackay
Vibha Gulati
Sally Gersbach
Christina Manawaiti
Sheryl Hardy
Hajnalka Tulogdi
Suzzi Penni
Amelia Mackay
Flynn Mackay
Amy Bell
Michelle King
Bea Little
Robyn Bogart
Jane Rheumkorff
Joanna Jensen
Jenni Mills
Sooz Sinclair
Lilly Rose Laws
Sarah Heritage
Kiri Koubaroulis
Liz Hale

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Tarik Sawires Egyptian drumming
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Artist Groups
The Women’s Room Artists
Figure 2: Caitlyn's lotus dance in the circle outside the front entrance of Braemar Gallery
OVERVIEW OF THE VIDEO REPORT

The following report contextualises a video that was filmed at the Earthspirit Festival opening day on the 30th August 2009. Approximately eight hours of video was taken and then edited into several smaller video stories for different audiences. The ten minute section that I have included as part of this report shows how diverse women’s groups came together to celebrate and reclaim what was sacred to them through sharing with each other their creative practice, love of nature, stories, birthing bodies, spiritual beliefs and respect for diverse views. Each group brought their own versions of what was sacred to them and embraced different creative practices from their own as part of the whole that made the festival enjoyable. This video exert beginning in the town square and follows The Spring Goddess Parade down the main street of a local town to the Community art gallery where traditional Aboriginal owners who honoured their Ancestral lands.

Please view the Earthspirit video at:

Earthspirit Video Link

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSvJHXK1g6o

Figure 3: Video Still of the Earthspirit Festival Video Report
INTRODUCTION

Doctor of Cultural Research Program at The Institute for Culture and Society at The University of Western Sydney

The Earthspirit Festival was one of the three projects that formed the basis of my Doctor of Cultural Research Program (Figure 4), which was conducted at The Institute for Culture and Society at The University of Western Sydney.

![Diagram of Doctoral Projects]

1. Earthspirit Festival
2. Ancestral Connections Interviews
3. The Wisdom Tree Group

Figure 4: Doctoral project overview

The Earth Spirit Festival was organised by The Women’s Room Centre for Women’s Wellbeing, a community arts group in Winmalee, and held at Braemar Community Gallery in Springwood, both of which are located in the Greater City of The Blue Mountains, Australia. The project encompassed a one day festival event and a three week art exhibition. The festival aimed to bring diverse groups of women together to share their creative expertise and to acknowledge women’s skills, abilities and wisdom. The aim of the Ancestral Connections Exhibition was to showcase women’s stories, art and performance to the larger community and to inspire women from diverse backgrounds to share their story and art. The Women’s Room organised the exhibition and festival to support women’s creativity in a community space.
BACKGROUND

Counter Culture Festivals in Australia

The idea of a contemporary festival evokes images of music, colour, clamour, street stalls and performance stages. Contemporary festivals in Australia are now big business attracting international artists and performers in dance, music, film and folk demonstrating how consumerist and neoliberal global culture has dominated festival culture. Music festival have struggles to maintain financial viability, while others, like Peats Ridge Festival and the Harvest Festival, have folded (SMH 2013). Early manifestations of festivals in Australia were not always financially successful either and nor was money their main focus. Instead music and alternative lifestyle festivals were more about transformation of culture and changing conservative society values (St John 1999)

![Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world - the point, however, is to change it. Karl Marx](image)

**Figure 5: Odyssey Festival in Wallacia in 1971 near Penrith**

Festivals in Australia have a long association with music in events like the first Australian outdoor rock concert emulating the famous Summer of Love Hippie Festival of Woodstock at Ourimbah in New South wales called ‘Pilgrimage for Pop’ a weekend celebration of drug culture and alternative lifestyles in 1970 on the Australia day long weekend (Long way to the top n.d.). Over the next five years there followed a string of festivals celebrating alternative lifestyles, drug culture, counter culture and protest at the well-known Sunbury Festivals from 1972 until 1975 in Victoria Melbourne, the Odyssey Festival in Wallacia (near Penrith) in January 1971, the Aquarius Arts Festival in May 1971 held at Canberra University.

Outdoor music festivals continued into the 1980s at the Nararra rock concert on the central coast of NSW from 1983-1984. Emerging alongside music festivals was Confest, an outdoor gathering focused on transforming society, which began in 1976 on the banks of the Cotter River in the Australian Capital Territory, and which is still in operation. Confest interested in individual expression and activist counter culture is similar to the Earthspirit Festival as it acknowledges the natural and earthy as special. St John commented on the earthy aspect of The Confest organisers Down to Earth explaining;
anything deemed ‘natural’ - ‘organic’, ‘green’, ‘earthy’, ‘vego’, ‘folky’ - is valorised, and to express one’s commitment to such, via apparel, diet, music, courtship, childcare, and conversation, garners acceptance and respect. The identity of the alternative lifestyle is here revealed to be a DIY assemblage of desirable argot, icons and gestures (St John 1999).

St John also suggests that alternate counter culture of expression has its historical roots in the ‘rebirth of a Dionysian culture’ which is linked to the liminal spaces by Victor Turner in what is termed Communitas, a ritualised coming together to enable group cohesions (St John 1999).

**Festivals and Ritual**

Archaic concepts of festivals may have been political, social or religious with Greeko -Roman festivals incorporating both religious and secular aspects (Bowden 2010). Ancient festivals were about gathering people together in an attempt to create a common identity for the people, engender loyalty and belonging through ritual processes or performance in the moment as in Victor turner’s communitas (St john 1999). Closely related to festivals are holy feast days, one day events that set aside time to celebrate special times of the year, usually in religious contexts. Festivals in this ancient sense were more religious in nature as they were closely associated with local places, crops, seasons, deities, gods, goddesses and marked off as special from everyday life with particular set of rites or rituals (Bowden 2010). The Earthspirit Festival shared some similarities to archaic festivals in that it was a spiritual coming together for a remaking of community

Contemporary Festivals in Australia have retained elements of the ancient forms especially concerning identity, status and belonging but have been considered as secular rather than sacred and largely considered as commercial ventures or vehicles for promoting particular music performers, writers or artists (Crespi-Vallbona, Montserrat, and Richards 2007). However, St John (2006 1999) has convincingly argued that contemporary electro tribal trance dance festivals have religious elements similar to Victor Turners liminal experiences of coming together described in the concept of communitas in what he terms Hyper-liminality to describe the embodiment of being in a spiritual moment of connection with others. Pike (2001).also draws parallels to archaic rites at the gorging chaos of The Burning Man festival where she argues that participants come for a spiritual seeking, reminiscent of the ancient rites of Dionysus where sex and wine flowed freely

**ABOUT THE EARTHSPIRIT FESTIVAL THEME**

The Earthspirit Festival was a contemporary festival which celebrated women’s wisdom, stories, art and spirituality. This festival differed from many of the larger music festivals as it focused on honouring the primal, natural and expression of inner life of women rather than on alternative drug culture. It was a small community arts and ecology festival promoting the raw emotive art and stories of women and handmade, home grown, humanitarian or natural products as the focus was primarily about making money but nurturing creative talent and community development.

The festival attended to local issues in response to the festival participants view that corporate governance and neoliberal globalisation had overtaken their ability to control aspects of their lives such as how to birth, be a woman, a mother, what to believe, how to practice their art, spirituality and cultural traditions. Similarly, the women’s stories and art and performance at the festival and accompanying exhibition explored themes of ancestral mothers, symbols of fertility,
birth, motherhood and the creativity inherent in the natural world. Artworks were not always for
sale as women were more interested in sharing their reality of womanhood and raising
awareness of what was sacred to them rather than turning a profit.

The Earthspirit Festival remade the archaic concept of festival through evoking the spiritual and
celebrating seasons. Although most contemporary women are not reliant on the spring and
summer harvest for their basic wellbeing as ancient women would have been, the seasons
represented an awareness of their own bodily rhythms and evoked a ritualistic and symbolic
remembering of women’s cyclical biological rhythms. The festival was not archaic in the sense
that there was one universal understanding of the divine or the sacred but there was a desire of
the community to ‘reclaim the sacred’ in their lives, which manifested in diverse cultural
practices like paintings, stories, dance performances, acknowledgement of country, relationship
to land, calling on ancestors forms. The ‘Earthspirit’ was not specifically defined and purposely
left open so that diverse interpretations were available to the eclectic mix of participants.
Despite the diversity

THE PROJECT

The Earthspirit Festival and Ancestral Connections Art Exhibition 2009

The 2009 Earthspirit Festival theme was Ancestral Connections, was the fourth festival to be
organised by The Women’s Room Festival Organising Committee. The festival was held on
Australian Aboriginal Gundungurra and Darug traditional lands, and we were welcomed by
Australian Aboriginal elder Auntie Carol Cooper. The Australian Anglo name for the land is
Springwood. The festival was held in the grounds of Braemar Community Gallery at 104
Macquarie Road Springwood, which is now owned by Blue Mountains City Council. The
Ancestral Connections women’s stories and art occupied three rooms of historic homestead
Braemar House. The Ancestral Connections theme was intended to bring diverse women
together to explore their identity and belonging and showcase the variety of creative and
spiritual practices women used in their daily lives.

The Earthspirit Festival emerged from the creative arts and spiritual groups held at The
Women’s Room as well as other women’s community arts and dance groups within The Blue
Mountains Local Area. The Blue Mountains is known for its highly creative and artistic
community with several smaller festivals and one major festival ‘The Winter Magic Festival’
in the calendar year. The Earthspirit festival was the only festival in the area that focused on
the telling of women’s stories through art, performance that specifically invited honouring of
the land and spiritual ancestors. While men did participate in the festival performance, this was
in a supporting role to their partners.

The Earthspirit Festival women’s story and art project was made up of three primary spheres of
influence. Understanding the relationship between these sphere clarifies the scope of the project
These where:

1. The Women’s Room Management Committee
2. Artists, performers and community groups
3. Braemar Gallery and The Blue Mountains City Council
In 2004 I formed The Women’s Room. Initially this was to support birthing women and new mothers but it soon became clear that many women at other phases of their life were hungry to tell their story and really wanted a place to share their experience of being a woman, nurture them on a deeper level, build a sense of belonging in community and connecting with their intuitive creative selves. I began offering one day workshops exploring issues surrounding motherhood, birth and women’s cycles using the creative strategies such as painting, meditation, clay work, story writing, sharing of story sculpting from natural materials, performing healing rituals of release and affirmation in the Australian bush and walking in the bush to acknowledge the sacredness of trees and nature.

The Women’s Room became a well-known place in the local community for women to explore and express creativity, healing practices and spirituality. The organisation grew dramatically from a handful of women in 2004 to over 750 members within two years. A decision was made by the regular attendees at the end of 2005 to hold a small exhibition of the creative work that had been produced in the groups at the local community art gallery.

**Figure 6: Spheres of Influence at the Earthspirit Festival and Ancestral connections exhibition 2009**
Formation of a Festival Management Committee

As the facilitator of the groups, I witnessed how the creative and spiritual practices we were engaging at The Women’s Room was positive for women’s sense of self, improving aspects of their wellbeing, which empowered them to make change in their lives. In 2006 the regular attendees at The Women’s Room groups had informally decided to show other women their artwork in a local community space. To share our artworks and stories in a public exhibition seemed like the next step, although none of us had ever exhibited our creative work before and were daunted by the thought of our creative work and stories being exposed to the general public. We wanted to show other women in the community that they too could have a voice through the arts, so was highly motivated to organise the exhibition.

The first Women’s Room story and art exhibition was held in September 2006 called The Secret Life of Women Exhibition. At this exhibition 30 women showed 90 artworks and accompanying stories. We invited several women’s local community performance groups to help us gather a crowd. The festival and exhibition received an overwhelming response from the public with 600 visitors and positive comments in the exhibition register. On a high after this success a festival management committee was formed for the next five years this established a pattern of annual festivals and exhibitions for women to come together and share their stories, art and performance with their families, friends and audience members of the community.

The Women’s Room Committee was comprised of core committee members:

- President: Karin Mackay,
- Vice President: Rebecca V Laws,
- Treasurer: Kim Waldron,
- Volunteer: Coordinator Sheryl Hardy,
- Stall coordinator: Glenice Ware

Women supported on the day: Sally Gersbach Karen Maber, Coralie Faye, Tracy Allen, Amy Bell, Fiona Saxton, Kate Tuckey, Vibna Gulati, Emily Cooper, Dayl Workman, Sooz Sinclair, Ambre Hudson, Patricia Jennings and other women and men who were informally involved in the running of the festival but unable to attend the regular committee meetings.

The committee was relatively stable, however was consistently challenged by new members with a divergent agenda to The Women’s Room. St John also notes the instability that organically formed open ended groups

The Women’s Room Ethos

The women’s artworks and stories were inspired by The Women’s Room groups and projects, while other artworks and performances were made by closely affiliated community groups (Figure 7). While there were different genres and forms of the creative work, there was an underlying ethos shared by the groups which linked the creative process of making, performing and writing with generative processes within nature and is demonstrated by the focus in the festival and exhibition on ‘the natural’ or ‘tribal’ or ‘spiritual’. This manifested in natural birtthing, homebirthing, rituals in nature, Aboriginal connection to country, performing dance that was tribal and ‘earthy’ and the exploration of connectedness to a sacred sense of place in the artworks and stories at the festival. The aims of The Women’s Room were extrapolated for a funding grant by one of the committee members and are summarized below as;
1. Creativity is a powerful process because it shows people that they have the power to make something out of nothing. Deeply Engaged Creative process takes us back to a deeply held place within us that does not question our belonging as part of the earth.

2. Empowering women to find their voice, share their story and feel part of a community not only does their personal level of self-esteem and wellbeing seem to improve but their capacity and willingness to help others and motivation to engage more fully in community activities increases.

3. Creating a space to share our lives, our story and practice our art we are going back to the deeply essential primal core feeling of our ancestors which gives us a sense of being connected to life energy.

It is important to develop resourcefulness, so it’s not just about surviving but about going beyond that to become a growing and blossoming productive individual in the community with passion and purpose

Artists Performers and Community Groups

The Women’s Room artists were made up of an individual artists and groups who had participated in the workshops, groups and course held at The Women’s Room. Some artists were not from The Women’s Room but from groups that were closely affiliated with The Women’s Room, with similar philosophical outlooks regarding tribal, the creative and women’s empowerment. Women that exhibited in the 2009 Ancestral Connections exhibition came from diverse ethnic, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many women explored themes of belonging and identity, motherhood, birth, relationships and earth spirituality (see Appendix for a representative). Specifically groups were;

1. The Women’s Room Individual Artists

Women who attended the creative groups or classes held at The Women’s Room were invited to enter their work into the exhibition. Some women would not have attended the groups, but still wanted to exhibit. The exhibition was open to all women who wanted to place an entry. The women were required to become a member of The Women’s Room and there was a small fee of approximately A$20 to exhibit.

2. The Women’s Room Mothers Group

Women interested in natural living, art and spirituality with children between 0-5 years of age would meet in The Winmalee Community Centre every second week. Creative sessions similar in structure and process to those at The Women’s Room creative course were offered. The group was Instigated by Karin Mackay in 2004-2006 then run for a short time by Rebeca Verpoorten then Kym Waldron until 2010. Women attending made individual and group woks for the exhibition.

3. The Wisdom Tree Earth Based Spiritual Group (Instigated by The Women’s Room)

A group of six women collaboratively ran a women’s earth based spiritual group to explore their creative and spiritual selves. Women were invited to exhibited their artworks, craft objects and ritual items in the exhibition, however they chose not to exhibit original items but replicas as ritual artefacts were considered inappropriate to be placed in a public space.
4. **Katoomba Homebirth Group**

A community group advocating the rights of women who wished to birth naturally at home with or without the support of a midwife and located in the upper Blue Mountains area in New South Wales Australia. The group also aimed to bring awareness to the emotional, physical and spiritual transformations occurring through pregnancy and birth. This group painted and exhibited casts of their pregnant belly.

5. **Spring Goddess Parade (Collaboration Women’s Room; Hands Heart and Feet African Drum and Dance and individual community members)**

Four women made large straw Goddesses reminiscent of icons honouring the European style wheat harvest festival. This was led by Rebecca Verpoorten Laws. As a group and in collaboration with John and Emily Cooper from Hands, Heart and Feet African Drum and Dance they decided to hold a Spring Goddess Parade from the centre of Springwood down Macquarie Street to Braemar Gallery where the exhibition and festival were held. Through The Women’s Room networks community members were invited to join. The parade was held on Sunday 30th August 2009.

6. **Wollemi Aboriginal Dancers**

Wollemi were a local Aboriginal dance group led by dancer Jo Clancy, a Wiradjuri woman, who lived in Katoomba and had string ties with the traditional owners of Gundungarra and Darug land. The Wollemi dancers were invited by The Women’s Room Management Committee to be a part of the festivities on the day and performed three dances. Jo talked the audience through meanings of the dances and some children learnt the actions and steps. There were three women in this group.

7. **Burralgang Aboriginal Dancers**

Fleur Magic, also an Aboriginal Wiradjuri women led and performed with a group of nine Aboriginal girls from near Orange in the Central West Country of New South Wales. The Burraglang Dancers were invited to perform by The Women’s Room Management Committee and performed two dances. Fleur also spent considerable time teaching the audience traditional Wiradjuri language and concepts.

8. **Hands Heart and Feet African Drum and Dance**

This group was led by Emily and John Cooper who were well established in the local community and performing regularly at many events. While not ethnically African they learnt African style drumming from West African teachers who had migrated to Australia. The original dance moves were adapted into their unique stories and dances. John and Emily had been supporting The Women’s Room Exhibitions and Festivals from the first year of inception and were very involved in the festivities of the day.

9. **Ghawazi Tribal Style Belly dancers**

Devi Mamack was the owner of this professional dance troupe. Ghawazi had also been involved in The Women’s Room Festivals since inception and was also happy to support the festivities. Three dancers performed on the day.
Qabilia Belly Dancers

Three women friends made up this dance troupe who danced in more traditional style of belly dancing rather than tribal style. This was their first time performing at The Earthspirit Festival, however Dayl Workman who led this group, also exhibited an artwork and was Mistress of Ceremonies on festival day.

Figure 7 The Earthspirit Festival and Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009 participants

The Partnership with Blue Mountains City Council and Braemar Gallery

The 2009 Earthspirit and Ancestral Connections Exhibition was funded in part by a Cultural Partnership Grant won by The Women’s Room to help develop and pay for the running costs of the festival. One of the requirements of the funding agreement was that a project be developed to develop community engagement. The Women’s Room facilitated a project called ‘One Seed’ which use the funding to assist women to develop and facilitate their own creative arts groups in the local Blue Mountains Local Government Area. These were comprised of six small grants of $300 given to women who applied through a rigorous selection process. The idea behind the project was that by empowering one woman to develop their own creative ideas and teach their wisdom and skills to other women this would blossom into further groups and grow the creative
women’s community. Five of the six women then entered their groups work into the Ancestral Connections Exhibition. These groups were Goddess Parade, Ancestral Dolls, Mask Making, Ghanaian Bead Making, and Ancestral Treasure Boxes. Of these groups The Goddess Parade and the Ancestral Dolls made significant contributions to the exhibition.

Funding was an important aspect of the successful running of the Earthspirit Festival, however it also created tensions and challenges that were not easy to resolve. For example, the time in administration of the monies and applying for grant income impacted negatively on the festival committees groups own creative process. Another issue was that all the effort in obtaining the grant needed to be weighed up against what the expectations were to gain the funding. For example of the 5,000 seed funding given, $900 was returned to the Gallery in fees and $250 to the council to apply to have and event, $300 to another council body to auspice The Women’s Room, $800 to cover insurance and public liability, 1800 (300 x 6) for each women to facilitate a group, which left 1050 to help pay for Aboriginal speakers and performers as well as advertising and printing. The non-Aboriginal performers volunteered their time. The Women’s Room Committee struggles with the economic realities and administration requirements that were essential for winning funding and raised the question of why there was a need to pay much of the funding back into the council.

Braemar Gallery was a community run gallery, which was a supposedly a space for artists to access and display their art at an affordable way. The application to exhibit was overseen by a volunteer committee, who also assisted in hanging the artworks. During the course of the festivals and exhibitions which The Women’s Room held at Braemar Gallery there was repeated tension between festival management committee and the Gallery volunteer committee. The Braemar Gallery website presented the gallery as accessible and community oriented

> Are you a painter, photographer or perhaps a sculptor? Looking for a place to exhibit your artistic talent? Then look no further than Braemar Gallery, the only community managed visual arts Gallery in the Blue Mountains. The Gallery Committee arranges a calendar of exhibitions ranging through various media to promote local artists and introduce exhibitions of high quality from outside the area and local to the community, as a community service

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**Figure 8** Braemar House. The site of Braemar Gallery 104 Macquarie Road Springwood on Gundungurra Aboriginal land
The notion of community presented on the Gallery website as shown above is homey, friendly, connected, however the volunteer committee at the time of the exhibition was antagonistic towards the feminist content of The Women’s Room Exhibition. Despite this the festival committee wished to continually reclaim the space as theirs even after suggestions to relocate the event to avoid confrontations and challenges. Women used their creative works, performances in a critical creative activism to make a statement about their local space as communal and not in the control of a council bureaucracy.

**Relationship to Land**

Springwood is an historically important place in the development of greater Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains Region, over to the plains of the Bathurst region in New South Wales, Australia. Springwood was a stopover point for further travel up to the Blue Mountains and was colonised by Governor Macquarie. There was and still is very little recognition of the traditional Aboriginal owners in the local historical society records, which still focuses on the ‘foundation’ of white colony. The below passage shows how Macquarie saw the land as belonging to no one and he could name it.

*In May, 1815, Governor and Mrs Macquarie set out with a large party on a twenty-one day trip over the Western Road. Once again Springwood was one of the places selected to make a camp. In Macquarie Rd, Springwood, there is now a monument to mark this camp site. Macquarie wrote in his diary: ‘We then halted at three o’clock in a very pretty wooded plain near a spring of very good fresh water, and pitched our tent near the side of the road. This stage is 12 miles from Emu Ford and our first on the Mountains. This place being very pretty I have named it Spring Wood.*

![Figure 9 Site map of Braemar Gallery and grounds](image-url)
Braemar Gallery is located on the main street of Springwood named Macquarie Street, after Governor Macquarie. Braemar house, the current site of Braemar Gallery, was built on 60 acres by James Hunter Lawson in 1892 and was one of the first European landholdings in the area. The Goddess Parade participants, while representing the colonisers, also performed an act of resistance from control exerted by local council rules and bureaucratic neoliberal processes as they began their unauthorised Goddess Parade from foundation square of Springwood all the way towards Braemar Gallery. I was aware, as were The Goddess Parade group that we needed to have a permit, permission and pay a fee to Blue Mountains City Council for holding a parade on the main street. However, this was ignored and the parade occurred without official sanction.

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The aim of the Earthspirit Festival project was to find out why and how women attending The Women’s Room wanted to share their stories and art with their community. The central question of the overarching doctoral project guided was ‘how do creative cultural practices influence women’s sense of identity and wellbeing relating to nature and kin’.

The project wished to explore;

- The reasons why these women wanted to come together in a group to share their creative and spiritual practice, rather than be content to experience their creativity and spirituality on their own.
- To investigate the link between women’s creative spiritual sharing in community and how this influenced their sense of wellbeing.
- To formulate deeper understandings of the link between creativity and spirituality.
- How women’s sense of belonging and identity were related to relationships with kin
- How art and spiritual practices can be used for empowerment
- How is the natural, earthy tribal implicated in women’s sense of identity and wellbeing

KEY QUESTIONS

- In what ways do you think that the sharing of women’s story and art is important?
- Do you think there is a spiritual aspect to creative practice?
- How has participation changed how you think about your creative or spiritual practice?
- What does wellbeing mean to you?
METHODOLOGY

Activist art and an Ecofeminist approach

The Earthspirit Festival was one of bringing diverse disparate individuals and groups together to make a complex but cohesive whole in a culturally responsive way. Berryman et al. (Berryman 2103) asks ‘How can we maintain the original integrity of both participants and researchers and their respective cultures and co-construct at the same time something new?’ In the making of the Earthspirit Festival design, the research was a collaborative experience with women’s creative arts groups in the local Blue Mountains community. The aim of the exhibition and festival was to facilitate a deep recognition of the tensions, politics and emotions that exist within and between individuals, groups and communities which are not always easily reconciled but always present.

The festival day was designed so that diverse groups of women came together to address the often unspoken tension of separateness. One of the festival aims was to bring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups together to acknowledge the tradition owners of the land. An arts based and ecofeminist methodology was central to the festival and exhibition, as I was concerned with creating a space for diverse women’s stories, perspectives and artworks to be heard, to resist colonisation of the local by the neoliberal global and open a space for the rituals of cultural practice of the festival participants. In the creation of the festival and exhibition as a container a space was created for women to come together and act as witness to each other’s reclaiming what was sacred for them.

While we had overwhelmingly strong support and positive commentary from many who came to our exhibitions and festivals, the women’s expressive art, was still considered second rate, pathetic or not able to address serious concerns and that feminist and sexual themes were considered offensive by some (Parker and Pollock 1987). For example, the male curator of the gallery hid the more sexually oriented artworks behind doors. Also, we experienced disparaging comments about the quality and feminist content of the work. Many of the artworks were symbolic figurative of the female form which depicted sexually empowered and embodied experiences and this seemed to be challenging for the gallery committee.

Women used their artwork and story to decolonise the gallery space and assert their ideas about their own bodies and wisdom ways despite the negativity from those who controlled the space. Women resisted by not conforming to the selling of their artworks and remaining committed to exhibiting at this community space even though it may have been easier to find another venue. The Women’s Room experienced other barriers at the festival like being charged extra for using the outdoor space where other exhibitors were not, power supply cut off mid performance, and ‘unavailability’ to keep the gallery open. While The Women’s Room was permitted to hold their festival and exhibition at Braemar gallery, there was subtle and not so subtle symbolic violence towards women which was reflective of the broader patriarchal attitudes towards women (Mies 1998; Salleh 2004).

Ecofeminism incorporates a critique of capitalistic patriarchal western centric perspectives which take free labour from both women and diverse peoples who rely upon land for their wellbeing (Mies & Shiva). The festival aimed to reverse this conundrum and make possible a place and a space for women to express fully their diverse cultural experiences and especially validate women’s embodied biological wisdom through creative arts practice. I used an ecofeminist approach as a lens to critique the relationships women had between each other, the land that the performance was held upon and women’s desire to acknowledge these links while also remaking their own relationships with self, others and cosmos. The ecofeminist approach was important in guiding the festival projects in an effort to value women’s work, human’s
relationship with nature and natural processes which have been controlled and contained by patriarchal systems (Salleh 2004).

The festival theme Ancestral Connections was thought of by The Women’s Room management committee and the invitations asked participants to explore their multiple roles as women and multiple ethnic identities in a public forum. When women shared in community their intimate cultural identities they made public declarations of ‘This is who I am, this is my story, this is one of my stories, one part of my belonging’. The tension experienced in a globalised world and living in a local place brought to the surface the complexities women faced in negotiating multiple identities and the structural realities of their material lives. Women painted and wrote about their lived tensions and connections they felt in particular embodied space of their bodies, families and local natural communities.

Art based research recognises that arts is a valuable way to understand the social landscape, imagine the almost impossible and challenge the status quo. For women who participated in the festival and exhibition, re-imagining was an important aspect of their creative work because it allowed cultural threads of belonging to be reconnected, emotions to be felt, expressed and shared and for them to become more confident and empowered in challenging injustice in their lives. Finley recognises arts ability to enter the discordant zone of inner and outer tensions when she states;

*Arts-based research methodologies play out in what are often discontinuous and discordant social constructions; these are the contested sites that form the 'zone of contention' (Garoian, 1999, p. 43) that take shape in negotiation between public and private worlds, forming liminal spaces in which relationships are made between people and politics, imagination and action, theory and activism. They are also the sites in which a critical arts-based research can unveil oppression (discovery) and transform praxis (invention) …… Like the emancipatory teacher, the arts-based researcher is a 'liminal servant' (Garoian, 1999, p. 43) whose responsibility is the creation of entrances to emotional, spiritual, and ephemeral spaces. (Finley 2003)*

Art based research methodology made possible a liminal space for the self in a way that women were able to bring together disparate aspects of themselves address tensions they experience living in a global world. An important distinction between the communal liminal space St John (1999) and Finley (2003) discuss is that the liminal space experienced by the women in this study was that women’s stories, artworks and performance acted as both whole group liminal moments, and internal liminal spaces which created a space for conflicting tensions to come together and be worked through. The diverse perspective were able to be held in the liminal space, integrated through the container of the festival but not dissolved or made invisible.

**METHODS**

A group of about six women came together at monthly meetings to decide upon themes and activities for the exhibition and festival. The Women’s Room Committee, while inviting performers and artists to be part of their event, did not specify what the performers were to dance, or the artists to paint. The research was designed to open a space for the creative practices to be expressed and for women’s inner life stories to emerge in relation to their relationship to the theme Ancestral Connections.
Invitation

A bookmark sized invitation was designed using one of the committee member’s artworks of a women’s face on one side on a black background and on the flip side was the festival invitation to the opening day and Goddess Parade (Appendix 4). One thousand invitations were printed and distributed at local and regional shops. An email invitation was also written and sent to approximately seven hundred names on the membership database (Appendix 5). The Women’s Room Website also advertised the festival and exhibition. Possibly more importantly were word of mouth advertising and invitations which were supported by the paper and electronic invitations to local cultural institutions. The festival and exhibition, as a recipient of a Cultural Partnership grant with Blue Mountains City Council was also advertised on Blue Mountains Tourism Website. Finally advertisements and press releases leading up to the festival and exhibition were placed in the local Blue Mountains Gazette, by both The Women’s Room and Braemar Gallery (Appendix 6). Women who were interested in participating in the exhibition were sent an application form and paid an administration fee of approximately $20, depending on how many works they were to place in the gallery. Audience members could just turn up on the day as this was a free event. Some Performers and stallholders were approached to be part of the festival, however, the festival committee were always receptive to new performers and stallholders and artists participating.

Festival Management Committee meetings

Monthly committee meetings were held for a year before the festival and exhibition in 2009. Committee meetings were a time for planning and friendship. Meetings were used to decide on the theme, fees for artwork entries, stallholders and council fees for rent of venue and holding and event. The committee considered who to invite for the performances as well as sorting through logistics of the day. A democratic but add hock process was used to make decisions regarding the festival. The committee struggled with the amount of people power needed to manage the logistics of the festival day so there was a dedicated volunteer coordinator. Other roles were President, Vice President and Treasurer as well as artist manager, stallholder coordinator, promotions coordinator. The President, Vice President and Treasurer took on multiple tasks as did the other three women. The committee had a dedicated core group of six women, as well as women who helped out on the day but were never able to be present at the physical meetings due to family commitments.

Creativity Courses and Workshops

Creativity courses were regularly held at The Women’s Room as six week courses held over ten weeks, one day workshops and ongoing groups. These groups and workshops were instrumental in the holding of the exhibition and festival. It was from these smaller grass roots groups that many of the women heard and become interested in the becoming part of the annual exhibition and festival event. The groups and courses were like the matrix from which the stories and artworks that would eventually become the Ancestral exhibition began. A popular course was the ‘Paint your canvas’ course as well as ‘Meditation and Art Course’. Groups at the time of the ancestral connections exhibition were ‘The Arty Mothers group’ for mothers with under 5 year olds and ‘The Wisdom Tree Group’ open for all women but mostly over 40 women attended to explore their creative and spirituality. Women were from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, with diverse spiritual beliefs. However most women held a reverence for nature even if they were not what would typically be considered pagan. The interesting observation I made through the research was how diverse women were both waning to belong but also had a desire to express and explore the multiplicity of their cultural and spiritual identities.
Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009

The Ancestral Connections Exhibition was held from 28th August 2009 until the 13th September 2009 at Braemar Gallery Macquarie Road Springwood NSW Australia. The annual women’s story and art exhibition was managed by The Women’s Room and formed an important method of sharing intimate works with the local community. Historically women have been excluded from art institutions due to attitudes that women were not capable of the artists temperament, their role was one of caring for children not creating magnificent artworks.

*Those with class and gender power who write about art, exhibit it, publicise it and award its prizes have systematically worked to ensure the continuation of male dominance in the field.* (Parker & Pollack 1987)

Even when women began to enter the institutional art world those allowed entry were from educated, Anglo backgrounds. Women of colour, ethnically diverse and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were not as well represented (Parker & Pollock 1987). Contemporary women face barriers when attempting to exhibit works such as childcare responsibilities, lack of time and financial resources as well as limited cultural capital which posed challenges for women in accessing exclusion from ‘high art’ institutions. The Women’s Room role was to support women in their creative life, which could be difficult if pursing alone. The aim of the Ancestral Connections Exhibition was to provide diverse women a safe space, to show the community, the range of women’s everyday life experiences through their art and stories.

The Ancestral Connections Exhibition was built on a lineage of the feminist art movement, spiritual feminist movement and conscious raising groups with women commenting and performing post-modern globalised perspectives. What set the Ancestral Connections Exhibition apart from pervious feminist movements was the desire to embrace their multivariate fluid embodied experiences through a broader spiritual exploration of relationship to people and place. Personal and collective empowerment were still a central feminist goal but this was achieved through inner exploration of tensions experienced through the negotiation of who they were, how to birth, mother, how to believe and what their beliefs were, where did they come from and what was their relationship to the cosmos.

The Women’s Room created a space and a place where the creative, spiritual perspectives of their lives where acknowledged. This was reflected in comments recorded in the comments book at the festivals some of which read;

*It’s been an inspiring and humbling experience to be part of this exhibit. A very comprehensive coverage of women’s experience.*

*It is good that such events are organised and we ‘women’ can say something about us.*

*What an amazing day to spend a morning with my teenage daughter. Mesmerising, powerful and utterly dripping with the essence of our inner lives.*

*Wonderful to see such creativity truly telling the story of women in all aspects.*

*Absolutely fantastic, empowering, relaxing, enjoyable. Definitely would like to do more often. Thank you for the experience.*

*Having just returned from the desert and into this room, I have stepped from one powerfully spiritual place to another. A beautiful sense of female connectedness combined with our earth mother.*

(Research participant’s comments book 2009)
I have included a selection of the participant’s comments from the Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009 comments book to demonstrate how women experienced the exhibition and festival day. There were two negative comments from thirty six and most women who did leave a comment used similar language expressing their embodied spiritual and emotion selves. Apart from addressing the themes of Ancestral Connections there were no other criteria for entering an artwork. A $20 fee per artwork was charged to help cover the cost of hiring the venue but was waived or reduced if financial hardship was a barrier to entering an artwork. The works ranged from paintings to posters, sculptural goddesses, displays, jewellery, maps, installations and masks. Next to each artwork was a short story accompanying the artworks and although not the usual practice in art galleries this was an important philosophical methodology to contextualise women’s experiences lending a deeper more intimate experience of the artwork. Braemar gallery asked for a 30% commission on artworks sold. Despite this, women placed relatively low monetary value on their works. A total of 51 entries were exhibited representing approximately 49 women (Appendix 1). The number of women artists is approximate because several of the artworks were group compositions which made it difficult to estimate exact numbers of participants.

**Earthspirit Festival**

Earthspirit Festival day had evolved over the history of The Women’s Room from a small opening welcome for the exhibition to a festival full of diverse dance groups, stallholders, impromptu audience participation and a Goddess Parade. While The Women’s Room organised the logistics of the day and financed the operations, there was a fairly loose structure which allowed improvised and unexpected moments to occur. The result encouraged audience, stallholders, artists and performers to move in and out of their central role. For example Dayl was the mistress of ceremonies for the day, was also a belly dancer performer from the group Quabila and had entered an artwork into the exhibition titled ‘You are’. Jo Clancy from the Wollemi dancers invited children to learn her dragonfly dance, including young dancers from another Aboriginal dance group called Burralganga, which bridged a political divide between different groups and audience members. Tarek who sold Egyptian drums at a stall accompanied the belly dancers in an impromptu drumming performance with other drummers while Hands Heart and Feet Africa Drum and Dance were instrumental in the Goddess Parade through the streets of Springwood and then later moved into storyteller performers. In anticipation of the dynamism of the day, I decided to video the day in an attempt to capture the colour, noise, clamour and relationships between people in these living moments so I chose. On festival day, I videoed the artworks and performances and informally interviewed eighteen participants and asked why they attended the festival.

**The Video Report**

I used video as a medium to document the Earthspirit festival day because I wanted to capture as best I could the mood, the type of people who attended, the colour, performance and the sense of movement of the day. I also used video to record the artworks in the Ancestral Connections Exhibition to give a sense of the space of where the artworks had been exhibited. Filming on the day was more challenging than I had anticipated as my technical skills were limited. My role behind the camera was confusing for the committee members who were used to me as front person, organiser and President of The Women’s Room. I too struggled with this new role of camera person, which is demonstrated in sections of the video where I direct the crowd; ask people to move out of the way and greet people that I knew.
Apart from documenting the action on the day, I set out to capture the symbolic meeting of the two tribes, Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal. As this was the Earthspirit Festival, exploring connection with ancestors and relationship to the earth and the spirit of the land, I wanted to highlight the Aboriginal custodial relationship with land and validate Aboriginal status as first peoples. I had noted in the groups and workshops of The Women’s Room both strong support and interest for the local Aboriginal community but also some women still held old racist views.

The performance of the two tribes coming together was an attempt to bring together the two groups in a symbolic act of reconciliation. The idea was influenced by conversations I had with two Darug friends, Karen Maber and Chris Tobin, who were advocates for reconciliation between the colonised and the colonisers. The reconciliation between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people in Australia was front of mind for many Australians at this time as a year before Kevin Rudd’s national apology to the stolen generation speech on February 13th 2008 had bought to the surface the historical removal of children from Aboriginal families under the Australian Government protectionist and assimilation policies. After watching the video several times I questioned why I stayed with the Anglo Goddess Parade and not with the Aboriginal elder and dancers.

At first I wondered if I was also replicating the privileged position of the white Anglo colonisers moving onto Aboriginal land without consideration (Nicholls 2009). While the filming of the Goddess Parade dancing down the main street of Springwood towards Braemar Gallery I was following the action. The Aboriginal elder Aunty Carol was waiting to welcome the Goddess Parade and after her welcome, Jo Clancy and her Wollemi dancers would perform the dragonfly dance and later Fleur’s Burragal dancers would also perform. In coming together at the festival was a symbolic reimagining of how the meeting of two diverse groups, which had historically been devastating for Aboriginal people, could have been. The historical colonisation of the Aboriginal lands from 1788 onwards had ensured Aboriginal people were denied existence as equal to their white counterparts. Culture, language, ancestral wisdom and spiritual stories were denied and supressed. Children were taken from parents and Aboriginal people were massacred or assimilated to become ‘civilised’, poetically expressed in Carmody’s song

Thou Shalt Not Steal

we’re gunna Christianise your black barbaric lives and teach you how to kneel but your history couldn’t hide the genocide the hypocrisy to us was real

At the Earthspirit Festival version of the meeting of two tribes, the Anglo Goddess Parade participants were recast as the visitors and the Gundagaiura and Darug Aboriginal elder and Wiradjuri dancers as the owners of the land. However, this perspective has come from my own ideas and desires. My ethnographic and autoethnographic reflections, while attempting to provide collaborative spaces, quiet possibly unwittingly replayed colonalist perspectives.

Although videoing was intended to capture the views and perspectives of participants, it still captured only a partial view, seen through my own lens and influenced by what I filmed, where I walked and who I interviewed. The viewing of participants through the video had undertones of the voyeur. Parameswaran (2008) draws upon Wiegman’s critiques of the ‘seeing eye’ as being intricately linked to the ‘peep hole’ of imperialism’s racial and gender oppressions, historically used as a ‘rationalized vision,’ which artificially ‘detaches from other senses to produce disengaged scientific observation’.

I experienced my initial naivety regarding ‘the seeing eye’ when I asked Fleur, from Burragal Dancers, if I could film their performance on festival day. Fleur explained to me that she would have declined permission if I had not approached her about this before festival days there were strict protocols surrounding viewing and distributing indigenous images. The discussion with Fleur prompted a realization that my Anglo ethnicity, behind the camera, represented an
historical voyeuristic colonial oppression that had consequences far beyond the festival day. Fleur wanted to know how it would be used, who it would be shown to, and requested permission be sought at any stage of this process. The videoing problematic had opened up a dialogical space where ‘the seeing eye’ could be renegotiated to incorporate more critical understandings and, as Harvey (2004) suggests, opportunities to disrupt unchallenged assumptions.

It was important then not to disconnect from my other senses or hide behind the camera in an attempt at pretend objectivity but to fully engage with my participant insider status and the multiple roles that it afforded me. Video is a language which yields power as much as the textual word and must be considered a political act.

_The most important issue is that every video is a relationship with the participants. Otherwise, ethnographic video can too easily slip into the pleasures of voyeurism, which forces subjects into the predetermined social norms of dominant culture. However, if video is regarded as a language that involves the researcher, the subject, and an audience in constructive dialogue, it opens up possibilities for fluidity, communication, and therefore personal and political change._ (Cubitt, 1993; Gallagher, 2001)

What was captured on the video could be played and replayed as I moved in and out of various roles. While Bickel noticed how she moved between the roles of artist researcher and educator I noticed that I needed to move between and negotiate multiple roles such as artist and researcher friend, activist, organiser, wife and mother as my family helped me on festival day. I used the video data to later reflect on, and journal about, the festival day. As researcher, I would edit this video for presentations at conferences but as President of The Women’s Room I looked for a different selection to report back to the festival community on the Facebook site and as mother and friend again I looked for more intimate readings. I noticed different things that I thought I already knew upon each viewing of the video.

Apart from the video, I also analysed the artworks and stories by noting the occurrence of themes, such as what was considered sacred, global themes of another place, and birthing and motherhood. The role of participant observer was challenging, as I knew many of the people that I filmed and interviewed. Like the centre of the lotus blossom in figure 7, the groups, artists, and performers surrounded me, making it difficult to discern boundaries when looking out from the centre, making either myself, or others, at times invisible.

The centre for me became the place of negotiation of self and other, local and global, where stepping in and out of multiple roles of researcher participant, mother, and friend gave me alternate perspectives. This at times painful process recognized that de-centering is important in gaining new perspectives but that re-centering is just as necessary for these perspectives to be brought to light. The performance of multiple identities created tensions that could not be easily resolved as my roles, such as artist-mother-researcher or friend spiritual seeker-researcher, were performed concurrently, creating hybrid forms of knowledge that would not have been possible with a myopic perspective.
Video Transcript and Analysis. Please see

video available at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSvJHXK1g6o

Approximately 8 hours of video footage was collected on the Earthspirit Festival day. This footage was edited by me, into shorter clips ranging from 25 to 3 minutes. The clip that I have used to support this report was a 10 minute clip which was edited and used as part of a 30 minute presentation at the 31st International Society for the Sociology of Religion Conference, which was held in July 2011 Aix en Provence, France.

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![Figure 10: The Gathering of the Goddess Paradre. Foundation Square in Springwood](image)

Research Output 2 – Page 26
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<td>Starts in Springwood Foundation Square. Hands, Heart and Feet African Drummers and Dancers and one of the Goddesses are in the square as well as gathering parade participants.</td>
<td>Significant starting place as it is a white settlers stopping place. We are reclaiming the square as a.</td>
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<td><strong>Figure 11: Goddess Parade heading dancing down macquarrie Street Springwood</strong></td>
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<td>A festival on the main street of Springwood</td>
<td>The location of the festival on the main street in a town centre is significant because many popular alternative style festivals occur in remote or out of town locations. For example Confest in Australia on the Margins and trance dance in collective tents (St John 2001), (like caves), The Burning Man festival (Pike) has been held in the Nevada desert or contemporary Goddess circles in sacred groves or natural settings the Margins.</td>
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<td>John from Hands Heart and Feet (HHF) is the first person to be spoken to and talk to the video camera</td>
<td>The Earthspirit Festival was taking the spiritual, the alternative and the spiritual feminine Goddess and bringing it into the conservative streets to reclaim the space, rather than to escape or portion off from society. In this was it was a clear act of communicative activism. Why if this is a women’s festival have I begun with John, the male founder and main drummer from HHF. Perhaps this still reflects the deeply embedded patriarchal society where men are more confident and put themselves forward more often. He was the first person to talk to the camera and what he said was a great introduction to the day. Perhaps it also reflected my own enculturation in an all-male patriarchal family and which propelled me into the Women’s festival in the first instance.</td>
<td>‘It’s a beautiful Day, it’s a beautiful Earthspirit kind of day … No it’s a good thing’</td>
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<td>People are gathering in the Square, children, women, men, families. HHF are in the centre, gathered in a rough circle, gathering energy with rattles, drums. The other people surround HHF. The Goddess is watching along, dancing to the music.</td>
<td>The participants are a little bit tentative to begin with and are warming up. The main part of this goddess parade is the HHF group who is led by John and Emily and Emily’s sister. They are a well-known and popular local drumming and dance group and were asked to support the Goddesses which had been made at The Women’s Room. HHF had been supporting The Women’s Room since the first festival in 2006. This demonstrates both the independence of the community groups and a collaborative relationship. It is also evidence to support the idea that there was a shared spiritual ideology of respecting and acknowledging the earthy, natural aspects of life.</td>
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<td>Kim is dancing</td>
<td>The natural materials of the goddess sculpture symbolised the desire to express an affinity with the basic materials of the earth. Kim’s Goddess was decorated with calico and prints that she had made with leaves and gumnuts. The Australiana colours of green and yellow evoked the bush and were reflected in the gum trees behind Kim. Kim’s ethnic background was Dutch and her use of Australiana was a way of solidifying her belonging in this bush community as she had recently moved from the plains of Sydney to Springwood in the Blue mountains.</td>
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<td>with her handmade goddess sculpture, with the tall eucalyptus trees in the background</td>
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<td>Kim’s twin girls are with her and she is laden with the Goddess strapped on the front and a backpack with supplies on the back, with her twin girls near her legs. This shows the reality of motherhood. The backpack and the goddess symbolises the burdens and joys that being a mother entails and while worthwhile can also be draining. She is the one carrying the family and the</td>
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<td>spiritual trajectory of their future hopes and dreams, represented by the Goddess. Her Goddess made at one of The Women’s Rooms Courses has typically Australian wildflower symbology, however this is contrasted to the black face of the Goddess, disrupting what the fair complexion of what pagan goddesses would usually look like.</td>
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<td>Caitlyn has a baby on her back in a backpack and is heavily pregnant. Her belly is painted with a lotus flower.</td>
<td>Her pregnant belly is exposed and emphasized by the hand painted lotus flower. The lotus flower is a reference to ‘lotus birth’, a natural birth technique of opening the birth passage like a flower opens (Gaskin). Lotus birth also references the spiritual journey of birth and the transformation that motherhood brings. Like Kim who is carrying the burden of Goddess, children and backpack, Caitlyn also has a backpack with her child as well as carrying her unborn baby within her. Male partners were at the festival with both women, however did not participate in the Goddess parade or look after the children. It would have been easier for the women to ask partners to look after children however children were included in the Goddess parade. Children and pregnancy may be seen as indicating these women’s fertile status as living Goddess principal, laden, fruitful in the midst of the mother phase.</td>
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<td>Goddess Parade moves down the main street of Springwood led by Emily from Hands, Heart and Feet African Drum and Dance</td>
<td>Hands, Heart and Feet led the parade down the main street of Springwood performing on the pathway between the street and the buildings. Morning shoppers and café goers looked on curiously. Car horns beeped and onlookers took photographs. Drummers and parade participants walked, danced along with the main group. This ‘tribe’ represented non-Aboriginal visitors on Aboriginal land coming to the Gallery space. The gallery space represents government (and thus colonial) institutions that have claimed land and control over what is and isn’t allowed on council land. We are meant to have applied for a permit to dance on the pavement; however we do not do this. Instead we reclaim the streets for dancing and impromptu music. I have never filmed a moving parade before so filming is shaky.</td>
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<td>The Parade continues to move down the street past cafes</td>
<td>As the parade moves past café goers, some are curious and happy while others are annoyed. Most have no idea of what is actually occurring. As the parade moves along it picks up extra passers-by who follow the action. Although this is a Goddess Parade and a women’s festival some men join the parade. It would have been interesting to interview the men involved and ask why they were participating as it may have given an insight into how important the festival was for their partners or themselves, however the focus of the research was on women.</td>
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![Figure 13: Hands Heart and feet African Drum and Dance nearing Braemar Gallery](image)

<p>| Goddess Parade coming towards me and past me | I move to the top of the carpark near the gallery as I want to capture the parade as it passes. My inexperience with moving film and sound mean that I don’t quiet realise that what I say will be captured. I could have later edited this out as I find this embarrassing, however I decide to leave this in as it | |</p>
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<td>Rebecca leads the Goddess parade</td>
<td>Rebecca was the instigator of the Glorious Goddess workshop led the women through the process of making the sculptural Goddesses. She was also fascinated with the European celebrations and festivals which made similar icons paraded through the streets (like may day celebrations). The Goddesses were made from natural materials and cloth which they had hand printed, straw timber and chicken wire framing. The natural and earthy were cited as important elements in making the sculptures to represent the connection that humans share with the natural world. The blonde haired, blue eyed Rebecca represents the typical concept of European beauty and hold a privileged place at the beginning of the parade. This was not planned but was the way the parade played out. However the symbology of the European culture moving onto traditional Aboriginal land is highly symbolic of the power and privilege that still is often silenced.</td>
<td>‘And here comes Rebecca. Goddess of all Goddesses’</td>
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<td>past me toward the gallery</td>
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<td>Goddesses move past the camera</td>
<td>There are four Goddess sculptures in the parade and one by one they move past the camera. My focus becomes the Goddesses rather than the women who have made wheel and carry them. This gives me the feeling of being in a play where the actor or puppet has its own voice separate from the person playing the part. For a few moments this lends a mysterious sense of the Goddesses having their own persona, rather than being the extension of the women who carry them. The women walked slowly because the Goddesses are heavy. They are proud and smiling but as a group a slightly disconnected from each other. The four women who are carrying the Goddesses are with the hands Heart and feet but are also disconnected from that group. When analysing the video I thought that this was representative of the eclectic mix of participants who have their own beliefs and belong to their own groups, even though they have come together to be part of the festival honouring the Earthspirit.</td>
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Figure 15: John and Emily Cooper from Hands Heart and Feet performing introductory story dance
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<td>Symbolic meeting of the tribes</td>
<td>As I follow the Celtic Goddess and African drum and dance parade onto the grounds of Braemar Gallery, the camera gives the sense of being a part of as it looks into the back of Rebecca. I film an Aboriginal man to the left and continue to walk up to the veranda where the Goddesses are placed on an alter space. The parade has come onto sacred land. One sense of the sacredness of nature meets another. The coming onto the land in this way gives a sense of the invasion and taking over of where the traditional owners have been waiting. I am squeezed into a small space as the crowds have gathered and there is little room. As I turn the camera around in this space the Goddess parade participants stream by me and I capture the intimacy of bodies at close range. The sound too is close and makes noises which are individual rather than part of the main cacophony. I feel that this is symbolic of what is</td>
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<td>‘Here she comes. Move out of the way’.</td>
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<td>‘Let’s clear the path. Here they come.’</td>
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<td>occurring on a deeper and more expanded level as participants have bought their own meaning of the sacred to the festival individually, as part of their group and then also as part of the festival. The in-between spaces and experiences create liminal and synergetic moments that cannot be controlled or planned. My multiple roles of organiser, researcher and participant are fluid as I move between the filmic and the bossy organiser asking people to move out of the way.</td>
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Figure 17: Wollemi dancers
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<tr>
<td>Welcome by Aunty Carol Cooper with Wollemi dancers standing next to her on the veranda of Braemar House</td>
<td>The focus shifts dramatically to Aunty Carol Cooper, an Aboriginal elder who welcomes all who are in attendance at the festival onto her ancestral lands. The power has shifted from the incoming tribe to the traditional owners. Although Aunty Carol addresses the crowd, who mostly sit below her in anticipation of the dancers, one Anglo woman stands close to her, unwittingly sharing the stage. Although this is unconscious, it appeared that there was a lack of understanding of the gravitas of the welcome and a lack of understanding that she should not be sharing centre stage. The Goddess alter becomes obscured and remains unacknowledged for the rest of the day.</td>
<td>'Hello. Welcome. Today it has turned out quiet nice. I am both Gundungurra and Darug and I would like to welcome you to our country and I would like to thank our ancestors and acknowledge them past and present and of course I would like to acknowledge and welcome the non-indigenous people that are here today. Hope that you enjoy it. The reason I said Gundungurra first is because we are on Gundunurra land. Across the highway is my mother’s land and that is Darug. But they are the two nations up here. So please enjoy your selves today. It is great.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 18:** Aunty Carol Cooper welcoming everyone to her ancestors country
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action/ Location</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Speech Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview with selected audience members</td>
<td>As I interview and film I begin with Fiona, someone that I already knew. Fiona was once on the committee a few years previous but now only comes to the festival. She is a single mother of three children and references both her desire to be involved and lack of energy. Emily just happens to be sitting next to Fiona and becomes involved in the interview. Emily brings attention to the many groups that come together to make the festival happen. Importantly she articulates what we can feel on the day that we are more than the sum of our parts. Finally Paula, who has never attended the festival before explains that for her it is the ‘holding energy’ that she feels happens when the women come together in performance and art. The energy these women talk about and the idea of ‘coming together’ is a theme which is continually reinforced by audience and participants.</td>
<td>Karin was telling me a story a bit earlier on and it took me back to my childhood. I am hoping she will get to say it today. Thank you everyone and I hope you enjoy it.’</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Me: What is the best part of the festival? Fiona: The best part Me: You are going to have to say Emily now she is sitting next to you. Fiona: It is……actually. I love all the women coming together, all the women’s dancers and they really inspire me. And I want to go and join all the troupes but then I don’t end up having enough energy. One day I will have enough energy. Emily: There is so much creative stuff happening in the (Blue) Mountains. There are so many people coming together to make a day like this happen. It is not just one group you know, it’s all the beautiful dancers and artists and stallholders and you of course Karin. It’s great. Me: It changes every year doesn’t it? Emily: Well we have been lucky with the day too. (Looking up at the sky). Me: What is your name? Paula: I am Paula. I really like the coming together. It’s a beautiful holding energy. It is great to have that coming together in all different forms (Hand Gestures to reinforce). Me: Have you been here before? Paula: No. It is my first time.</td>
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<td>Speech Quotes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three belly dancers in red with veils covering their heads</td>
<td>A small circular space is made by the audience members sitting around the edges of the grass and on the veranda. No one has told the audience to sit in any particular way. The trees and path as well as the buildings encourage audience and performers to collaborate in the making of this circular stage. The three women remind me of the mysticism of the number three in many religious traditions represented here by the maiden, the mother and the wise woman. The veils are reminiscent of the burka, although these are red and none of the women are Muslim. The twirling of the dancers mimic the swirling dervishes (rituals of Rumi’s followers), a spiritual reference to the constant turning revolution inherent in our existence and how all created things share the revolution of electrons, protons and neutrons. The shadow of the tree on the ground, the women’s bare feet connects them to the earth and the movement raises energy. The audience responds with a banshee call, a trill of throat and tongue.</td>
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<td>Action/ Location</td>
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<tr>
<td>Young Dancers Come Together</td>
<td>A symbolic moment of the festival. While the initial coming together of the tribes Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal was more formally acknowledged in the goddess parade and the welcome to country, it was not until later in the day when the formal aspects were over that an impromptu moment happened. This is critical in understanding how the festival became the container for the making moment; the unpredictable liminal shared experience of communitas. I thought it interesting that these moments arose in spaces of the day that were less controlled and formalised. However, these moments would not have been possible if the more formal planned aspects had not already set the tone of the day. I noticed that the young were more open to dancing together than the older audience participants.</td>
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<td>Action/ Location</td>
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| Interview with Home Birthing Advocate Michelle | Michelle is one of the four homebirthers who had a belly cast exhibited in the gallery. She has a baby on the front of her and now has five children. I thought it important that I interview her as she represented a radical way of expressing the self through taking a cast of the pregnant belly and painting it with words, symbols and poems. Placing your physical form of pregnancy is a clear statement that this is who I am in natural shape and form. Michelle was a Canadian woman who married an Australian man and then moved to Australia. For Michelle as well as several of the other women already mentioned, coming together, or as Michelle puts it ‘being part of the community’ is what was the best aspect of the festival. For Michelle her identity was connected to the alternate home birthing community and the festival gave her a space to advocate for her right to birth and mother in the way she felt was important. The homebirth community was not just about rejecting mainstream medical culture but was about control over their bodies and contained deeply held spiritual beliefs about the spiritual transformative nature of birth. | **Me:** What was the best thing you liked about the festival?  
**Michelle:** I thought it was great to see all the people. I didn’t expect a turn out like this, so that was good.  
**Me:** What was your favourite bit?  
**Michelle:** I was listening more than watching I am afraid.  
**Me:** That’s alright  
**Michelle:** I liked the belly dance. I am sure it would have been great to watch.  
**Me:** Did you go and have a look at the artworks?  
**Michelle:** Yeah! I loved all of the artworks. It was beautiful and the bellycast displays are wonderful (Laugh).  
**Me:** You saw your own there? Why do you think it is important for women to put their stuff out there in an exhibition or something?  
**Michelle:** I think it is lovely to see the expression from all the different women on being a woman and being a mother and all the different stages of being a woman.  
**Me:** How does it make you feel to be a part of this show?  
**Michelle:** Well it makes me feel part of the community. It makes me feel more part of the community to be contributing to things like this. |
<table>
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<th>Action/ Location</th>
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<th>Speech Quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview with two committee members at the end of the festival day</td>
<td>I thought it was important to show how the perspective of the committee members who put a great deal of effort into organising the exhibition and festival. Both Glenice and Sheryl also had multiple artwork entries in the Ancestral connections exhibition. These women had poured their heart and soul into both the artworks and festival which is evident in their exhausted satisfaction as they contemplate the days events. Both women use the same terminology to describe what they enjoyed the most about the event and that was the ‘coming together’ and ‘energy’ that they witnessed and felt. Both women highlighted their emotional response and that of others at the festival demonstrating that one of the aims of the artworks was to elicit an emotional response from audience members. This affective strategy was an unspoken but important way to engage the audience members. By laying their intimate emotions on canvas, photography or in story, women used vulnerability to move people. I am not suggesting that this was an intentional strategy as my involvement in the making stage of the artworks made clear to me that women were genuinely struggling with difficult person issues and bravely decided to share these with the general public, placing themselves at risk of exposure, ridicule and weakness. Another important aspect of the exhibition was that it was a vehicle for women to communicate difficult emotions to their families in a (relative) safe way and which Glenice alludes to when she speaks of her sister’s reaction to her artwork. The relaxed conversational style of the interview and filming shows the close relationship that the committee members had developed over the course of organising the festival.</td>
<td>Me: Ladies how do you feel? It is coming to the close of our festival. Are you feeling ok that it is nearly over? Sheryl: I feel like crying (smiling). I feel like this is the sound track to cry to. (Black eyes dog soundtrack by Nick Drake folk musician). Glenice: Oh yeah (nodding her head). Me: It is a bit loud. I don’t know if I am going to pick anything up on this, so you can say whatever you want. Sheryl: I was going to wind it…. (pretends to stick her fist and finger up in defiant gesture while laughing). Me: It has been an emotional one has it? Glenice: Yeah it’s scary. (nodding head) Sheryl: Yeah, very, yeah. It has ripped a lot of things apart but its good. It is a good ripping. Glenice: My sister came (to the exhibition) and I reduced her to tears. (looked pleased) Me: Ooh good….I think I interviewed your sister. Glenice: Oh did you? Me: or a friend. It might have been a friend? Glenice: Yeah it might have been a friend. Me: She said Glenice ware had the best artwork. Glenice: (shyly). Well there you go. Me: So ladies, what was the best thing about the</td>
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<td>Action/ Location</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>festival that you enjoyed?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sheryl: … (thinking)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Me: Dyl (My 14 year old son) just turn it down sweetie.</td>
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<td>Sheryl: I don’t know. The whole energy. You know I think Glenice and I were just sitting here talking about the end and all the women; all the dancers coming together – so just that impromptu getting up and having a go, having a bit of a dance, big beaming grins and kids getting in there and doing it. That was nice.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Me: That was good.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Glenice: We were just saying that just sitting here right now is really special.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sheryl: And having my first cup of Chai (tea).</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Me: It has been pretty full on and you never realise just how full on.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sheryl: Lot of people.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Me: How many were here? … Ooh look can you interview your selves women (something has distracted mw which I need to attend to)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Glenice: We’re finished</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Me: Nooooo.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sheryl: We’re done. (Waving and smiling). Bye……</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Output 2 – Page 43
**FINDINGS**

**Reclaiming Sacred Meanings**

By choosing the foundation town square as the place to begin their journey to the Braemar Galley the Goddess Parade reclaimed a space that had historically been a symbol of oppression for those who were written out of the history of the area, namely women and Aboriginal people. The significant act of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women associated with The Women’s Room coming together at the Earthspirit festival at the historic Braemar house was an act of reclaiming what was sacred to the participants. Holding the festival and exhibition at this site and bringing together disparate tribes, groups, spiritualities and women’s stories and art, questioned the status quo of who was in control, had ownership and who legitimately belonged to the local community and what was an acceptable way of practicing creative cultural practices.

**Coming Together as a Spiritual Practice**

Coming together was a physical gathering; however women cited the way the festival and exhibition was a more than the physical sensation. When women were asked what they liked best about festival day they cited coming together of diverse dancers and groups. Glenice liked the ‘whole energy’. Sheryl talked about ‘all the women coming together and everyone getting in there to have a go’ while Paula articulated for her it was ‘a lively holding energy’. The energy described by these women on festival day was more than a mundane experience. Instead the video, artworks and interviews revealed a heightened liminal experience of being together in communitas. The intimacy of the gallery space, the shape of the grounds, the groups’ shared reverence for nature and openness to improvisation, when brought together on a single day created a synergy of elements that women experienced as a spiritual coming together. Although women held diverse religious and spiritual ideals, the women’s art and performance groups showed through expressing their diverse creative cultural practices a shared spirituality of coming together. Bringing women’s shared experience together in a central space both alleviated women’s isolation and strengthen a sense of self for the emergence of self and cultural wellbeing.

**Women Negotiating Identity and Belonging**

The festival and exhibition created a container for women to explore multiple aspects of their becoming. Identity was not constrained to finding their ‘real self’ but was about exploring aspects of self within themselves as well as the hybridity of their bloodline ancestral connections which encompassed past real and imagined ancestors. Through the process of making, creating and performing women worked through everyday life issues, reimagined their identity and unearthed parts of their ancestry that had been hidden or forgotten. Once shameful aspects like adoption, oppressed cultural heritage, divorce and separation were brought to the surface and made visible to themselves and to others in the community. By making these visible to themselves, women were able to move from being embedded in the making of the artworks to becoming the viewer, which opened new perspectives on what they had created.

Women’s expression of identity and belonging was fluid rather than fixed (Bauman). The sense of identity and belonging women explored were as much about attempting to reconcile multiple roles and ethnicities within the individual rather than only identify with one fixed idea of the self. This fluid identity meant women could move between their lived reality and their imaginal to express once forgotten aspects or shameful aspects of their lives in a safe supportive...
environment. Aspects of identity and belonging women explored and shared in the festival did not mean that these were permanent expressions of who they were. However, the opportunity to explore, find or remake these multiple identities allowed women to step into the identity and try this out in the relatively safe space of the festival and exhibition. For some women the artwork and performances strengthened already known about identities, for others a temporary belonging to a group was established and for others cathartic declarations of past experiences meant they could move on from identities no longer needed.

The important aspect for women was that the exhibition and festival was a place to negotiate inner and outer aspects of self, suspend judgement on who they were and try out new identities. Belonging was about connecting to self, others and the cosmos, including negotiating a relationship with the natural ecosystems that we live with. Being involved with the festival and exhibition also meant negotiation relationships with family and the tensions in women’s material reality. Women’s belonging and identity encapsulated their spiritual beliefs that went beyond the festival and exhibition but which expression of these were made possible through the coming together of diverse perspectives at the event.

**Critical creative activism: Resistance and response to globalisation**

The Earthspirit festival seemed to be a manifestation of a localisation process where a community of women attempted to reclaim a sense of the sacred that drew upon an imagined global community and the desire for personal connectedness at a local level. I argue that while this festival experience contains elements of neoliberalistic consumerist practice this does not preclude participants from seeking or experiencing meaningful spiritual experiences. Apart from making connections with other people on a mundane level, the bringing together of their creative energy and performance of self within community created a liminal space for a spiritual connectedness among participants. Women created the exhibition and festival to make opportunities for connectedness within the self and to others in an attempt to find the threads of their own identity and belonging but also to explore to their sense of the divine (Bickel 2012). The analysis of the video and later interviews revealed that these spiritual connections were explored through a ‘Life energy’ animating the cosmos.

Empowering women was central to the aims of the festival and exhibition. Women artists and performers through their explorations of identity and belonging reclaimed what was important to them. The festival and exhibition was a safe space for women to challenge beliefs about themselves and societal expectations for women. Women used a range of strategies to show resistance to aspects of society that impinged on controlling their lives, such as refusing to sell their work even though they were expected to pay commission to the gallery, reclaimed the street for their spiritual purpose through the goddess parade and remade their spiritual and wisdom traditions. The Women’s Room mothers group challenged the idea that contemporary motherhood was harmonious, while the Katoomba homebirthers claimed their right to birth in the way they felt was right for their bodies and spiritual practice. Fleur from Burralgangu Aboriginal dancers incorporated Aboriginal and contemporary dance refusing to be constrained only by one tradition. The eclectic range of women from diverse strata of society challenged the notion of spirituality being an individual narcissist concern.

As a group the women came together to celebrate their relationship to the spiritual energy that animates all life, even though they expressed this in diverse ways. The festival was a place which bought together disparate groups that had a common resistance to global processes of destroying the local and relationships to place and community. The women and their partners, friends and family by participating in the festival renegotiated what community meant for them and in the process they renegotiated global process of neoliberalisation and standardisation. The appropriation of tribal and spiritual symbols was remade to become new representations of what
was sacred, which demonstrated their reverence for relationship to nature and the life energy within natural processes. For example Ghawazi Caravan Tribal Style Belly Dancers used Sufi dervish dances and wore bright red beaded belly dance costumes with Bedouin tribal jewellery, while the Arabic name meaning clan or tribe was used by Qabila, another belly dance group. The tribal was used as a way to reconnect to nature, to re-establish a perceived disconnection to natural processes which represented a desire to connect and be part of a larger cosmological community. The festival allowed women to find ways to explore divine energy and reclaim connectedness to the natural, earthy, the inner authentic, and the emotional self. Women reclaimed a space for their own art and spiritual practice by disrupting the usual disengaged art gallery practice and was one of the powerful ways that women used a creative critical activism to reclaim a space for their creative and spiritual practice within community.

Stories, art and ritual for emergence of self and cultural wellbeing

The Earthspirit Festival was not just a coming together of diverse groups but was also about the diversity within our inner selves. Living in a global world means that women have many identities, belong to multiple social and cultural groups, are empowered in some contents and disempowered in others, are part of a local community but also possibly disconnected from their local place, while being exposed to global communities (Born 2010).

The festival and exhibition made a space for women to take the challenging aspects of their lives to remake these so that the confusing or difficult was transformed to an empowering moment. Women also reclaimed potentially oppressive symbols of birth motherhood, being in nature to revel and celebrate in their sensuous embodiment which was often depicted within the natural world. The festival and exhibition was part of the process of remaking the self and reclaiming their embodied wisdom which gave new meaning to what is was to be an artist, to birth to be a woman. Exploration of the intimate issues of the self and then move to the public showing of their work in a community space the negotiation of which was a constant remaking of relationship of at each stage of the process between self, others and cosmos.

The festival and exhibition opened a dialogue for women to converse with their inner life in a liminal space that was created in the making of their artworks, doing ritual or coming together in community at the festival, exhibition and groups. Women were able to recognise their multiple identities and roles they inhabited in their life and played out various centering and centering strategies to explore aspects of their life. Some women explored adoption, oppressed ethnicities, womanhood, expressing emotion in a safe place, alternative lifestyles, the earthy tribal and their ‘spiritual’ wellbeing. The festival project became a place where women performed an emergence of the self and a communicative activism of reclaiming empowerment in the local community.

Wellbeing was an expression of the challenges, joys, beliefs, sense of disconnection and connectedness that women felt and became aware of through the process of making art, sharing their stories, participating in ritual and the shared coming together in community. Wellbeing was experienced as embodied sensations felt at different moments, life stages and changed depending on context. In this way wellbeing was found to be a phenomenon that was experienced as a moving in and out of states of being and a process of becoming and unbecoming rather than an attainment of a balanced state of mind (Grosz 2011; Gunnarsson 2013; Bunch 2013; Somerville 2008; de Carteret 2008). The festival and exhibition project unearthed how cultural wellbeing was able to account for women’s diverse beliefs, experiences and traditions where they could reclaim their own meanings of birth, motherhood, nature, the tribal, community and what was sacred to them. Exploring Imaginal cultural identities from the past or imagining possibilities for the future within community helped women work through challenges and feel empowered.
REFERENCES


Born, P. (2010) Creating vibrant communities: How individuals and organisations from diverse sectors of society are coming together to reduce Poverty in Canada. BPS books: Canada


LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ancestral Connections Exhibition Catalogue
Appendix 2: Representative stories and Art from the Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009
Appendix 3: Sample of Group Creative Process
Appendix 4: Invitation Bookmark
Appendix 5: Invitation Email
Appendix 6: Media Release
Appendix 7: Guiding Questions to Participants and Audience Members
Appendix 1: An(estral CCDDeions Exhibitim Catalogue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Price</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Front Room</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Renata Mueller</td>
<td>Single Woman Talisman</td>
<td>Pencil, Pen, paper</td>
<td>$185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,2,3</td>
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<td>2. Renata Mueller</td>
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<td>4,5,6</td>
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<td>3. Renata Mueller</td>
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<td>7,8,9</td>
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<td>10,11,12</td>
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<td>5. Glencie Ware</td>
<td>The Red Shoes</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>NFS</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Sooz Sinclair</td>
<td>A Luddite’s Blog</td>
<td>Zine</td>
<td>$1ea</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Lily Rose Laws</td>
<td>Me As a Dancer</td>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>NFS</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Karin Mackay</td>
<td>Walk Gently On Me</td>
<td>Acrylic on Linen</td>
<td>$5200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Rebecca V Laws</td>
<td>Oma Violet Mutti Lavender</td>
<td>Acrylic</td>
<td>$185</td>
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<td></td>
<td>than Daughter Rose</td>
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<td>10. Rebecca V Laws</td>
<td>The Passing Down of the Fertility Crown</td>
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<td>11. Sally Gersbach</td>
<td>Uffington Pride</td>
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<td>12. LivingArt project</td>
<td>Ghanaian Beads</td>
<td>Jewellery</td>
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<td>13. Kim Waldron</td>
<td>The Ideal</td>
<td>Oil</td>
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<td>14. LivingArt Project- Kristie Dare</td>
<td>Braiding My Hair</td>
<td>Mask and Story</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Kim Waldron</td>
<td>Motherhood; The Raising of future ancestors</td>
<td>Ink and paper</td>
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<td>My spirit Trees</td>
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<td>Middle Room</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. Jenni Mills</td>
<td>Magic of The Mountains</td>
<td>Watercolour and Ink</td>
<td>$150</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Karin Mackay</td>
<td>Music Box</td>
<td>Print of sketch</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Joanna Jensen</td>
<td>For Sachi</td>
<td>Gouache</td>
<td>NFS</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Homebirth Group Katoomba</td>
<td>Birth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>21. Sarah Heritage &amp; Kiri Koubaroulis</td>
<td>The Link betweenall women</td>
<td>Bellycasts</td>
<td>NFS</td>
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<td>22. Women’s Room Mother’s Group</td>
<td>The Great Mother</td>
<td>Sculpture</td>
<td>NFS</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. Karin Mackay</td>
<td>Mother’s Mandala</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>NFS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Christina Manawati</td>
<td>Sacred Earth</td>
<td>Acrylic on canvas</td>
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<tr>
<td>25. The Women’s Room</td>
<td>The Hill Where I Belong</td>
<td>Watercolour</td>
<td>NFS</td>
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<td>Display</td>
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### Middle Room Cont’d

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26. Living Art Project</td>
<td>Woven Women</td>
<td>NFS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Joanna Jensen</td>
<td>Yesterday Today &amp; Tomorrow</td>
<td>Pencil-Conte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Ambre Hudson</td>
<td>The Burning</td>
<td>Acrylic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Sheryl Hardy</td>
<td>The Last Letter</td>
<td>Photograph</td>
</tr>
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### End Room

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<th>Title</th>
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<td>30. Dayl Workman</td>
<td>You Are I</td>
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<td>31. Karen Maber</td>
<td>My Ancestors</td>
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<td>32. Flynn Mackay</td>
<td>Love</td>
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<td>33. Karin Mackay</td>
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<td>34. Amelia Mackay</td>
<td>My Family Tree</td>
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<td>35. V'ilba Gulati</td>
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<td>37. Liz Hale</td>
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<td>42. SuZZi Penni</td>
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<td>43. Sheryl Hardy</td>
<td>Woman</td>
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<td>44. Karin Mackay</td>
<td>My Mother’s Gift</td>
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<td>45. Karin Mackay</td>
<td>Morning Prayer</td>
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<td>Seed Cycle</td>
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<td>51. Karin Mackay</td>
<td>Spirit of My Ancestors</td>
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<td>52. Living Art Project</td>
<td>Glorious Goddesses</td>
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Appendix 2:  Representative stories and Art from the Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009

1. The Women's Room Individual Artists

Individual Artist A) Rebecca Verpoorten

Figure 12: The Passing Down of the Fertility Crown story and art

Rebecca V. Laws,
*The Passing Down of The Fertility Crown*
Acrylic on Canvas

This painting depicts the Holy Mother Mary passing from generations before a sacred fertility crown to me. I have used the crown which is heavy with seed and fruit as a symbol that represents the honour to have the ability and possibility to conceive and birth children. Even though this honour is great and sacred it can also be treacherous because being fertile can mean unplanned pregnancies which can cause extreme heartache. In this painting I wish to acknowledge the crown that was symbolically worn by those women in my family who conceived and birthed before me, therefore making it possible for me to conceive and birth my own three beautiful children. I have found the experience to be challenging painful and sorrowful and totally life changing. I praise God for the honour of conceiving and giving birth to my children and for the opportunity to be their mother and so I feel a true affinity to the Holy Mother Mary. Mother of Jesus and mother of us all.
Sheryl Hardy,

The Last Letter

Photography

I am adopted. 11 years ago I made contact with my birth mother. I have written and phoned many times during that time, she however has made contact with me only once. I’ve held onto her words of hope of a reunion rather than acknowledging the truth of her actions. On my 39th birthday this year I wrote her the last letter.

Goodbye Marion.

NFS

Figure 13: The Last Letter Story and Art by Sheryl Hardy
They are tearing down the Berlin Wall,
bless their souls.
Ours remains.

That they have found a way, whilst we have not,
is relative.
Emotive walls take time.
They are ice
thin packed
tight
with youth's frustrations,
mortared with today's despair.
Yesterday's rainbow
laser bright,
spanning the breadth within.
Untouchable.

I have written "Tomorrow" clear
across both palms
now pressing hot against the ice.
They are transmutation,
we are woman,
water
mutable,
we melt.

Figure 14: For Sachi Art by Johanna Jensen
Karen Maber, *My Ancestors*
Acrylic on canvas

The rivers are my Ancestors
They give me fish to feed,
With the wisdom of the ages
Deep within a planted seed.

Passed by Elders to the young
Sound knowledge and values taught,
Our place within this natural world
The answers to questions sought.

My lyrebird she comes to me
And sings her clever song,
She shares with me her qualities
To show that I belong.

She sings me up a rainbow
And lets my dreams take air,
But all the while reminding me
That I love, I listen and I care.

When in times I feel alone
My Ancestors lost from me,
I remind myself they live again
In the stars, the land, the sea.

---

Figure 1Sa: Poem accompanying artwork by Karen Maber My ancestors
Karin Mackay,

**Sacred Earth**

Acrylic

We are part of the same processes, universal forces and cycles that our ancestors were part of. We look up at the stars, we gaze at the moon, we have come from the earth. This Goddess of the earth spreads her fertile flowers so that seeds may germinate. For me this also represents ideas, hope and compassion for humans to renew their relationship with their environment. I live in hope that more of us will develop a growing awareness of the preciousness of earth's animals, plants other creatures, rocks and streams. The earth is alive. The earth is us. We are the earth.

$165

Figure 16: Artwork and Story Sacred Earth by Karin Mackay
2. The Women’s Room Mother’s Group

The Mother’s Group created a Mandala to represent their individual experiences within the whole. In this way women were acknowledging the diversity of experiences and varied roles that they played in life. In a way they sacralised the process of birth and motherhood.

The Mandala is about uniting our experiences as individual women, mothers, and all the other diverse roles we have in our lives. It also recognizes the connection our individual experience has with our ancestors, our future, our children, and also our place in the natural world.

The Women’s Room Mothers’ Group meets fortnightly to share our varied experiences, as women, workers, mothers, artists, daughters, friends, aunts, sisters and so on, through making art. The Group focuses on valuing and respecting our parenting role in a society that often doesn’t recognize the importance and value of mothering.

Figure 17: Mother’s Mandala Artwork and Story by The Wisdom Tree Mother’s Group
3. Wisdom Tree Earth Based Spiritual Group

The group made replicas of the spiritual artefacts they made and used in the spiritual group as they felt that to exhibit their spiritual object would not be appropriate. They did not want the public touching sacred objects of power.

The Wisdom Tree

VASALISA THE INTUITION DOLL TO PUT IN YOUR POCKET
Poppets,

"When a woman is strong in her instinctual nature, she intuitively recognizes the innate predator by scent, sight, and hearing ... anticipates its presence, hears it approaching, and takes steps to turn it away. In the instinct injured woman, the predator is upon her before she registers its presence, for her listening, her knowing and the apprehensions are impaired--mainly by introjects which exhort her to be nice, to behave, and especially to be blind to being misused.

--"Women Who Run With the Wolves" by Clarissa Pinkola Estes

Dolls like this came about while reading the third chapters of The women who run with the wolves. The story of "Vasalisa the wise- The doll in her pocket". This chapter is about Intuition as initiation. It's about LISTENING AND TRUSTING YOUR INTUITION.
Figure 20: Belly casts from the Katoomba Homebirth Group

**Belly Casts**

Birth is the common thread from the beginning of everything.

When we bring forth new life we remember all the mothers before
5. Glorious Goddesses for Spring Goddess Parade

Straw and Clay Goddesses were made by four women in the weeks leading up to the festival. They were expressions of the spiritual, cultural beliefs that the women had about Goddesses. This Goddess was meant to encapsulate strength, empowerment and the all seeing eye of inner knowing. It was important that to the women that much natural material was used.

Figure 19: Glorious Goddess from The One Seed Project
Appendix 3: Sample of Group Creative Process

The Wisdom Tree
Nurturing Our Ancestral Self

Structure of the morning

Meet and greet 10 mins
Centre and protect 5 mins
Inner self meditation 15 min

Discussion & Writing
JWhere have I come from?"

What is my word?
What is my ancestral name? 25 min

Expressive watercolour
Painting 25 min

Morning Tea Break 11.00 am

Painting, sketching, clay making, Collage, writing about your ancestral connections. This is an intuitive response. Do not judge or have any expectations.

Closing calling on our ancestors 12.15 am
Appendix 4: Invitation Bookmark
Appendix 5: Invitation Email

EarthSpirit Festival
30th August 2009

Celebrate the awakening Earth Goddess in Spring
AncestralConnection Art Exhibition 28th August-19th September
Braemar Gallery 105 Macquarie Road Springwood

ANCESTORS, GODDESSES & EARTH CONNECTION
From the beginning of time......we all belonged to mother earth......what's your ancestral story?

Our ancestors have come before us passing on wisdom through bloodlines, stories and art. They have followed us here in spirit now. They live on in the rocks, streams, stars and moon. In the myths and stories we tell our children, Gods and Goddesses, mothers and daughters. From the mists of time to everyday reality. We all have a story to tell. How will your spirit be remembered? What will we become?

Entries are now open for creative women to exhibit or display their stories, art and soul work exploring the theme of ancestral connections.

We are after work that shows heartfelt expressions of the daily reality of women's lives through to intimate imaginings of mythical earth connections. A $250 art prize will be awarded to the work that best demonstrates the theme of ancestral connections with passion and emotive expression.

Categories may include photography, video, sound, performance, poetry and written stories, journals and scrapbooks, craft, weaving, needlework, jewelry, sculpture, drawing, painting, belly casts, clay work and spiritual artifacts.

Entries close on the 30th July 2009

Website for info www.thewomensroom.com.au Contact Karin Mackay karinm@tpg.com.au or 0247545598

Where have you come from?
Where do you belong?
What is your spiritual earth connection?
How are you related to mother earth? How did you get where you are now?
We all belong to mother earth.....what's your ancestral connection?
Think myth, ritual, ceremony, rocks and streams Think grandmothers, mothers and daughters
Appendix 6: Media Release

Press Release

Ancestral Connections Exhibition
28th Aug-13th Sept
Women share their stories and art exploring ancestral spiritual connections to people and place.

Opening Day EarthSpirit Festival
30th Aug 10am-4pm Braemar Gallery 104 Macquarie Rd Springwood
info at thewomensroom.com.au or 02 47 54 5598

Come and soak up the friendly atmosphere at the EarthSpirit Festival, the Mountain's best Community festival. The Women's Room artists share their gorgeous artworks and heartfelt stories exploring ancestral connections to people and place. A must see for mothers and daughters, fathers and sons or those interested in the soulful mystical connections to our spirit of place. The main focus of the exhibition and festival is to raise awareness of human's interconnection with the "EarthSpirit" and to share our stories of spiritual unfolding even in the challenging times faced in daily living. This year we are inviting the community be part of a welcome to Spring Goddess Parade and Ceremony by bringing a flower or small symbol to place on a communal alter to honour the changing seasons. Hands Heart and Feet drum and dance will kick off the parade and welcomed to country by respected Aboriginal elder Aunty Carol Cooper, followed by The Wollemi Aboriginal Dancers. The sensuous and beautiful Gahwazi Caravan belly dancers will mesmerise while Urban Quabila belly dancers are the surprise newcomers. The grand finale will be Fleur Magic Aboriginal dancers covered with traditional ochres sharing stories through song and dance. It is always a fantastic day for family, face painting, stalls and more with that special touch of spring magic.
Appendix 7: Guiding Questions to Participants and Audience Members

Women's Stories and Art Project Survey Questions

What was your favourite part of the festival?
What was your least favourite part of the festival?
What part of being involved in the festival has made you feel happy or good about yourself?
What part of being involved in the festival has made you feel sad, frustrated or disappointed?
Describe how you felt being part of the audience viewing the artworks and performances
How has being part of the festival changed your sense of belonging to community?
Was there any specific artwork or story that moved, challenged or inspired you? If so, can you describe how this affected you?
Has any part of the festival inspired you to begin or renew your own creative practice?
What kinds of creative practice would most like to do?
E.g. Paint Sing Write Dance Grow a garden
In what ways do you think that the sharing of women's story and art is important?
Do you think there is a spiritual aspect to creative practice?
How has participation changed how you think about your creative or spiritual practice?
What does wellbeing mean to you?
Has the festival inspired you to want to make any changes to your life?
How has your sense of wellbeing changed by being part of this festival?
What challenging feelings did you face by putting your artwork, story or performance on public display?
Was it worth it? Would you do it again?
Would you rate this experience overall as having a positive or negative influence on your wellbeing?
Positive / Negative

Would you participate again?

a) Not participate again
b) Tell friends about it
c) Maybe
d) Come again and bring a friend
e) Definitely participate again and bring friend or family

Overall was participating in the festival a worthwhile experience

a) Poor
b) OK
c) Good
d) Great
e) Outstanding
Art as a connection to the Divine in women’s lives:
Cultural wellbeing through creative process

Karin Mackay, Institute for Culture and Society University of Western Sydney, Australia

Abstract: “Art and the spiritual have an ancient connection; however articulation of how the making of art can instigate a spiritual experience, influence artistic practice and effect change in women’s lives has not been well articulated. This paper focuses on the way contemporary women use art in their search for deepened understanding of inner self, belonging and as a way to connect to a ‘divine energy’ that helps them cope with challenges and experience joy. Based on the analysis of sixty three women’s artworks and stories from an art and spiritual festival and interviews with ten women artists, I articulate the complexities of the relationship between art making and the divine through women’s lived and embodied experiences of the art making process. Through this research I found that women while in the process of making art experienced a connection with a divine energy that inspired their artworks, gave them a sense of connectedness and was central to their sense of wellbeing.”

Keywords: Cultural Wellbeing, Women, Divine, Art, Spirituality, Creative Process

Introduction

Art is often seen as a product or used as a political statement (Block 2008) however, the women’s stories and art at the centre of this paper demonstrate that the art making process was more akin to a spiritual experience, even when the final work had a political message or was intended for market. This paper clearly establishes a reciprocal relationship between art making and spiritual practice, where art making instigated a spiritual experience or a spiritual experience in another context could inspire art making. The experience of being in a spiritual moment and art making assisted women to process complex, often disparate information from their everyday lives, which stimulated questions of deep importance, rediscovery of the forgotten or instigated new phases of knowing. The following scenario highlights how the emotional experiential moment was pivotal in my quest to understand how art influenced wellbeing.

As I walked the long stretch of beach, I was suddenly struck by a powerful insight that seemed to come out of nowhere. I knew I had to remember it. I had no paper or pen but I did have my camera. So I wrote it in the sand with a piece of driftwood and took a photo. It said “art as a reminder of connections with the divine”. Another thought instantly rushed in, so I hurriedly wrote this in the sand, in case the idea evaporated and was lost forever. It said “art as a reminder of who we are” (See fig1). In this moment, I felt as if my life force was shimmering, like hot air rising on the horizon, that my inside energy was reverberating so it expanded to further than my usual bodily limits. It felt good, whole. Everything made perfect sense and I felt connected with something else beyond, within and around me. It was as if time was frozen but I was aware this feeling of elation...
would not last. As I continued on my walk, I wondered if the women I was researching had moments like this when making art.

Once I returned home, I felt compelled to create a painting in an effort to capture the power of this experience. In making the artwork, especially while spreading large sections of the paint with my hands, I experienced a sense of being within and becoming one with the paint, the rough textured linen canvas, the vibrant colours and the divine “energy”. The emerging imagery helped me to remember the feeling I had whilst waking on the beach. When I experienced this painting later, I realised that the giving and receiving of starfish between a human and an anthropomorphised headland Goddess had unconsciously captured the idea of a reciprocal relationship between a physical reality and a spiritual energy (See fig 2). The making of this artwork made my spiritual experience visible and was a way for me to capture a complex array of thoughts, insights and emotions that steamed into my consciousness in a moment of connection to an invisible energy force that was within and around me. By memorialising this momentary experience through the painting, my initial and subsequent experiences could be remembered, relived and reworked at another time, with the possibility of instigating another artwork or another moment of connection or further dialogue with divine “energy” in an iterative way.

Art can be a powerful way to express something that cannot always be easily said in words and is associated with the unconscious or spiritual dimension (Jung and Shamdasani 2009). While the spiritual feminist movement offers clear critique of how art process can be a “conduit to the divine” in women’s lives (Raphael 1996: 76) it has been criticized for universalising a euro centric white middle class spiritual practice excluding ethnically or socioeconomically diverse perspectives (Eller 1995; Collins 2000; Klassen 2009: 47). This paper takes a critical feminist perspective questioning how art making can be used by women from diverse cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds to explore their own spiritual concepts. The women involved in the study were an eclectic mix of artists, spiritual seekers, mothers and women interested in exploring their inner spiritual life. Women did not necessarily identify explicitly as feminists or artists, however I take a feminist standpoint approach to legitimise women’s voices, art works, and stories (Harding 1987; Haraway 1988; Rosunee 2012; Lintott and Sanders-Staudt 2013).

Women’s artwork exploring everyday lived experiences of spirituality, motherhood and connectedness with nature, remain devalued and marginalised because these are not marketable commodities or deemed significant to the cultural conversation by patriarchal systems (Mies 2011; Shiva 2013). Many of the women did not have the time or financial resources to produce, exhibit or sell artworks they felt made someone an artist. Consequently, the societal discourse of women’s creative process work being ‘less than’, ‘self-focused’ or ‘not addressing issues of importance’ (Liss 2009: xvi; Lintott and Sander-Staudt 2012:4) meant that some women in the
study did not feel legitimised to claim the title of ‘proper artist’, even if they expressed themselves artistically. The Women’s Room Collective aimed to support and empower women in their artistic and spiritual practice through challenging the dominant discourse surrounding creativity and wellbeing.

While art has been seen as “a way of knowing” (Allen 1995, 2005), “a healing practice” (McNiff 2004), and “a spiritual practice” (Cameron 2007: 17), these perspectives have not explored the rich complexity emerging in postmodern cultural constructions of spiritual artistic expression. Women in this study used art to explore identity, belonging, self-knowing, connection to community, nature and the divine, which they reported as healing and improving wellbeing. This paper will more fully explore how art making and spirituality is experienced by a diverse group of women coping with contemporary issues in their daily lives.

The Study

The research was conducted at The Women’s Room Centre for Women’s Wellbeing, a community organization located in The Blue Mountains, Australia, which offered a range of expressive art groups for women of diverse cultural, socioeconomic and religious backgrounds. As I was the founder, and facilitated many of the courses, I was both deeply embedded and was afforded an insider perspective (Colic-Peisker 2004). The workshops utilised an art therapy process approach, alongside sociological critiques of women’s experiences and roles in a patriarchal society. These aimed to deepen women’s self-knowing and ‘becoming’ in an exploration of place in the cosmos.

Ten women, from the 2009 Women’s Room “Ancestral Connections” exhibition, were interviewed between July 2009 and January 2013 and asked how and why they made their art. Sixty three artworks and stories were exhibited and videoed and after the exhibition, the stories and art were analysed to determine overarching themes. Reference to a ‘divine energy’ in the interviews prompted a re-examination of the stories and artwork themes to draw out further ideas of what the divine meant to women and what kind of connectedness was sought. Rather than Jantzen’s (1999) concept of women becoming the “divine other”, women from this study conceptualised the divine as ‘energy’, which they became aware of in a heightening moment of conscious connectedness which could unearth complex aspects of self. As my analysis dug deeper, a complex relationship between the art making process and the divine was revealed. This will be discussed in terms of 1) Art in the Making moment 2) The Divine as Energy and 3) Art as a Connection to the Divine.

The Creative Process of Art In the Making Moment

The women’s Room workshops and groups aimed to create a space where women could explore the challenges and joys of life, using a creative arts process. An important part of the process was centring or meditation techniques to engender an altered state of consciousness. Women described a flow, zone or trance like state that they felt helped them create their artwork. Dayl, a transpersonal art therapist, of Maori and European background, explains how her approach to art making is a process of meditative being which elicits a positive sense of wellness.

> When I approach my art I use a process approach. I feel whole, totally selfless, totally comforted, a sense of equilibrium, like floating in a pool. I am held in that space just enough to keep floating, just float.

Dayl’s sensations of floating, being held or comforted, differs from Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) concept of flow, which supposedly requires conscious perception of skill, arousal and boredom. In Dayl’s case her flow was not a cognitive focus on skill but rather an organic becoming. The concept of Matrix, suggested by de Zegher (2002) seemed more like the creative process Dayl was describing. Origins of Matrix are associated with mother, womb, embedded material and a formative place where creation arises (Bickel 2012: 112). Dayl’s sensations indicate the relational nature of the creative process where her “being does not precede the becoming” but is a space able to hold and know the self (de Zegher 2002:11).
Women used the terms ‘process’ and ‘meditation’ as umbrella concepts to describe a synergic nexus of particular experiences they felt were conducive to the creative process, such as, attentive focus in the moment, awareness of the sensory self, relationship to others, cultural identity, place in cosmos and being or doing in ritual like ways. The Latin origin of nexus is from nectere, means to bond or connect and has come to mean connecting of many things at a particular site. Aspects of self, time, place, community and cosmos can converge at a particular moment where sensory perception is heightened thus facilitating creative process and spiritual practice (Mackay 2011: 95). Dayl’s moment of knowing self in her creative process shows how the creative nexus reaches beyond the inner and the outer binary of de Zegher’s Matrix to include a convergence of synergistic experiences of becoming at particular moments in time.

Spiritual feminists argue that the divine other needs to be constructed as a divine feminine “being” to be relevant to women’s experience (Irigaray 1993, Raphael 1996 and Jantzen 1999). Rather than seeking to ‘become’ Divine, women in this study conceived of the divine as an ‘energy’, which inspired their creations. During spiritual and creative practice, women remained intensely aware of their own being and the many complex elements of their life. Karen, a Darug Aboriginal Australian, explains her spiritual creative process.

When I paint …it’s like a meditation for me. There is something pure about that not only the dot itself, how it looks but the process of doing the dot. …no one has taught me to do the dots and people can interpret it…ooh you are doing what is seen as Aboriginal”. No, I am doing what I am being told to do. There is something pure about that, not only the dot itself, how it looks, but the process of doing the dot. There is something that calms me. I am closer to that feeling, like I am closer to God. I am just closer to everything……. They [the ancestors] are telling me, by doing…that the process is making you one with everything, so the doing, it’s the doing…it’s the doing. I don’t blank out and suddenly see something there. I am aware of every single dot……. I am painting especially for someone, I am I’m meditating on people and love and emotion.

The painting of the dot is a synergistic coming together of all that she is: her relationships within community, her Aboriginality, her spirituality and her connection with the energy of “everything” in the cosmos, all of which make this particular creation possible. The ritual-like practices used by the women from The Women’s Room opened them to “a different dimension”. By using repetitive actions such as continuous brush strokes, dot mark making, boiling a kettle, making a cup of tea, listening to music, being alone or surrounded by others, a meditative experience was elicited and a communicative flow of oneness with their artwork was experienced. The women’s art making thus moved beyond simply carrying out ritual actions (Orenstein 1990; Henley 2002; Malchiodi 2006; de Zegher 2002; Saliers 2005) to enable an important potential for communicating with an animated energy within the artwork. In the following example, Mary’s ritual actions allow a dissipation of boundaries between the self and the artwork, which gives access to the rich unconscious nexus of her life to inspire her creation.

When I do my art I am in…..this is what I call a different dimension, where I am just absorbed in the work. I have my music on. I have my tea after tea. Because the music is what inspires me and just the creation, the creating from nothing to something. It is almost like strange…but like the piece comes alive. It sort of communicates.

The comforting sounds of clinking cups, music and boiling kettles made when Mary’s extended family came together was conducive to her creative process. She recreates familiar ritual actions by boiling the kettle and having a cup of tea while she is creating. These ritual actions induce a nexus of all that she is and all her relationships in her life, which comes together in a synergistic moment and she is inspired to create out of nothing. This was reflective of other women’s creative process where ritual actions of intense focused ‘doing in the moment’ made it possible to engage in a kind of unspoken dialogue between artist and the artwork. Art making in the moment reflects women’s desire to feel connected with the emotional self, significant others and a communicative connection with the energy in their artwork in a way that helps them create.
Art in the making moment may elicit connections to energy so powerfully evocative and memorable that they act as agents of change, setting into motion new physical and emotional journeys of discovery. The act of art making can be a powerful process of transformation, where strong emotions can be released and pain transmuted into a sense of hopefulness and trust in women’s own ability to work through disappointments and challenges experienced in life.

**The Divine as Energy**

The direct experience of the divine was described as a peaceful, calm, beautiful experience where the self was felt to be expansive. This often occurred at an unexpected moment when women were walking in nature, on the street, in their kitchen or looking up at the stars. Below three women describe how an experience of the divine feels for them.

Where your presence flows outside of your physical body but is still attached. You feel bigger than yourself”. (Amy)

I get this incredible …….I don’t know what you to put it……..I am standing it’s usually at the kitchen….at the kitchen bench and it is like a stretching feeling of this beautiful, beautiful thing that happens to me. I feel tall. It is in me and it stretches me and I sort of feel like I am looking down that I am this elongated spirit or and yet…I sort of feel like I haven’t grown. I just feel like something stretching me. (Mary)

When the feeling came upon me I felt as if my perception had changed. I saw and felt reality as it really is rather than used to seeing it. That was connection with the Divine, emotional and physical. The emotions of that experience were exquisite. I felt joy, peace, and serenity. I knew there were no opposites. All was one, all was good. (Diarne).

Even though the Women’s Room artists shared similar concerns with spiritual feminists (Christ 2003; Klein 2009), such as an empowered feminist approach to ritual and embodied processes linked to the natural world (see fig 3), there was a distinct shift from women revering the Goddess as ‘The Divine Being” to that of the divine as all-encompassing life-giving energy.

The imagery from the exhibition showed how ‘the divine’ manifested in many diverse cultural forms not confined to one being, deity or religious ideal but focused on what was sacred to them. Forty two of the sixty three artworks and stories at the exhibition related to the Goddess, the Divine Mother or imagery evocative of the divine feminine (see fig 4, 5, 6, 7). However, the concept of an overarching all-encompassing nexus of “energy” distinguished these women’s idea of the divine from that of the spiritual feminist ideal of Goddess Divine. Kate, an Anglo Irish Australian, describes her concepts of the divine.
The divine is a female energy but this is just an image to help me focus on the energy. I don’t really think that there is someone up there.

Through the process of making art women were able to reflect upon aspects of their lives to question and incorporate their own cultural constructs of ‘the divine’. Although women portrayed diverse cultural concepts of the divine in their artwork, overwhelming reference was made to an “energy” force that enlivened all creation, made life possible and connected everything and everybody. Below are examples of two very different perspectives are given by Dianne, an Anglo Dutch Australian in her mid-60’s and Karen an Aboriginal Australian in her 40’s, it is still clear that the divine is “energy” with countless cultural manifestations.
When I say my ancestors, I can hear the energy. I can hear it in the trees. I hear it and I can feel it and see it in your dog. I can…they have all got their own…and it is all the same. The trees…no one is more important…..we are not more important than the trees…it’s all that energy but you have got to hear it. It is not my energy. It is everyone’s energy. It is just the energy. It is just the flow………..but it goes beyond, so I am aware that I am only capturing just a little bit…an essence…a glance…..what I want to paint…and I have realised is…….. I want to paint Lyrebird energy. I don’t want to paint Lyrebird. (Karen)

Understanding the unity of everything, of total existence is the divine. The degree of your understanding dictates what you can do. The greater your understanding of the totality, the greater the magic in life. The divine is above the normal sense of logic. Energy is in the air everywhere. Everything is intimately connected, every particle, every person (Diarne).

This force was not confined to one face, place or conception of divinity but was moveable force that ran through life and could be tapped into through art but not only through making art.

Art as a Connection to the Divine: Cultural wellbeing through creative process

The making of art was not necessarily a direct divine experience but was explained as a capturing of a small moment, a glimpse of a larger power, because the artwork could only hold a part of the large universal divine energy. From a cosmological point of view, Sagan (1980) suggests that “the beauty of a living thing is not the atoms that go into it, but the way those atoms are put together. Energy is borrowed and may be momentarily captured, received and then given but keeps moving in “the flow”. The ‘creative nexus’ was the moment when the divine energy was felt or captured during art making. Karen explains that;
When I saw that Rainbow I received and when I paint I give and then there will be a receiver (when it is bought or given)……..of course you are not buying a blank canvas but don’t think for a moment it is just paint on it…… because that is really all a lot of people think you are just buying the paint arranged on canvas but that is not what I am giving them. I am giving them the energy. There is something about the glance because and I do feel that when we lose the body in whatever form or whatever happens you become one with this essence…you are one with it…you can’t…you can only get a glimpse of it now because that is all we are actually capable of.

The life force encapsulated in the divine energy and transformed into art is simultaneously a woman’s but not hers, embodied but not static as it is infinitely present and immanent. However, not all women were content to describe their storytelling or painting as a way to capture the divine energy. Some felt it was more about being in a conversation, a dialogue with the divine where the result would be the artwork or story. Vibha, a Pakistani Hindu, explained how this dialoguing with the divine was a way to question aspects of life.

When I paint it is like my innermost soul is connected to the divine but it is like a relationship between two people, it is an interaction and it is a combination of both the individual and the divine. Each individual will have a unique relationship with the divine and will be expressed in a different way. For me the painting grounds that oneness and it makes it practical and tangible instead of being esoteric. You can see and feel rather than it not be expressible. The grounding is different, you are not capturing it. It is your relationship with it, your beliefs about it and your questions about it. That comes through the art. For me it is not blind faith. I question it. I question why things happen. Especially with the sort of art I do. It is more emotional art. I paint feeling rather than actual objects.

Art not only explores the boundaries of energy and matter (Orenstein 1990: 118) but can open a portal from the conscious self to an unconscious cosmic divine energy that resides within the self and all matter. The connection to this energy allowed transformation to occur, with the power to move women emotionally and spiritually. Some women described their experience as a loss of ego, immersion, a stretching, tallness, bigness, higher self, oneness or flow, but no matter how this is described; the divine energy is implicated in the creation of their artworks. Amy explained her experience after one of The Women’s Room creative sessions and states that she;

felt completely connected. It was a definitive moment for me. I felt like I was guided by the Divine and I opened myself up to receive. It created itself unconsciously. Looking at it now I could not believe that I had made that.

The Divine does not overcome Amy and she does not become a cosmic divine ideal in the way Irigaray (1993) and Jantzen (1999) have suggested. Raphael argues that women are a “conduit to the divine creativity” (76), however this suggests a one-way transmission from a divine presence ‘entering’ the woman’s body, an entry which is suggestive of sexual penetration from the more powerful other. For some women, like Amy, there was a sense of opening to receive, the distinction being that divine energy was a force latent within themselves assisting their dialogical creative process, rather than a ‘divine being’ coming within. Some women described their creative process as a kind of channelling, while others were not comfortable describing their inspired art making in this way, possibly because it held connotations of being taken over by some external force.

…it starts with an emotion…umm and it is always something that I feel so I am not painting a memory I am….without being weird it is a little bit like channelling except even that sounds when I say it like there is an external force. It is not an external anything. It is an internal everything. (Karen)

The Art making nexus may have begun with a personal exploration but this was nested within larger questions of belonging and connecting to local community and place, cultural identity and
Making art in a connected spiritual way enabled women to connect with their inner life and question the meaning of important aspects of their life such as birth, motherhood, bloodline connections, adoption, relationships, ethnicity, spiritual beliefs and being in nature. One of the artists, Sheryl, believes that we are all connected to the earth. I think we are all connected to each other. I think we are all connected to everything but the groundedness is the solidness to remind us there is solidness within myself as well.

Art reminded women of the divinity within them, others and grounded and connected them to the larger energy in the cosmos. Dayl’s art work “You am I” (see fig 9) explored her mixed Maori and European heritage, which offered a way to remember where she had come from and reconcile her mixed cultural heritage. Joanna’s work, “For Sachi”, explored older woman’s chaotic cosmological relationships in the messy mix of daily life by asking “Who Are You” (see fig 10), a reference to changes from being young women to old. Remembering gives a sense of continuity throughout time (Reiss 2005: 14) and was important in connecting women to self, real and imagined ancestors for belonging and wellbeing.

Connecting to the divinity within themselves through making art was important in developing their sense of wellbeing. Interviews clearly demonstrate that art as a connection to the divine made them feel good, connected with their emotional selves, made them feel whole, peaceful, empowered and helped them cope with life’s challenges.
I would have to say truly umm it is medicine and I feel that is why I have been given to paint and that is why I have had some level of success because it is not the paint on the canvas but it is the medicine. It is the care and the energy that I am putting into that. I don’t feel so isolated because I do feel isolated a lot you know……um. Society is isolating……um and I feel like it is a walk in the bush and you don’t feel lonely but you can feel lonely in a crowd full of people. When I paint I never feel lonely. I feel nice and relaxed. I feel like I have people…not people…things around me. I am nurtured. It is a nurturing experience for me. So why do it? It is my way of loving really. I just think it is this kindness that I put into it. It is my energy that I put into it that I want to pass onto humanity.

Women’s art making in connection with the divine, was a way to remember the connections which made them feel whole, healed, loved and less isolated. Amy talked about how she felt connections being activated in her brain when she was creatively engaged but when she was not she felt a pervading emptiness.

I know how I feel when I am not doing it, something is missing. I feel like doors are closed. It is almost necessary to keep the life force going.

Art is one way of receiving, capturing and feeling the joy, peace and wholeness experienced in the divine moment of connection. Emotional energy may then be infused into the artwork and felt by viewers. Art as a connection to the divine was not necessarily a way to become divine but experience the synergic nexus running through life at a moment in time. Sagan (1980: 1) poetically suggests “we long to return, and we can, because the cosmos is also within us. We’re made of star stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.” And so to making art in connection with the divine may help us to know ourselves on a deeper more spiritual level.

Conclusion

Making art in a connected creative process was a way for women to actively partake in their deepened becoming in relationship with their world and the divine energy of the cosmos. The art making moment allowed women to process the complex aspects of their life and think deeply about what was important to them through connecting, capturing and dialoguing with divine energy. The spiritual connectedness felt by the women in this study was not a vague notion of the spiritual in art but experienced through specific art making moments where women of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds articulated connection to a ‘divine energy’ rather than any culturally specific ‘Goddess deity’.

Connected Art was an important way that women worked through issues of their own identity, strengthened relationships to others through real or imagined belonging and made sense of their place in their conceptions of the cosmos. Through making art in this way, women could challenge the dominant ideologies which marginalise women’s experiences. The art making moment provided a synergic space for women to process complex, often disparate emotions, sensations and current knowing, enabling women to imagine other possibilities for their lives. Making art in connection with the divine was empowering for women as it made their innermost thoughts and feelings visible where in the past they may have had to be silent. Art making can be a way for women to express their belonging to place, to feel a connection to their inner being and the energy that animates all that is in the cosmos not by becoming a divine ‘being’ but by experiencing the divine ‘energy’ of life in the art making process.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karin Mackay is a working artist with considerable experience in facilitating youth and women’s community groups using a stories and art approach, to create a sense of community and raise awareness of social justice and ecological issues for cultural wellbeing. Karin founded The Women’s Room Centre for Women’s Wellbeing in The Blue Mountains Australia, which curated the popular Earthspirit Festival and women’s art exhibitions for 5 years. Karin has published in the areas of women, spirituality, ecology and the arts in online articles, poems, newsletters, and blogs. She has written and facilitated numerous creative arts courses with the aim of connecting participants to their inner consciousness, such as ‘paint your canvas’, ‘meditation and art’, ‘birth art’, ‘the too good mother’ and ‘expressive goddess art’. She is working towards the completion of her doctoral studies with The Institute for Culture and Society at The University of Western Sydney, Australia in the area of creative cultural practice, women’s wellbeing and relationship to land and kin. She has presented her work on cultural wellbeing through story and art at both domestic and international conferences and published her first academic article in 2011 titled *Reclaiming the Sacred: A Festival Experience as a Response to Globalisation*. She has worked with Professor Margaret Somerville, a leader in place pedagogies, The NSW Office of Environment and Heritage and United Nations Regional Centre for Excellence Greater Western Sydney on major projects investigating connection to place and sustainable practice. Karin now lectures in Education at the University of Western Sydney in the areas of Education for Sustainability, Learning and Creativity and Diversity, Social Justice and Equity.
Art as a connection to the divine in women’s lives

Please refer to the following 36 pages
Art as a Connection to the Divine
Virtual Presentation

Cultural Wellbeing
through creative process

Karin Mackay
Institute for Culture and Society
To my ancestors whose spirit lives on......and to my children

Figure 1: Front Cover Walk Gently on Me. Acrylic on canvas by Karin Mackay 2009
Art as a Connection to the Divine

Cultural Wellbeing through Creative Process

A report for Doctor of Cultural Research (DCR)

A Virtual Presentation for

Arts in Society Conference

24th June – 26th June 2013

Eotvos Lorand University

Budapest Hungary

Karin Mackay

Doctoral Candidate

Institute for Culture and Society
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the Virtual Presentation</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Ancestral Connections Interviews Study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why a Virtual YouTube Presentation as a Report</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Virtual Presentation Report</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Presentation Transcript and Analysis</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected Bibliography</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Front Cover – Walk Gently on Me. Acrylic on canvas by Karin Mackay 2009

Figure 2: Walk Gently on Me and accompanying poem acrylic on canvas by Karin Mackay 2009

Figure 3: Video Still of the Virtual Presentation Report

Figure 4: About the Author Karin Mackay

Figure 5: Logo of from The Women’s Room Community Group

Figure 6: A session from The Women’s Room Mother’s Group

Figure 7: Belly cast and Water Goddess sculpture from The Women’s Room studio

Figure 8: Kim Waldron at the Ancestral Connections Exhibition

Figure 9: Stories and art displayed at The Ancestral Connections exhibition 2009

Figure 10: To The Moon oil on Canvas Karin Mackay 2006

Figure 11: Guerrilla Girls Activist Artists

Figure 12: Venus of Willendorf, Natural History Museum Vienna, Austria

Figure 13: Colour Studies by Wassily Kandinsky 1913

Figure 14: Carl Jung psychotherapist 1875-1961

Figure 15: Philemon by Carl Jung in The Red Book (1913-1940)

Figure 16: Pinel at the Salpêtrière. Pinel orders removal of chains from patients at Paris Asylum for insane women (1878)

Figure 17: Oriental serving girl artwork

Figure 18: Diamond and Orienstein’s (eds) book Reweaving the World

Figure 19: Aboriginal women on mission national library of Australia

Figure 20: Kim and Olivia at The Women’s Room Mothers Group painting
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 21: Pottery workshop at The Women’s Room .................................................. 20
Figure 22: Beauty, Hope and Wisdom acrylic on canvas Karin Mackay 2009 ............... 20
Figure 23: Looking over Back Beach Woolgoolga, NSW, Australia ............................. 21
Figure 24: Art as a reminder of connections with divine written in sand photo by Karin Mackay .......................................................... 21
Figure 25: My footsteps in the sand on Back Beach Woolgoolga, NSW Australia. Photo by Karin Mackay .......................................................... 22
Figure 26: In the zone reenacting the art making process video by Karin Mackay 2009 .......................................................... 22
Figure 27: Walk Gently On Me depicting Woolgoolga Back Beach acrylic on canvas ...... 23
Figure 28: Mermaid on the beach oil by Karin Mackay ................................................. 23
Figure 29: The divine and art ......................................................................................... 24
Figure 30: Art Making Moment slide ............................................................................. 24
Figure 31: One of The Women’s Room art making groups ........................................... 25
Figure 32: Meditative state of art making ....................................................................... 25
Figure 33: Karen Maber with one of her art works ....................................................... 26
Figure 34: Tea cups and kettles can begin a ritual state ................................................ 26
Figure 35: Cosmos swirl connecting life .......................................................................... 27
Figure 36: Amy Bell’s Belly cast with Labyrinth from Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009 .......................................................... 27
Figure 37: Walking in the bush Shaw’s Ridge Winmalee photo by Jacob Mackay 2008 .......................................................... 28
Figure 38: You Are My Sunshine acrylic on canvas Karin Mackay’s ............................ 28
Figure 39: Tree on Shaw’s Ridge photo Karin Mackay 2008 ......................................... 29
Figure 40: Sunrise over Woolgoolga Headland 2006 photo by Karin Mackay ............... 29
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 41: Forever Connected acrylic on canvas by Karin Mackay exhibited at the Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009 ...........................................30

Figure 42: Loloba’s Dream acrylic on canvas by Glenic Ware exhibited at the Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009 ..................................................30

Figure 43: Tree Lovers acrylic on canvas Karin Mackay 2009 ..........................31

Figure 44: Section of Blossom painting acrylic on canvas Karin Mackay 2009 .................................................................31

Figure 45: The Last Letter photo by Sheryl Hardy exhibited at the Ancestral Connections Exhibition 200 .................................................................32

Figure 46: Under the Persimmon Tree watercolour Karin Mackay 2009 .................................32

Figure 47: Mothers Group and Katoomba Homebirth artworks 2009 Ancestral Connections Exhibition .................................................................33

Figure 48: Detail of Katoomba Homebirth group belly casts .................................33

Figure 49: Under the Apple Tree acrylic on canvas Karin Mackay 2009 ..........34

Figure 50: Sunrise capturing the centre over Woolgoolga Back Beach 2006 .................................................................34

Figure 51: This Sacred Earth acrylic on canvas by Karin Mackay 2009 .................................................................35
I believe that the ancestors live in the land; that the land has its own spirit – the Earth Spirit. I see bodies in the hills, trees, mountains and the ocean. I feel a place more than I see it. My blood, body cells, skin and bones have been born through millions of years of the earth’s journey. The trees, the mountains and the oceans have made me; they are my skin, bone and hair. I have come from the once swirling oceans, from the fish that swim there, from the birds, reptiles, grasses and trees. I am ancient but I am here now. We are one.

Walk gently upon me.

This painting was inspired by my special magical place that I visit. Here the earth is kind to me and I love her well too. She always brings me special gifts to enjoy and then to return. I stay in the little purple house on the hill overlooking the Ocean.

Figure 2: Walk Gently on Me and accompanying poem acrylic on canvas by Karin Mackay 2009
OVERVIEW OF THE VIRTUAL PRESENTATION

Please view the

Art as a Connection to the divine video link at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSvJHXKJg6o

Figure 3: Video Still of the Title Page for the Virtual Presentation Report
INTRODUCTION

The virtual presentation ‘Art as a Connection to the Divine’ that makes up this report has emerged from the Ancestral Connections interviews, which was one of three projects I completed in the doctoral research. While this report has a similar title to the published academic article “Art as a Connection to the Divine in Women’s Lives” which is another of the doctoral research outputs, this report output focuses more carefully on the physicality of the creative process, the way art works were made, and how making art in connection with a divine energy was good for women’s wellbeing. The video aims to communicate the embodied nature of the creative process used by the research participants through a rich symbolic language that can be read on many layers. The video uses a combination of photographs of the women’s art works, music, manipulation of virtual software and spoken explanations which have been creatively put together to create a virtual performance of the findings of the research, which was presented at the Arts in Society Conference 24th June - 26th June 2013 Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary.

ABOUT THE ANCESTRAL CONNECTIONS INTERVIEW STUDY

The Ancestral Connections Interviews were linked to the activities organised by The Women’s Room Centre for Women’s Wellbeing, a community arts group in Wimnmalee, New South Wales, Australia. The project entailed ten interviews with Individual female artists affiliated with The Women’s Room. Some women had attended one of the creative groups or workshops facilitated by The Women’s Room between 2004 until 2010 and/or exhibited at the three week Ancestral Connections Exhibition held in 2009, a women’s story and art exhibition that formed the first project of my doctoral research. The aim of the Ancestral Connections Exhibition was to showcase women’s stories, art and performance to the larger community and to encourage women from diverse backgrounds and abilities to have the courage to share their story and art.

The aim of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of why women participated in the range of activities held at The Women’s Room, including their participation in the festival and exhibition and how this was related to their sense of wellbeing. Interviews were held informally at several local cafes, at my own home, at the participant’s home, at participant’s workplaces and over the phone. As I was deeply embedded in the activities of The Women’s Room I was very familiar with the women who I interviewed. Therefore while the interviews were guided by several already formulated questions about why they exhibited at the festival and how they felt it helped them, the style was conversational. The dialectic was an important methodology for me to allow the knowledge to be shared in the making moment (Mackay 2014).

The conversational style of interview allows a dialogue to unfold in the making moment of the conversation, a creative act of becoming and a liminal space where
women could allow the thoughts, emotions and wisdom to emerge (Somerville 2008, Phoneix de Carteret 2008). However I also found that like de Carteret it was the fleeting thoughts that I scrabbled down in my journals that helped me to slowly make sense of what was said. I recorded some of the interviews on a digital recorder at different venues, like noisy cafes with babies crawling over the table, or held close next to speaker phone. Others I recorded by hand with notes but I found that this took away from my concentration of the conversation as I became engrossed in what was being said. During the interviews it became clear that my initial questioning around why women wanted to participate in the exhibition was not what I had expected. I had assumed women would talk more about the physical sharing of art and stories at the exhibition and how connecting with other women inspired their art making. To some degree women did mention their connections with other women but what emerged strongly from the interviews was a deeply spiritual focus on connection with a divine energy, which inspired their art making. The divine energy that women discussed was also different to what I had anticipated as women did not mention “The Goddess”, even though many of the women wrote and painted about this in the work they exhibited at the Ancestral Connections Exhibition. The energy women talked about was an energy that animated all life and which they tapped into when in nature, using ritual acts or through their creative art making. Women cited their connection to the divine life energy as important in their sense of wellbeing (Mackay 2014). Women used their creative process to explore their identity and belonging, express their spirituality, to feel good about themselves and challenge women’s prescribed roles in society.

Why a Virtual You Tube Presentation as a Report

The reason I have chosen to use video was the flexibility and accessibility of the medium to communicate to a wide range of audiences. An academic article Art of the Connection to the Divine in Women’s Lives, also, included in my doctoral portfolio, was submitted and accepted for publication in the International Journal for Social, Political and Community Agendas in the Arts in 2014. The report that follows is a creative response to the academic work already completed in the article as it was vital to engage with the community from which the research had come. The video medium was like a collage of images, commentary and narration that contained the essence of the research in visual and auditory language. Video form was flexible and able to be rapidly shared to a specifically targeted audience. As most of the women who had been interviewed were friends on facebook, I could upload the You tube and “share it” where women were able to view and comment. Once again this became a shared dialogical space where collaborative knowledge was constructed. This was an important strategy to use if I was to be consistent with the overarching feminist and cultural wellbeing methodologies which aim to give back to the communities from which the research was conducted.

Specifically the making of this video was able to communicate the findings of the research back to the ten research participants that were instrumental to the findings. The feedback from the women involved has been positive as they felt that it represented their work sensitively and accurately. I shared the video with the research
participants through Facebook with many participants responding with extensive comments. Excerpts from three participants’ responses after watching the video are below;

_Such a beautiful insightful gift to share. Thank you for valuing our expression of art by listening and observing with such care and sensitivity. Thank you for putting the right words to what I feel and for connecting me to other wonderful women._

After watching the video it felt as if I had just attended one of our beautiful spiritual meetings. It is wonderful work of bringing the inner spirit and energy together with the outer world of education. Thank you for including my experiences in this study.

_I feel so proud and deeply touched by your heart work. Thank you for holding the torch for so many women to find, converse with and embrace their inner divine nature. I for one would not have processed so graciously what in hindsight was a painful and pivotal moment in my life journey. What a wonderful legacy of a time connection and transformation for myself and I am sure many other women involved in The Women’s Room._

I was nervous about how the video would be received because I was eager to ensure that the women from the study were represented as best I could. I was highly sensitive to the social power problematic of speaking for other women and the importance of not universalising women’s experience (Bultler 1991). However, I was also aware of the need for diverse women’s voices to be heard, art to be seen and stories to be read to highlight the structural inequalities that still exist for many women and to show how the embodiment of women’s experience validated their standpoint. In this case their divine standpoint and the importance of their sense of connectedness to ‘life energy in the making moment for their sense of wellbeing.

The video highlighted the crucial aspects of women’s creative process and is able to unpack how women approach their artwork and what they consider to be “the divine energy”. What emerged strongly from the research was that a making moment was a felt embodied experience that inspired both creative and spiritual practice. The video report was able to bring together the views of the artists from the interviews contextualised within the larger Earthspirit Festival project and Ancestral Connections exhibition project, where the women exhibited their artworks.

The following written report compliments the You Tube video to assist the reader to make sense of the video and understand the context of the study. I have synthesised the report into a series of three repeating forms being

1. Analysis of the slides and video to give an indication of the relevance of the chosen video imagery.
2. Video slide capture
3. Section of relevant Transcript of the video
Not all video slides are presented here as this would overwhelm the reader. Instead video snips have been taken to guide the reader similar to signposts to remind the reader where in the video story relates to the text. The intertextuality is an important component of the way women used creative practices as they would often combine story and art, poetry and performance, where the creative process was a dialogical space between two often disparate worlds and a way to move in and out of these different spaces and was a way to negotiate discordant aspects of the self in community.
Virtual Presentation Transcript and Analysis. Please see video available at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mvaDAmUvM

The presentation was created by combining video and photo that I had recorded about my own arts process, documenting my spiritual experiences of art making and walking in the Australian bush. Images from the Ancestral Connections exhibition and Earthspirit Festival were also used. I then put this together with music and sound effects. I made a voice recording which I overlay onto the video. The whole video of 23mins was presented virtually at Arts in Society Conference 24th June – 26th June 2013 Eotvos Lorand University Budapest Hungary.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action/Analysis</th>
<th>Video</th>
<th>Speech Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Art as a Connection to the Divine in women's Lives: Cultural Wellbeing through creative process</td>
<td>A Virtual Presentation for Arts in society Conference 24th June- 26th June 2013 Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Title slide
<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Speech Quotes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Conference information, title of Presentation and affiliation details Art as a connection to The Divine in Women’s Lives. Context of the Doctorate. My position at the University</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Video" /></td>
<td>Hi, I'm Karin Mackay. I'm a working artist and I like to work with raising awareness of social justice issues for women and ecological issues for cultural wellbeing within community. For five years I curated the Earth Spirit Festival, where women used story and art to explore their inner consciousness, relationship to others, and their place in the cosmos. Currently I'm working towards completing my doctoral studies with the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney, in Australia. In January 2013 I was appointed full time lecturer at the University of Western Sydney.</td>
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<td>Introduction to the presentation. What the presentation is about. Art is used for deepening understanding of women’s spiritual self.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Video" /></td>
<td>This video focuses on how women from community arts group in the Blue Mountains, Australia, used art in their search for deepened understanding of their spiritual self, and explore contemporary challenges in their daily lives. Sixty-three women's artworks and stories from the Ancestral Connections exhibition held in 2009, and 10 interviews with women artists informed the research.</td>
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<td>Shows various contexts of women practicing art to demonstrate who, and what were involved as well as a sense of how groups were organised in keeping with women’s needs. For example to accommodate for children etc. Images of the women’s community arts group to show kind of women and art and the reality of women’s lives, especially when attempting to make art and focus on their own needs with the responsibility of children/babies.</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Video Image" /> and explore contemporary challenges in their daily lives</td>
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<td>Figure 6: A session from The Women’s Room Mother’s Group</td>
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<td>About the Ancestral connections exhibition. Who exhibited and what was exhibited. Explain that ten women were then interviewed about their creative process. Women’s own way…..not just spiritual feminist way, or art therapy way but their own way</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Video Image" /> Sixty three women's artworks and stories from the Ancestral Connections Exhibition in 2009 and ten interviews with women artists informed the research</td>
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<td>Figure 7: Belly cast and Water Goddess sculpture from The Women’s Room studio</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Briefly summary of the main findings of the Study that art and the spiritual can inspire each other. Connected art making was a way for women to challenge the dominant ideologies that have marginalised women experiences. The art making moment in divine connectedness provided a synergic space for women to process complex, often disparate emotions, sensations and current knowing, which enabled women to consider other possibilities or make connections that may not have previously been considered.

**Figure 8:** Kim Waldron looking at artworks at the Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009 at Braemar gallery

Give a sense of the way the artworks were displayed at the gallery. Show samples of the artwork and the way it was hung in the Braemar gallery. Notice the stories that are positioned next to the artworks.

**Figure 9:** Stories and art displayed at The Ancestral Connections exhibition 2009
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Video</th>
<th>Speech Quotes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Introduce how research demonstrated that art making process is transformative in women’s lives as it can transform challenging experiences into artworks. Show an artwork that has a spiritual theme to connect with the idea of transformation and inner processes of empowerment. Media transition effects has the artwork shatter to reiterate the breaking apart that occurs in the transformation and creative process, where old concepts and thoughts of self-give away to new ideas.</td>
<td><img src="" alt="Video" /></td>
<td>My research clearly demonstrates how and why some women engage in art-making as a powerful way to transform aspects of their lives.</td>
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Figure 10: To The Moon oil on Canvas Karin Mackay 2006
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<th>Action/ Analysis</th>
<th>Selected Video Slide</th>
<th>Speech Quotes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Art is not just a product for consumption, politics but about women’s emotional and spiritual wellbeing</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Selected Video Slide" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Show the famous Venus statues that Marija Gimbutas made famous in her book The Gods and Goddess of old Europe and which spiritual feminists called upon as evidence that a matriarchal society did exist. Relate to the original thesis of my overarching doctoral project “ancient women didn’t go to art school” The premise of my doctoral study was that women did not need art school as they would create within and inspired by their environment. However historically women have been denied access to the institutional forms of artistic acknowledgement. Link to feminist spirituality</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Selected Video Slide" /></td>
<td>“Art and the spiritual have an ancient connection; however, how art instigates a spiritual experience and influences women's wellbeing has not been well articulated.”</td>
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<td>Kandinsky and Jung. Perspectives on art and the spiritual from art history and psychology perspectives. Show audience a Kandinskian art piece and use effects to demonstrate his focus on the unseen and emergence of the spiritual.</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Colour Studies by Wassily Kandinsky 1913" /></td>
<td>Art and the spiritual have an ancient connection; but how art instigates a spiritual experience and influences women’s wellbeing has not been well articulated. Kandinsky explored the connection between art and the spiritual in the early 1900’s. He believed that artmaking was a direct link to the inner spiritual self.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This research bridged an arts therapy, fine art and community arts perspective and was often difficult to place as women and art and spirituality has not been written about extensively. Consequently I have needed to refer back to make perspectives on art and spirituality.</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Carl Jung psychotherapist 1875-1961" /></td>
<td>Similarly Carl Jung, a prominent psychotherapist, linked inner consciousness with the spiritual self and credited artmaking to be a way to access inner knowing</td>
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Figure 13: Colour Studies by Wassily Kandinsky 1913

Figure 14: Carl Jung psychotherapist 1875-1961
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<tr>
<td>Use a Jungian art piece from the private collection of Jung’s artworks from the Red Book. I have chosen this artwork as it shows the Judeo Christian male centric perspective that Jung held and which also influenced physiotherapeutic settings</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Video" /></td>
<td>However this perspective has been critised by spiritual feminists as western centric based on Christian male values which set up male and female opposite binaries (Rowland 2008).</td>
</tr>
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Figure 15: Philemon by Carl Jung in The Red Book (1913-1940)

Show images of women who were sent to asylums for minor reasons. They had no say in their mental health and wellbeing and could be sent here at the say of a male guardian.

This research does not view the women in the study as clients or want to use a therapeutic approach as these perspectives have been historically sights of patriarchy and potentially oppressive for women.

The research approach I used was not about therapy, clients or interpreting images. This is because the therapeutic setting has historically been a site of patriarchy.................where the thing to be healed was viewed as being within the individual woman.....................rather than recognising life challenges as resulting from multiple societal causes, like race, class and oppressive ideologies towards women.

Figure 16: Pinel at the Salpêtrière. Pinel orders removal of chains from patients at Paris Asylum for insane women (1878).
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<tr>
<td>Bit of history Oppression of women in therapy, art, feminism focus on one way not able to include diversity</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Some feminists from the 80's and 90's attempted to rewrite concepts of western spirituality to create a female centric spirituality. The Goddess or Sacred feminine was linked to a Great Cosmic feminine force......to the earth......to the cosmos and the sexual creative force within all women......... Many liberal feminists criticised the universalising of women's experience. Spiritual Feminists were criticised for harking back to a mythical Goddess religion in Europe.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Show how feminism and more specifically spiritual feminism challenged patriarchy and women’s agency. Spiritual feminists attempted to critique male centric religions (Jantzen, Raphael) and develop a unique female spirituality. Show images of several influential feminist spirituality books that inspired the Goddess movement in western society, mostly in the USA.</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<td>Figure 17: Oriental serving girl artwork</td>
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<td>Figure 18: Diamond and Orienstein’s (eds) book Reweaving the World</td>
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<td>Feminist Spirituality was centred in mostly well-educated Anglo middle class America and was criticised as euro centric and ignoring women from diverse socioeconomic, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Show images of the goddess icons and well known artworks. show the exclusion of diverse women and the reality of their lives.</td>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Video" /></td>
<td>Many felt that this excluded and disempowered women from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds because it did not acknowledge their lived experiences. Still Women's everyday wisdom, arts and spiritual practice is often dismissed as inconsequential or trivial. To legitimise women's voices, I take a critical feminist perspective by questioning how art making can be used by women from diverse cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds The women involved in the study were not clients but an eclectic and diverse mix of artists, spiritual seekers, mothers and women interested in exploring their inner spiritual life to explore their own spiritual concepts.</td>
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Figure 19: Aboriginal women on mission national library of Australia

Figure 20: Kim and Olivia at The Women’s Room Mothers Group painting

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| Women used art to explore their identity, sense of belonging, self-knowing, and connection to community and concept of "the divine" which was healing and good for their wellbeing but not therapy. The research clearly established how the art making process can instigate a spiritual experience and a spiritual experience can inspire artmaking. | }
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<td>Show images of the mix of women who attended the groups and course at The Women’s Room. Reiterate argument that women’s everyday wisdom, arts, spiritual practice is thought of as inconsequential. What the women were like in the study, not clients but women struggling with everyday challenges in a patriarchal society.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Video" /></td>
<td>Art making was a way of working through important issues in life, not in a linear step by step way, but through immersion in practice, allowing the unknown, unfelt, unseen and unimagined to enter consciousness and open up possibilities that may not have previously been considered.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role of art making in identity and belonging. Art making when connected in a spiritual flow can open up possibilities that have not previously been considered, not in a linear way but in immersion in practice. Text and artwork. I chose this artwork to show the hidden possibilities. There are three women in the artwork but only two are obvious, the third represents the hidden possibilities that can be discovered in the course of art in the making moment.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Figure 21" /></td>
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<td><img src="image" alt="Figure 22" /></td>
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<td>Figure 21: Pottery workshop at The Women’s Room</td>
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<td>Figure 22: Beauty, Hope and Wisdom acrylic on canvas Karin Mackay 2009</td>
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<td>Intro walking on the beach. Art as a reminder of who we are on the beach. Beach sounds sights horizon</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Figure 23: Looking over Back Beach Woolgoolga, NSW, Australia" /></td>
<td>As an example of how art is related to the spiritual experience, I recall a walk on my favourite beach which highlights how the emotional, experiential moment was pivotal in my quest to understanding how and why art was made by the women, from the women's room, for a sense of wellbeing.</td>
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<td><img src="image2" alt="Figure 24: Art as a reminder of connections with divine written in sand" /></td>
<td>As I walked the long stretch of beach I was suddenly struck by a powerful insight that seemed to come out of nowhere. I knew I had to remember it. I had no paper or pen, but I did have my camera, so I wrote it in the sand with a piece of driftwood and took a photo. It said art as a reminder of connections with the divine. Another thought instantly rushed in, so I hurriedly wrote this down in case it evaporated and was lost forever. It said art as a reminder of who we are.</td>
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<td><img src="image" alt="Figure 25: My footsteps in the sand on Back Beach Woolgoolga, NSW Australia" /></td>
<td>In this moment I felt as if my life force was shimmering, like hot air rising on the horizon, that my inside energy was reverberating so it expanded to further than my usual bodily limits. It felt good, whole. Everything made perfect sense, and I felt connected with something else beyond, within and around me. It was as if time was frozen, but I was aware of this feeling of elation.</td>
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<td><img src="image" alt="Figure 26: In the zone reenacting the art making process video by Karin Mackay 2009" /></td>
<td>As I continued on my walk, I wondered if the women I was researching had moments like this when making art. Once I returned home I felt compelled to create a painting in an effort to capture this wonderful, powerful experience. In making the artwork, especially while spreading large sections of the paint with my hands, I also experienced a sense of being within, and becoming one with the paint, the rough textured linen canvass, the vibrant colours, in a connection with something that I would later call the divine energy.</td>
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<td>Figure 27: Walk Gently On Me depicting Woolgoolga Back Beach acrylic on canvas</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Video" /></td>
<td>The emerging imagery helped me to remember the feeling I had whilst walking on the beach, even though it wasn't the same feeling. When I experienced this painting later, I realised that the giving and receiving of the starfish between a human and an anthropomorphised headland goddess had unconsciously captured the idea of a reciprocal relationship between a physical reality and a spiritual energy. The making of this artwork made my spiritual experience visible, and was a way for me to capture a complex array of thoughts, insights and emotions that streamed into my consciousness in a moment of connection to an invisible energy force that was within and around me.</td>
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<td>Figure 28: Similar artwork theme Mermaid on the beach oil by Karin Mackay</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Video" /></td>
<td>By memorialising this momentary experience through the painting, my initial and subsequent experiences could be remembered, relived and reworked at another time, with the possibility of instigating another artwork or another moment of connection, or further dialogue with the divine energy in an iterative way.</td>
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<td>so what is..........Art in the Making Moment? Women said that a kind of meditative state was important for their creative process.................like attentive focus in the moment, awareness of the sensory self, relationship to others, cultural identity, place in cosmos and in being or doing.</td>
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The art making moment is a nexus point converging. . . . . flash up different aspects of womens lives and then have a light in one point merging and then karen’s dot painting other painting to show that this is who they are

Figure 29: The divine and art

Figure 30: Art Making Moment slide
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<th>Action/ Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>Art making was a nexus point of all that women were in that moment in time…..the connection to the divine allowed them to express this</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Figure 31: One of The Women’s Room art making groups" /></td>
<td>Art in the making moment can be a powerful process of transformation, where strong emotions are experienced, released, and pain transmuted into a sense of hopefulness. Art in the making moment may elicit connections to energies so powerfully evocative and memorable that they act as agents of change, which may set into motion new physical and emotional journeys of discovery. These moments of immediate connection give a certain clarity that does not require interpretation from an expert, but instead are experiences of inner knowing, engendering trust in women's own ability to work through disappointments, challenges or joys experienced in life.</td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Figure 32: Meditative state of art making" /></td>
<td>Women said that a kind of meditative state was important for their creative process.............like attentive focus in the moment, awareness of the sensory self, relationship to others, cultural identity, place in cosmos and in being or doing</td>
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<td>Karen, a Darug Aboriginal Australian, works best when she is surrounded by her family at the kitchen table, using her repetitive ritual process of “doing the dot” where she communicates with her ancestors and becomes closer to God, to everything. Her universe is contained in the making of each dot.</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Image" /> [Figure 33] Karen Maber with one of her art works</td>
<td>Karen works best when she's surrounded by her family at the kitchen table, using her repetitive ritual process of doing the dot, where she communicates with her ancestors and becomes closer to God to everything. Her universe is contained in the making of each dot. “When I paint, it's like a meditation for me. There is something pure about that - not only the dot itself, how it looks, but the process of doing the dot. There is something that calms me. I am closer to that feeling, like I am closer to God. I am just closer to everything. I am aware of every single dot. I am painting especially for someone. I am meditating on people, and love, and emotion.” The painting of the dot is a synergistic coming together of all that she is in her relationships within community, her Aboriginality, her spirituality, and her connection with the energy of everything in the cosmos.</td>
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<td>Mary explained to me in her interview that the tea after tea reminded her of the comforting sounds of clinking cups and boiling kettles that were made when her extended family came together and was important in her creative process. Mary's ritual actions allowed a dissipation of boundaries between herself and her artwork, which gave her access to a rich, unconscious nexus of her life experiences, and that inspired her creation.</td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Image" /> [Figure 34] Tea cups and kettles can begin a ritual state</td>
<td>Similarly, Mary says that when I do my art I'm in this, what I call a different dimension, where I am just absorbed in the work. I have my music on, I have my tea after tea, because the music is what inspires me, and just the creation, the creation from nothing to something. It's almost like strange, but like the piece comes alive. It sort of communicates. Many artists have already discussed a ritual process in art-making to engage with the spiritual, such as Ornstein, Henley, [De'zeygar and Salius], however the art-making of the women in this study move beyond carrying out ritual actions to an important communicative potential, with an animated energy within the artwork. When the women use repetitive actions such as continuous brush strokes, their hands, dot marking, boiling a kettle, making a cup of tea, or listening to music, they experienced a meditative state which elicited a flow of oneness with their artwork.</td>
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<td>Art making as nexus in the moment, dot making being in the moment, ritual family. Festival, artworks. Process of women doing ritual candles tea...this from a nexus...why they needed to do this?</td>
<td><img src="image.png" alt="Figure 35: Cosmos swirl connecting life" /></td>
<td>The really important thing about what the divine was for these women, and where it did seem to cross over as being similar for each of them, was that it was not a being. It wasn't one thing. It was always explained in terms of energy. Lots of different names were given to that energy, like ancestors, like the earth, but mostly women called it energy and divine energy. This is a really important distinction when we're talking in terms of feminist theology, because in feminist theology the divine has always been constructed as a strictly female being and force.</td>
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<td>Energy as Divine the flow of life not becoming divine being. Eclectic postmodern spiritual search Divine as energy flow not a divine feminine Women being interviewed not about the goddess but more than this...about an energy, a flow that was not one kind of divine</td>
<td><img src="image.png" alt="Figure 36: Amy Bell’s Belly cast with Labyrinth from Ancestral Connections exhibition 2009" /></td>
<td>These women weren't interested in being a strictly female, divine force. They weren't interested in describing this. They were interested in feeling this and experiencing this. The women were not fixated on quantifying the divine as a being, but were instead interested in describing the feeling and the force that they experienced as divine. Rather than being a universal experience, women had different experience of tapping into this force, different intensity levels, and different cultural meanings attached to what they thought was divine. Through the process of making art women were able to reflect upon aspects of their lives and question and incorporate their own cultural constructs of divine.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The divine described by the women in this study was not based on any one particular cultural religious being or deity but reflected a postmodern search for spirituality in a globalized world. Reiterate how it the art making enabled women to challenge how they birthed, how they believed, what real art work was, lift up their voices and by sharing this empowered each other in their storied lives...gave them a voice and a feeling of wholeness!Images of birth, motherhood, images of artworks......flashing up......creating a community of support</td>
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<td>By grounding the divine energy flowing through all of us, the art making experience was a reminder of our own creative potential and our place in the cosmos. Art is one way of receiving the joy, peace and wholeness experienced in the divine moment of connection and when this is then given into the artwork an emotional energy may be captured and received by others.</td>
<td>Figure 37: Walking in the bush Shaw’s Ridge Winmalee photo by Jacob Mackay 2008</td>
<td>The direct experience of the divine seemed to occur at an unexpected moment when women were walking in nature, on the street, in their kitchen, or looking up at the stars, and it was a peaceful, calm, beautiful experience, where the self was felt to be expansive.</td>
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<td>Art as a connection to the divine was not necessarily a way to become divine but experience the synergic nexus running through life at a moment in time. It was a creative process exploring one’s being and location in time, place, and surrounding cosmos. Sagan (1980: 1) poetically suggests “we long to return, and we can, because the cosmos is also within us. We're made of star stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.”</td>
<td>Figure 38: You Are My Sunshine acrylic on canvas Karin Mackay</td>
<td>Through the process of making art women were able to reflect upon aspects of their lives and question and incorporate their own cultural constructs of divine. The direct experience of the divine seemed to occur at an unexpected moment when women were walking in nature, on the street, in their kitchen, or looking up at the stars, and it was a peaceful, calm, beautiful experience, where the self was felt to be expansive.</td>
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<td>The Art making nexus may have begun with a personal exploration but this was nested within larger questions of belonging and connecting to local community and place, cultural identity and cosmos (Mackay 2011: 94).</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Figure 39: Tree on Shaw’s Ridge photo Karin Mackay 2008" /></td>
<td>Three women describe how an experience of the divine feels for them. Amy says where your presence flows outside of your physical body but is still attached, you feel bigger than yourself. Mary says I get this incredible - I don't know what to put it. I’m standing. It is usually at the kitchen, at the kitchen bench, and it is like a stretching feeling of this beautiful, beautiful thing that happens to me. I feel tall. It is in me and it stretches me, and I sort of feel like I am looking down, that I am this elongated spirit, or - and yet of course I haven't grown. I just feel like something's stretching me.</td>
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<td><img src="image2" alt="Figure 40: Sunrise over Woolgoolga Headland 2006 photo by Karin Mackay" /></td>
<td>And [Dee-arn]; when the feeling came upon me I felt as if my perception had changed. I saw and felt reality as it really is rather than used to seeing it. That was connection with the divine, emotional and physical. The emotions of that experience were exquisite. I felt joy, peace and serenity. I knew there were no opposites. All was one. All was good</td>
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<td>Art in the making moment is a process of receiving divine energy flow, giving of the self in the making of an artwork, and then offering the work up to be received by others. The life force encapsulated in the divine energy and transformed into art is simultaneously a woman's but not hers, embodied but not static, as if it is infinitely present and imminent. Not all women wanted to talk about art being captured and the energy of art being captured. [Veeba] wanted to talk about art being a dialogue, and this is part of what she says: when I paint it’s like my inner most soul is connected to the divine, but it is like a relationship between two people. It is an interaction, and it is a combination of both the individual and the divine.</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Video" /></td>
<td>Each individual will have a unique relationship with the divine and will be expressed in a different way. For me, the painting grounds that oneness, and it makes it practical and tangible instead of being esoteric. You can see and feel rather than it not be expressible. The grounding is different, and you are not capturing it. It is your relationship with it, your beliefs about it and your questions about it.</td>
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<td>All of the women that I interviewed talked about the divine moment of being in the flow of life as a positive experience, and they use their art making as a way to remember the connections to the divine flow of life within ourselves, within others and within the cosmos, and this made them feel whole, healed, loved and less isolated. Amy talked about how she felt connections being activated in her brain when she was creatively engaged, and she said when I'm not doing it I feel like something is missing, doors are closed, and that she felt it was important to keep the life force going.</td>
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<td>Karen talks about it [creative process] as being medicine, and she talks about how that she feels less isolated when she's painting. She says I never - when I paint I never feel lonely, I feel nice and relaxed. I feel like I have people. It is my energy that I put into it and I want to pass onto humanity. It is my way of loving, really. Karen explains that when she's giving someone a painting she's not giving them just paint on a canvas, but she's giving them energy that she's put into that canvas, into the paint that she's experienced during the making of that painting.</td>
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Figure 43: Tree Lovers acrylic on canvas Karin Mackay 2009

Figure 44: part of Blossom painting acrylic on canvas Karin Mackay 2009
Connection to energy expresses cultural wellbeing and options for challenging dominant story. Dialogue and capture of energy a way to challenge how things are.

**Figure 45:** The Last Letter photo by Sheryl Hardy exhibited at the Ancestral Connections Exhibition 2009

Similar to Raphael, who used art making and weaving to re-cast a unique female sacrality [sic], art making for these women was really more about grounding themselves in their own lives. It assisted women from diverse backgrounds to untangle and reconstruct their own multifaceted cultural identities and sense of belonging. The making of stories, art and experiencing spiritual practice enabled women to connect to their inner life, and question the meaning of important aspects of their life, such as birth, motherhood, bloodline connections, adoption, relationships, their ethnicity, their spiritual beliefs, and their constructions of nature.

**Figure 46:** Under the Persimmon Tree watercolour Karin Mackay 2009

The art making nexus may have begun with a personal exploration, but this was nested within larger questions of belonging and connecting to a local community and place, cultural identity and cosmos. Cheryl sums this up beautifully by talking about her connections and connectedness. She says we are all connected to the earth. I think we are all connected to each other. I think we are all connected to everything, but the groundness [sic] is a solidness to remind us that there is solidness within myself as well. So I don't know that I would say that the earth is divine. I think we all are. I think we all have the nature of the divine. I don't think there is something out there somewhere that includes Earth. I think we all have it, so I think that it is just as much to connect with everything, but to also connect with what is within, to the earth within me. I think the earth remembers. The earth is the thing that is constantly reminding us that we are all connected, but I don't think we remember all the time.
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<td>Finally, art as a connection to the divine was a way for women to challenge the dominant ideologies that have marginalised women's experiences. The art making moment in divine connectedness provided a synergistic space for women to process complex, often disparate emotions, sensations and current knowing, which enabled women to consider other possibilities, or make connections that may not have previously been considered.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 47: Mothers Group and Katoomba Homebirth artworks 2009 ancestral Connections Exhibition

Connection to the divine energy of life moved women deeply and was overwhelmingly reported as a positive experience of oneness, peace and calmness, where the creative process contributed to sense of cultural belonging and wellbeing. Belonging, diversity, cultural identity, connection with emotions, what was important, gave them a place and a space to be visible, to feel whole rather than unimportant in a patriarchal world. Faces of the women flash up with their artworks..........being in the moment........spiritual......individual beliefs negotiating |

Figure 48: Detail of Katoomba Homebirth group belly casts
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action/ Analysis</th>
<th>Video</th>
<th>Speech Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There was a strong sense that the process of making art when in the flow of life was a way for women to remember their own power within, their own divinity. Making art in connection with the divine was empowering for women as it made their inner most thoughts and feelings visible, where in the past they may have had to have been silent. Art making gave women a space to process emotions, explore who they were, share their story, be listened to, connect with other women in a community, and not feel so alone.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to the divine energy of life moved women deeply, and was overwhelmingly reported as a positive experience of oneness, peace and calmness, where the creative process contributed to a sense of cultural belonging and wellbeing. Art making can be a way for women to express their belonging to place, to feel a connection to the inner being and the energy that animates all that is in the cosmos, not by becoming a divine being, but by experiencing the divine energy of life in the art making process.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What the women of this study have shown me, along with my own experiential learning, is that art can be a mediator between the self and the divine energy that has the power to capture a glimpse of a greater, all-encompassing energy, or life flow.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 49: Under the Apple Tree acrylic on canvas Karin Mackay 2009

Figure 50: Sunrise capturing the centre over Woolgoolga Back Beach 2006
Finally, the making of art was able to ground the divine energy that women experienced that was flowing through all of us, that they experienced as flowing through life itself. The art making experience was a reminder of their own creative potential and their own place in the cosmos. Art was one way of receiving joy, peace and wholeness experienced in the divine moment of connection, when this is then the giving into the artwork, an emotional energy that may then be captured, but also received when someone viewed the artwork later.

Art as a connection to the divine was not necessarily a way to become divine, but experience the synergistic nexus running through life at a moment in time. It was a creative process exploring one's being and Analysis in time and surrounding cosmos.

Thank you for viewing. Further information and access to a full paper email
Karin Mackay at K.mackay@uws.edu.au or you can contact me on my facebook page

I would like to specifically mention the women who were interviewed as part of this study or whose artwork was included; Karen Maber, Amy Bell, Vibna Gulati, Mary Cant, Sheryl Hardy, Kate Tuckey, Dayl Workman, Diarnie Den Ouden, Glenice Ware, Rebecca V Laws, Joanna Jensen, Renata Mueller, Maree Montes, Jelna from The Living Art Project, Sara Heritage and Kiri Koubaroulis.

DIRECTED BY Karin Mackay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action/ Analysis</th>
<th>Video</th>
<th>Speech Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Figure 51: This Sacred Earth acrylic on canvas by Karin Mackay 2009 | ![Video Player] | Finally, the making of art was able to ground the divine energy that women experienced that was flowing through all of us, that they experienced as flowing through life itself. The art making experience was a reminder of their own creative potential and their own place in the cosmos. Art was one way of receiving joy, peace and wholeness experienced in the divine moment of connection, when this is then the giving into the artwork, an emotional energy that may then be captured, but also received when someone viewed the artwork later.

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DIRECTED BY Karin Mackay |
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Born, P. (2010) Creating vibrant communities: How individuals and organisations from diverse sectors of society are coming together to reduce Poverty in Canada. BPS books: Canada


The SPICES Art Framework: A Practitioner Tool to deepen Understandings of Cultural and Spiritual Wellbeing

Karin Mackay, University of Western Sydney, Australia

Abstract: “The term wellbeing is commonly used to describe a person’s mental, physical, emotional and affective states; however, conceptions of wellbeing predominantly neglect how cultural and spiritual aspects of an individual or community may be implicated in wellbeing. In this study I explore the concepts of cultural and spiritual wellbeing through an examination of how a women's community group used creative processes to make their stories and artwork for The 2009 Women's Room Ancestral Connections Exhibition. I gathered data on women’s creative process through Arts Based Research and Art/ographic methodologies, as this allowed me to combine direct experience of art making with my researcher and teacher roles to analyse the cultural and spiritual significance of women’s stories and art. The research led to my development of a new arts analysis tool called The SPICES framework as a way to explain, analyse and practice the cultural and spiritual intent of stories and artworks. The study found that women primarily used three approaches to making their art being 1) Spiritual approach, 2) Intuitive Channelled approach and 3) Expressive Symbolic approach (SPICES framework). My research found that Women were empowered by their creative agency to question dominant cultural conceptions of societal roles, express their cultural perspectives, as well as to cope with the challenges of everyday life. Making art using a SPICES approach enabled an individual creative agency which could also become a communicative action strategy for the expression of cultural and spiritual values within community. Implications for policy makers, practitioners and researchers suggest the need to develop more sophisticated understandings of the relationship between Cultural Wellbeing and art making, particularly for marginalised communities as this will shed light on how cultural beliefs and practices influence health and wellbeing and better inform understandings of how cultural and spiritual aspects of personhood can manifest within community.”

Keywords: wellbeing, women, creative and expressive therapies, art therapy, community arts,

The problem with wellbeing

The notion of wellbeing has gained increasing currency to describe human’s desire to be well and live a healthy life. The term wellbeing has been appropriated by a broad range of sectors such as national governments and global economic organizations wanting to capitalize on the benefits of a well society (Galloway, Bell Hamilton and Scullion 2006; New Economics Foundation 2009). Similarly, other sectors from the popular press (Sointu 2005) through to health organisations (Cronin de Chavez, Bakett-Milburn, Parry and Platt 2005), international health charters (World Health Organisation 1986, 2005, 2010), community arts organizations (McQueen-Thomson and Ziguras 2002; Vichealth 2003; Mills and Brown 2004; Putland 2008, Wreford 2010), educational institutions (J. White 2007, Fisher 2011) and management sectors (Danna and Griffin 1999, Guest 2002, Baptiste 2008) all grapple with measuring and defining wellbeing. There is a growing awareness that cultural, spiritual and ecological aspects need to be incorporated into meanings of wellbeing. However, cultural and spiritual contexts of wellbeing are not adequately conceptualized or explicitly demonstrated, rendering wellbeing models and theories impotent in creating effective change.
A slow shift towards including cultural, social and environmental aspects of wellbeing is evidenced by the 1986 Ottawa Charter for health promotion, as it acknowledged social wellbeing and advocated a social ecological approach to health (World Health Organisation 1986; Awofeso 2005; Bircher 2005). The Bangkok Charter for Health, which built upon the Ottawa Charter, recognized the importance of mental and spiritual wellbeing to quality of life in a globalised world (2005). Despite this, twenty-five years since the inception of the Ottawa Charter, health promotion strategies specifically addressing the role of spiritual and cultural practices are few and rarely explicate the need for diverse understandings of Cultural Wellbeing. It seems ludicrous that arts and spiritual practices are missing from the discussion on wellbeing especially since arts and spiritual practices are culturally bound and therefore crucial in developing health and wellbeing understandings from a sociological perspective.

The World Health Organisation’s Regional Office for South Eastern Asia (ROSEA 2009) has criticized the slow implementation of programs to address mental wellbeing as a public health strategy in their 2009 report. Significantly, a change from the term ‘mental wellbeing’ to ‘human wellbeing’ was recommended, signifying that a more holistic view of wellbeing was needed. ROSEA has also called for the inclusion of “community wellbeing” as “families and communities are closely connected and cannot be developed separately from each other” (ROSEA 2009). Cultural Wellbeing is not explicitly mentioned; nevertheless, the report discusses specific strategies to address mental and spiritual wellbeing such as paying more attention to the local cultural practices such as meditation, music, voice and song and art practices. Although this report is rather uncritical of how these practices may be relevant to a range of communities, it does stress that cultural and spiritual practices must be included in definitions of wellbeing.

Unfortunately, conceptual understandings and research of Cultural Wellbeing is limited. Within the community arts sector in the United Kingdom and Australia, culture and arts are often discussed under the term “community wellbeing” with an underdeveloped sense of what is meant by Cultural Wellbeing (Vichealth 2002; Mills and Brown 2004; M. White 2006, M. White 2009,58; S.White 2010). Reference to Cultural Wellbeing can be more readily found in literature concerning Indigenous views on wellbeing, evidenced by the WHO Indigenous Health Report (Jackson Pulver et al 2010). Australian frameworks for Aboriginal Cultural Wellbeing are beginning to be developed but lag behind those of New Zealand (Allen Consultation Group 2006).

Interestingly, holistic conceptions and cultural aspects of wellbeing are acknowledged by The World Health Organisation (WHO) for Indigenous communities but not discussed in relation to non-Indigenous communities (WHO Indigenous Health Report 2010). Commonly, the language used when talking about Indigenous wellbeing, includes conceptions of culture, strength, self-determination, spiritual links to land, connectedness to ancestors and between individuals, community, greater universe and creative practice. These aspects of wellbeing together are considered to be important influences on individual and community health and wellbeing decisions in the localized context. In this paper, I will argue that Cultural Wellbeing, that is, the creative-spiritual-cultural-ecological nexus often more closely associated with Indigenous wellbeing, is vital for all humans to experience a sense of wellbeing. To demonstrate how Cultural Wellbeing is relevant to both non-Indigenous and Indigenous communities, I present the SPICES framework as a useful tool in discussing the
creative cultural practices that emerge from this nexus and which I observed through my doctoral research into creative community processes.

Contrary to the Cultural Wellbeing nexus I am proposing, most scientific models of wellbeing focus on separating aspects of wellbeing into financial, subjective, emotional and occasionally spiritual aspects (Billison and Fluehr-Lobban 2005). Carlisle and Hanlon (2007) suggest there are three broad approaches to conceptualising wellbeing but that each strand is beset by conceptual problems. Firstly, hard science approaches tend to fragment wellbeing into parts that are not able to account for the whole person. Secondly, the cultural and social approaches position wellbeing as a commodity and critiques happiness as a moral obligation. Finally, approaches to wellbeing through human centred or individual quest spiritual approaches, may be judged by some as superficial and trivial. Carlisle and Hanlon (2008) argue that current paradigms oversimplify wellbeing, which is much more complex and cast doubt on current models of wellbeing to effect sustainable change.

The sustainability of the current modernist paradigm has failed to substantially reduce health or other inequalities yet to which contemporary public health efforts apparently remain tied. (Carlisle and Hanlon 2008)

Systems of wellbeing that offer a more integrated perspective on the whole person are not often discussed in the socioeconomic and demographic driven wellbeing literature (Prout 2012). In discussing Indigenous perspectives on wellbeing, Prout (2012) argues that cultural health activities such as ritual, access to country, maintaining language, kinship and family history links, family community and social support, education and sense of self, home, governance and recognition of the value of Indigenous work are important. Several New Zealand models of wellbeing offer far more integrated conceptions of Cultural Wellbeing, incorporating social, economic and environment in an attempt to account for the interconnected Maori spiritual and cultural relationship to land. Dalziel, Matunga, Hirini and Saunders (2006) argue that while the Cultural Wellbeing model has arisen for Maori needs, it is not exclusive to Indigenous communities but flexible enough to incorporate European and multi Ethnic values.

Two models for Maori wellbeing one from Pere and the other by Durie, have both been adopted by The New Zealand Government ((Dalziel, Matunga, Hirini & Saunders 2006, Maori Health) who have introduced in 2002 a local government act for Cultural Wellbeing incorporating art practice for individual and community health promotion. However, the recommendations suggested that it was local government’s responsibility to forge their own definitions of Cultural Wellbeing. While this is a refreshing approach, which allows communities to redefine what wellbeing means to them it also highlights the under theorized and conceptualized notion of cultural aspects of wellbeing.

The concept of Cultural Wellbeing which emerged through my research was more like a matrix or network of moveable elements influencing each other. I found that the lived experience of wellbeing was not a static state or a neat collection of measurable elements that could be pasted together to render wellbeing but instead was dependant on many elements converging at particular times in a person’s life to influence how
they felt. Elements such as cultural values, beliefs, relationships, income, home, identity, combined with experiences such as a sense of being, feeling, thinking, creating and producing came together or broke apart at particular times in a person’s life. When a particular combination of elements came together this might elevate a sense of wellbeing in one area but create a sense of unease in another. Wellbeing then, was observed as a process in constant flux, dependent upon confluences and patterns of these elements which individuals and communities became aware of at particular ‘making moments’ (Mackay 2014) and over time.

The women’s art and stories from this research, demonstrated how women did not reach a static state of wellbeing attainment but experienced cycles of wellness and disconnection from wellbeing. Wellbeing was dependant on many factors converging with potentially unpredictable effects. Wellbeing, for these women, was experienced as a process where various aspects of life such as childcare responsibilities, love, joy, stress, feelings of belonging and connectedness, insecurity, cultural values, sense of identity, level of frustration and agency both instilled wellbeing and detracted from it at the same time. One aspect of a women’s life might be going well and adding to a woman’s sense of wellbeing, such as feeling good about making her artwork, while another area of life might bring her down, such as difficulty finding child free time to create possibly due to her partner’s reluctance to care for children.

In my exploration of wellbeing, it was necessary to think about how women made sense of their identities, belonging, empowerment, roles as women, art making, embodied biological cycles, connection to the natural world and sense of place in the cosmos as these were important influences in their life. Cultural Wellbeing emerged through a becoming of the self within community, where the nexus of many elements in women’s life came together and which came into awareness at specific moments in time, such as when making art, walking in nature and during their cultural and spiritual practices (Mackay 2014). To more fully understand wellbeing, I needed to consider how the many factors influencing wellbeing interacted as this was reflective of the lived reality of women’s Cultural Wellbeing.

The Cultural Wellbeing referred to in this paper may be conceptualized as a set of values and beliefs, creative and healing practices that incorporate the human, nature and sacred relationship nexus for individuals or communities. The creative practices, spiritual and healing belief systems that arise from within this nexus can be summarized as creative cultural practices such as art making, storytelling, singing, dancing, ritual, relationship to place and traditions. The concept of Cultural Wellbeing is able to capture the multifaceted relationships between the creative-cultural-spiritual-ecological nexus and the creative cultural practices that individuals or communities use for wellbeing. This paper will use The Spices Framework to unpack art made in a cultural or spiritual context and in so doing, detail how creative cultural practices influenced women’s wellbeing.

Research approach and methodology

The Women’s Room
The Women’s Room Centre for Wellbeing (TWR), where the research was conducted, was a women’s art centre which facilitated creative and spiritual courses, groups and workshops. TWR was based in The Blue Mountains, West of Sydney in Australia and was established in 2004 as a grass roots community organization, primarily run by a group of volunteer committee members comprised of a group of six to ten committed women. Those who participated were not clients of The Women’s Room but active participants in the creation of the groups, workshops and festivals. One of TWR aims was to improve women’s wellbeing through using creative arts, storytelling, mediation and spiritual practices with a focus on personal development and exploration of connectedness to the earth, community and the sacred.

A theme of ‘Ancestral Connections’ was provided by TWR Committee for the 2009 festival but the response to this theme was open to any medium and was entirely guided by the art groups or individual artists involved. The exhibition opened a space for women to challenge dominant conceptions of birth, motherhood, spiritual beliefs and cultural identities firstly in the making of these, then through sharing within small groups and thirdly in the exhibition experience. Editing of stories or culling of artworks was deemed irrelevant as the inclusive grass roots philosophy of TWR aimed for women’s raw voices to be heard by the local community. Art-based research enabled the women’s art makers’ voices to respond from their standpoint and so was able to challenge the dominant discourse and was demonstrated by a locally appropriate and socially responsible exhibition design, sympathetic to co-creative and collaborative practice was used (Finley 2003).

**Approaches used to analysing the data**

The research methodology necessitated an approach that could encapsulate women’s individual creative cultural practices and elaborate on what was wellbeing for them what I observed about wellbeing did not seem to fit a scientific model of wellbeing. The design of the research needed to be sensitive to feminist constructivist arts based approach as this was consistent to the philosophy of TWR. Finley argues that effective arts based research is not just about researching arts but is an activist activity “responsive to cultural and political issues” (2003, p.293). Liamputtong and Rumbold (2008) link arts-based research with collaborative participatory action research and describe it as “collaborative, self-reflective and co-operative” (2008, p.4). Finley’s (2003) arts based research approach was helpful in legitimising the specific knowing gained through art making and activism within community.

As my research role encapsulated artist, researcher and teacher, I also used an a/r/tographic approach (Bickel 2005), to investigate how creative cultural practices influenced wellbeing of women. Bickel (2005) situates the complexity of the artist, researcher and teacher roles that I was engaged with, arguing that moving between these roles, while providing interpersonal challenges, also gives insights that may otherwise be overlooked using a singular framework. An a/r/tographic approach was consistent with the idea of multiple elements of women’s lives coming together to create a unique perspective on wellbeing, rather than to separate roles and experiences into atomic parts.
ART AS A CONNECTION TO THE DIVINE IN WOMEN’S LIVES

As I was deeply embedded in the organization an ethnographic and auto-ethnographic method was used to observe various art making approaches during the focus groups, the three week exhibition and from during the ten in-depth interviews. This approach gave a rich set of data through the development of intimate relationships, self-reflective practices and insightful observation similar to Bickel’s (2005) a/r/tographic approach where I reflected upon my own artistic practice and as well as my observations as a teacher facilitator and researcher. New understandings were constructed in a dialectic and reflective mode which created shared meaning between myself and the women researched. Colic-Peisker (2004) argues that an insider approach allows interpretation of cultural meanings and symbols more easily than an outsider.

The artworks and stories, transcripts from the interviews, observational notes contained personal narratives which when analysed uncovered emergent common themes. Reissman (2008) argues that unravelling personal narrative can reveal nuances and subtle understandings of interviewees’ experiences not revealed in more empirical methods but is limited to smaller data groups precisely because of its continual reflective process used to modify an initial hypothesis. De Carteret’s (2008) conversational story praxis was also used where interviewees were engaged in continual conversations over a period of time, fragments of journaling and fleeting thoughts created insight. Analyzing personal narrative was not the primary focus when interpreting the artworks so White and Hede's (2008) integrated narrative analysis was also used as it included a process to incorporate environmental and metaphorical influences seen in the artworks.

Analysis began with the artworks and stories that were photographed or videoed from the exhibition. McCormack and Simons (2007) explain that beginning with an image allows the interrelationships of art maker’s experiences to be revealed through unconscious insights that cannot always be articulated in words. After reading the stories and experiencing the artworks I took note of the symbols and themes that were depicted for each artwork story combination. While reflecting upon these themes, patterns emerged which indicated that art works where made using different intentions and purposes. These purposes were mirrored in the product, the purpose and the approach used to make the work. The spices framework emerged more clearly after the in-depth interviews were analyzed and a reflective process allowed links from observations and focus groups to surface.

Through the research, I developed the SPICES framework, which articulated a more nuanced concept of wellbeing by demonstrating how women used creative practices as strategies to feel heathy, whole and healed. The Women’s Room Artists expressed their cultural and spiritual practices through the artworks and stories, many of which clearly reflected a creative-cultural-spiritual-ecological nexus describing a relationship of being part of and within a larger cosmos. Some women explicitly stated in their stories and interviews how feeling connected to the life energy of this nexus was vital to their sense of wellbeing (Mackay 2011, 2014). The SPICES framework facilitated women’s creative, spiritual and cultural practices for wellbeing and unearthed a culturally responsive approach to understanding the significance of women’s story and art taking place in community arts projects.

Gathering the Data
Data was collected from three sources

1. Visual artefacts and stories
2. In-depth Interviews and
3. Focus Groups.

**Visual Artefacts and Stories**

Visual Artefacts and Stories Exhibited in the Ancestral Connection Exhibition in 2009 demonstrated arts based methodology which became an active engagement within community and a critique of western patriarchal society. I collected the visual artefacts, poems and stories including paintings, sculptures, poems, installations, photographs, jewellery, magazines, masks, belly casts, posters and video. Five groups affiliated with The Women’s Room exhibited.

The breakdown of exhibiting participants in this festival and number of artworks exhibited is shown in table 1.1 The Ancestral Connections exhibition had entries of women's stories and art from the following groups:

1. Katoomba Homebirth Group. This group wishes to regain control over where and how they birth because to them, birthing represents a spiritual act as much as a physical one.

2. The Women's Room Mother's Group. An alternative mothers group focusing on life after the birthing experience using creative expression at the centre of its activities.

3. The Wisdom Tree Group. Earth Based Spirituality was at the centre of this focus group. Typically a session would begin with a centring meditation, discussion of insights or challenges in the preceding two weeks, followed by a creative response to the topic.

4. Living Art Project. Training and three hundred dollars start-up funding was provided by The Women's Room for six women creative workshop facilitators. Many of the workshops focused upon transpersonal spiritual processes.

5. Women's Room Artists. This group shared concepts of the spiritual forces within nature, making art in their own time and space.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number of Exhibiting participants</th>
<th>Number of Artworks exhibited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katoomba Homebirth Group</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ART AS A CONNECTION TO THE DIVINE IN WOMEN'S LIVES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arty Mothers Group</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Wisdom Tree Group</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Art Project</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Women’s Room Artists</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Data Adapted from Mackay doctoral participant data 2009.

Interviews

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants from the exhibition. Interviewees were selected from a variety of art genres including photography, sculpture, belly cast, poster, ritual object, painting or mask making. These interviews took place wherever it was more comfortable for interviewees such as in a café, in their home or over the phone. Women were asked open-ended questions like ‘What for you is a spiritual experience?’ ‘How do you approach your art?’ ‘Do you ever feel a sense of connection when you make your artwork’? Interviews were taped, then transcribed and analyzed using reflective narrative analysis similar to de Carteret’s Conversational storytelling praxis (2005).

Focus Groups

Focus Groups were held with two of the groups associated with The Women’s Room.

1. The Wisdom Tree focus group allowed for women’s creative spiritual explorations and continued for eighteen months from February 2008 until August 2009 meeting every two weeks.

2. The Living Art Project was a workshop style project that helped artists learn how to facilitate their own art groups in the community. This was held over a six-week period in June to August in 2009.

Approaches to art making

Women chose to exhibit deeply personal transformational experiences such as expressions of birth, mothering, adoption, family, and connectedness to nature, ancestors and the sacred feminine. Seventy five per cent of works were not for sale even though several women were working artist. What became evident was that women purpose for making artwork was as a means to express cultural beliefs, identity and belonging to a
real or imagined community, a bond to other women and a spiritual connectedness to nature.

Three different approaches to art emerged, revealing concepts of Cultural Wellbeing. This has been called the SPICES framework after the three approaches which it represents. Two artworks were not made with a cultural-spiritual approach but were of a commercial nature showcasing a technique rather than conveying a philosophy, story or spiritual cultural belief. See table 1.2.

The SPICES Art Framework

Artworks, stories and artefacts were found to be one of three types of. These were;

1. Spiritual
2. Intuitive Channelled
3. Expressive Symbolic

When the art and stories were analyzed using the SPICES framework a pattern emerged showing that each group privileged one of the approaches over the others. The approach chosen was influenced by each group’s philosophical and spiritual ideals underpinned by their cultural beliefs.

Table 1.2: Classification of Artworks into Types by Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not classified</th>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Intuitive Channelled</th>
<th>Expressive Symbolic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Data Adapted from Mackay doctoral participant data 2009.

Spiritual Art and Artefacts – product and purpose

The distinguishing feature of spiritual art means product, tool or text is made and used in ritual or ceremony. The product often symbolically represents the spirit of a person or a psychological archetype containing the essence of certain energy in the form of an icon like a clay statue, goddess figure, poppet doll or bark mat used for protection. This kind of art has two quite contradictory pathways. The first is when a spiritual artefact is made during or after a spiritual experience such as meditation, visualization, ritual or ceremony. Alternatively this artefact can be made completely apart from any kind of spiritual experience but the express purpose is a ritual tool for connection with a God, Goddess or divine energy of some kind. This does not preclude an artist having an
intuitive or expressive experience while making this kind of art. All types of art may become spiritual artefacts when used for a spiritual purpose. For example a written letter expressing personal affirmations may be burnt in fire to symbolically release these thoughts or a women’s symbolic clay icon may be thought to have her spirit in it.

![Goddess](image1.jpg)

**Figure 1: Goddess**

Source(s): Jelna 2009

The ‘Welcome to Spring Goddess Parade’ straw Goddesses made by one of the Living Art Project Groups for the Ancestral connections exhibition are an example of spiritual art. The goddess icon represents one aspect of the archetypal Goddess energy, also encompassing the women that have gone before present living women (see fig.1). Another example is the personal signifiers made from unfired clay (see fig.2) by members of The Wisdom Tree Group. These were often used in group ritual to ensure the spiritual energy of each woman was represented in the sacred circle. The artefacts were later used in the local bush rituals to connect with the nature's energy.

Interestingly the Wisdom Tree Group members were not comfortable with exhibiting their artefacts at the Ancestral Connections Exhibition as they were considered to be containers of powerful energies inappropriate for the public domain. Concerns were raised about members of the public touching spiritual artefacts thereby altering the energy contained within. One group member stated:
It feels to me if you put energy into an inanimate object anyone can use it and then there is no control as it then has a life of its own and may be misdirected. It is not in my power to physically place energy into something unless I have charge of it. (Diarne Den Ouden 2009)

Both The Living Art Group and The Wisdom Tree Group women drew upon cultural beliefs to construct their own artefacts. These represented aspects they wished to reaffirm or perceived qualities they needed to develop for challenges in their life like strength, power or courage, fertility, growth, openness or nurturance. Women felt empowered to create their own imagery, which challenged societal norms of beauty or womanhood (see fig 1).

Figure 2: Clay icons from
Source(s): The Wisdom Tree Group 2009

The artefacts then become powerful containers and reminders of an energy that may be drawn upon in times when Cultural Wellbeing is sort. The artefacts became reminders of supportive relationships of the group, individuals own remaking of the self and a sacred universal energy, which was experienced or will be in future rituals or celebrations. Cultural Wellbeing, in this instance, is experienced through the making and sharing of a ritual product drawing upon spiritual beliefs and reworked cultural understandings for the individual or group.

Intuitive or Channelled Approaches - Going with the process

This approach to art is characterized by a lack of planning. Sketches on paper or canvas are not usually drawn but instead the work is just begun, the art maker being directly immersed in the chosen medium. Occasionally, a rough sketch may be used to capture an
initial fleeting thought but after this the work is free flowing. This may be because there is no initial inspiration or a rush of inspiration that will not wait for sketches. It can be described as allowing whatever is meant to be drawn, painted, photographed or written to come when it is ready. This kind of approach to art is suggestive of a creative agency, which lies at once within and outside of the art maker. Some artists describe this as a connection with the inner self, others as an unknown force that guides the work. There is a sense that the work produced would not have come alone if this creative force was not tapped into. Art makers describe being in a trance like state, a flow, not having to think of what comes next. Art made with an intuitive approach is where the connection to the divine energy or entity is felt most strongly. Other instances of intuitive art are transpersonal process approaches, which intuitively express the inner emotions into an external form that is not overly concerned with technique or end product. (see fig.3)

Sheryl describes her process as intuitive where she was led by what felt right. In this process she followed her instincts in curiosity and it was not until she was finished that she realised that she had been in a trancelike state.

![The Last Letter](image)

Figure 3: The Last Letter
Source(s): Sheryl Hardy 2009.

When I come from a place of connectedness I don’t really plan anything, a thought would come to me. I don’t write things down. There was no plan just an inspiration. That process for me is very much intuitive. In that process I was...
connected to the divine. I remember almost being trancelike. They weren’t technical photos but that didn’t matter. (Sheryl Hardy 2009)

Sheryl comments that it is the connectedness that helps her to feel the energy which drives her work and which she calls divine. The spiritual and connectedness to other women were also explored by The Women’s Room mothers Group, who sought a place to explore their multiple roles as women, including the challenges and joys of motherhood as well as work life, spiritual life, sensuality and creativity (see fig 4). The Mandala reference in the story draws upon the multiple roles that are contained within the whole woman, demonstrating the complexities that these women negotiate in their everyday lives. A segmented circle was used to depict women’s individual experiences within the group, where they found a way to bring their diverse perspectives into a cohesive whole.

![Mandala Image](image.png)

Figure 4: Mothers Mandala

Source(s): The Women’s Room Mothers Group 2009.

The Mandala is about uniting our experiences as individual women, mothers, and all the other diverse roles we have in our lives. It also recognizes the connection our individual experience has with our ancestors, our future, our children, and also our place in the natural world. The Women’s Room Mothers’ Group meets fortnightly to share our varied experiences, as women, workers, mothers, artists, daughters, friends, aunts, sisters and so on, through
making art. The Group focuses on valuing and respecting our parenting role in a society that often doesn’t recognize the importance and value of mothering. (The Women’s Room Mother’s Group 2009)

What became evident when analyzing the data using the SPICES framework is this artwork operates on two levels. At the group level it would be considered an expressive artwork but on the individual level it would be considered an intuitive channelled artwork. The artwork viewed as a whole image acts as a way to express the groups shared value for mothering and parenting roles they feel are not always adequately acknowledged in dominant social discourses. The Mandala acts as a symbolic device typically used in the SPICES expressive symbolic approach. It has been carefully planned and segregated into eight segments, the boundaries supporting individual exploration of interior experiences. At the individual level the artwork morphs into an intuitive channelled approach allowing a direct line from mind, body and soul to the created image. These images show a more formless immediate quality as women work directly on canvas revealing stencilled hands, placentas, written words on cut paper, torn magazine montages and ball like embryos. Depending upon the context of the artwork it could also be considered a spiritual artwork as it honours and elevates parenting to soulful societal activity.
Expressive Symbolic approaches- A kind of remembering

The Expressive approach to art is more concerned with communicating a spiritual ideal. The artists describe the expressive approach as being one way to process their emerging cultural or spiritual ideas or previous experiences of divine connectedness. Expressive art implies partial planning with rough sketches but with plenty of room for personal innovation. Many experiences of divine connection seem to be inspired by experiences of nature such as witnessing a beautiful sunset, feeling the light of moon on the face or touching the gracious energy of a gigantic tree. (See fig. 5) The expressive approach concerns recapturing the ecstatic feeling experienced during a kind of flow or peak experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1993). The expressive approach lays on a continuum with the intuitive channelled approach as it also offers an experience of connectedness through the process of the making; however the initial memory or idea that is to be expressed has passed along with the initially intensity.

The Individual Women’s Room Artists where the largest group and used a predominantly expressive approach. These artworks contained individual expressions of spiritual or philosophical ideals depicting symbolic metaphors of personal and cultural concepts. The SPICES framework would place these works on a continuum from intuitive to expressive approaches as some women used an intuitive process while others a more expressive symbolic one, sometimes shifting approaches in the one artwork. Traditional religious or ancestral symbolism was combined with new imaginings of what was sacred to them were expressed. Motifs of fish, water, flowers, fruits and trees contained within the natural world was extensively drawn upon often symbolizing an intimate link between women’s life and sexual processes with nature’s processes of growth, life and death. The other aspect of expressive symbolic approach is a purposeful act of symbolizing a spiritual or philosophical concept in order to express that concept to someone else with the specific intent of strengthening this connection. A clear example of this is Amy’s belly cast depicting a birth labyrinth demonstrating the spiritual nature of birth, advocating homebirth and connecting with other women in the present, the past and the future. (see fig 6).
The creative-spiritual-cultural-ecological nexus inherent in Cultural Wellbeing practices is clearly demonstrated by the Katoomba Homebirth group as the exhibition of the painted belly casts expressed physical, spiritual and emotional control of pregnancy and birth as a natural and normal process. These shared philosophical concepts are vital in connecting these group members together and forging a strong identity for the Homebirth community. Shared cultural and spiritual conceptions are expressed in the labyrinth motif, the tree of life and the linking of birth to the sea and the stars, symbolically conveying growth, journeying and strength. When I questioned Amy about her belly cast she said there was no connection to the divine energy at the time of making but rather this was a remembered expression of her transformative birthing experience.

Art Making as an Expression of Cultural Values

The creative and spiritual practice that emerged from The Women’s Room was not easily categorized as they were located uncomfortably between professional arts practice, arts therapy, community arts practice and spiritual religious expression. The creative cultural practices form the groups focused on the experience of immediate unconscious knowing and intuitive responses, understanding of the self, connectedness with others and relatedness to the cosmos. These aspects of connectedness seemed to be what was at the heart of Cultural Wellbeing.
The creative-spiritual-cultural and ecological relationship nexus evident in the artworks, stories and interviews demonstrated a desire to connect with a fuller and deeper spiritual expression of life that was not often encouraged in other facets of their life. This research demonstrates that the SPICES approach uncovered ways that women used to express themselves unashamedly through telling their stories, making their art and exploring their spirituality and cultural identity. This shed light on what was important to them, their cultural values and beliefs and also tensions that existed between groups.

The Spices framework highlighted the differences cultural values they held. For example the Katoomba Homebirth Group and the Women’s Room mothers groups held different philosophies on mothering and birthing, the former seeing birth as representing a spiritual philosophical way to live in tune with the cosmos and the later focusing more upon mothering than birth roles in society. Another example was the tensions evident between some individual artists and The Wisdom Tree Group as one women put it “I don’t want anything to do with that new age crap”. The Wisdom Tree group were not as interested in exhibiting their spiritual artefacts as their wellbeing was more about the experience of making rather than displaying.

Despite these differences, women still chose to engage in their creative cultural practices and it was clear that a SPICES approach to life was central to their wellbeing because if they did not participate in their cultural activities they feel angry, trapped, cranky, small and like something is missing. As Amy says

I know how I feel when I am not doing it, something is missing. I feel like doors are closed. It is almost necessary for keeping the life force going.

(Amy Bell 2009)

There is an underlying notion that by clearing the self of negativity, by working through challenges using the SPICES approach assists art makers and others around them in a positive way.

The SPICES approach was also reflective of a desire to challenge and understand individuals place in society, self being seen as nested in relation to community and cosmos. Expressions of the art makers displayed resistance to dominant conceptions of spiritual and cultural belief where individuals and groups challenged their own cultural identities and spiritual practices. This was particularly evident by The Wisdom Tree Groups resistance to display artworks in the exhibition, as their works were never intended for display as they were made for a spiritual purpose. Artworks and stories also express a resistance to the dominant norms of what it was to be a mother, a women or an artist, from a grass roots perspective. These sites of creativity, spirituality and cultural remaking were important as they gave women a voice, a way to be seen, recognized, and acknowledged or a way to challenge the dominant discourse, which was not always a possibility in their daily life. The SPICES approach to art making allowed spaces that acknowledged the spiritual and cultural beliefs to emerge from everyday life and to be embedded in small seemingly inconsequential practices but which have the power to transform our consciousness if given voice.

The creative practice inherent to concepts of Cultural Wellbeing may seem low on the priority list of health agendas with major issues of pandemics, crushing poverty and lack of basic education to be overcome. However the cultural, spiritual and creative needs of
people are already embedded in their daily lives through practices such as praying, belief systems, (Marman, Cathcart, Burkhardt, Omba and Behets. 2009) song, dance, art making, performance, film, festivals or ritual and provide benefits that are not easily measured in purely financial terms (Oliver and Murray 2007).

The SPICES approach recognized that not all art produced in community settings or during therapy is a form of process art but contains cultural and spiritual intentions form within the artist that may shed light on the specific challenges and needs of that community. Further research needs to be completed with similar cultural and spiritual approaches to wellbeing such as the SPICES framework so that a more subtle dialogue that can specifically address how Cultural Wellbeing can be understood and lived. The limitations of this analysis tool are the interpretive power lies with those who are deciding where to place artworks into which type. It is highly recommended that this tool be used in conjunction with art makers input as to where they would place their artwork to ensure their voices are not subsumed into the dominant value system.

Cultural Wellbeing has been discussed mostly in terms of indigenous health but as this research demonstrates it is relevant to diverse populations. The dominant demographic of the Blue Mountains region where the research was conducted is mostly Anglo Australian and Christian so it was significant that the women involved in the exhibition came from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds suggesting that the SPICES approach was offering an inclusive practice for diverse women. The holistic creative-spiritual-cultural-ecological nexus inherent in Cultural Wellbeing and unearthed in the SPICES approach is important for arts workers, art therapists and policy makers to consider as it can unearth and making meaning from the expression of culturally important concepts for individuals and communities. The SPICES approach uncovers deeply held unconscious beliefs giving insight into cultural and spiritual perspectives that may be difficult to articulate using more traditional methods. The SPICES approach gives art health practitioners a language to discuss the subtle but important differences in artwork produced in various cultural settings. Cultural Wellbeing needs to be included in mainstream models of health promotion as it encourages exploration and expression of philosophical spiritual and cultural ideals for diverse communities which can be aid culturally appropriate response when identifying individual or community needs.

**Conclusion**

The art making processes used by the women were reflective of women’s cultural values. The approaches women used were specific strategies for a communicative action strategy. The communicative strategy was one of dialoguing with the self to work through issues, but also to connect with divine life energy. When women shared their creations within a community the implications were an iterative experience where creative cultural practices came together from many diverse women to create a sense of community; a sense of belonging and wellbeing. In this way woman had an opportunity to have their perspectives heard and made visible but also as a way to elicit bonding capital and empowerment status within the broader community.

The SPICES Art framework suggests that relational models of wellbeing are more effective in understanding a person’s Cultural Wellbeing. The SPICES art framework is a way to acknowledge the diverse perspectives held within the artworks and stories and can give insight into what is important in women’s lives. Too often artworks are thought of as
material products to be deconstructed devoid of the spiritual values and beliefs of the maker (Lippard 1995). In this way artworks are stripped of their emotional value and become discourses, things or performances rather than spiritual and emotional communication of a person’s wellbeing. The women in this study demonstrate that artworks are also expressions of cultural values, emotions, and women’s own diverse spiritualties.

Using the SPICES art framework, practitioners are offered a window into the world of the artist, which although is not the whole person, captures a snapshot of their Cultural Wellbeing at a particular time in life. When artworks are seen as symbolic representations without considering the worldview of the maker, the work loses context and becomes disconnected from its maker and essence. Wellbeing has typically followed scientific models that compartmentalise knowledge, learning and wellbeing. The SPICES model discussed in this paper is one creative cultural practice strategy that was found to foster a relational creative-spiritual-ecological nexus which is able to incorporate the many facets of women’s lives. While Cultural Wellbeing has been discussed as relevant to some indigenous communities the relational model has not been seen as relevant to mainstream models of wellbeing. To more fully understand wellbeing, researchers need to explore how the many factors influencing wellbeing interact rather than considering elements in isolation, otherwise understandings of wellbeing will not reflect the lived reality of peoples wellbeing or give insights into cultural values. The SPICES model would be a useful tool for those working as community arts practitioners, art therapists, community development workers and those involved in critiquing artworks for deepening understandings of what is important in the lives of the community they are working with and how wellbeing may be facilitated.
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ART AS A CONNECTION TO THE DIVINE IN WOMEN’S LIVES


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karin Mackay: Karin’s expertise lies in the area of using the creative process for transformational growth in personal, community and societal contexts. She has taught in the areas of Learning and Creativity and Diversity Social Justice and Equity for the past five years. Karin has extensive experience working with community arts groups and using action research methods over many years with the view to bring to light grounded perspectives of women. She is also an artist who managed The Women’s Room art and ecology groups festivals and exhibitions between 2004-2011.

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ART AS A CONNECTION TO THE DIVINE IN WOMEN'S LIVES
Flourish
Lessons From Life’s Garden
A Workbook for Exploring Your Creative Self

A report for Doctor of Cultural Research (DCR)

Karin Mackay
Doctoral Candidate
Institute for Culture and Society
This book is dedicated to all of the women who have been part of The Women's Room and who have taught me so much about myself and life.

Karin Mackay
Doctoral Candidate
Institute for Culture and Society
University of Western Sydney
Figure 1:  Garden of Life and Hope

Garden of Life and Hope

Acrylic

When I am filled with sadness for so many reasons; like seeing a friend watch her twelve year old daughter blossom with her first blood while she herself is dying, witnessing my mother in law’s body curling up into a fetal ball, or reflecting on my own changing and aging, I need a little hope.

When I walk through this garden I can imagine I am anywhere. It creates possibilities for the future. It is a bird’s eye view that brings perspective. It helps me to rise above and not get lost in the detail because I can see the whole even when I am immersed in life.
# Table of Contents

Table of Contents 2  
List of Figures 3  
Introduction 3  
Letter to You 5  
Lesson 1 - Life is a Garden 12  
Lesson 2 - Start in your own backyard 18  
Lesson 3 - Creative Flow is a Nexus of who you are 25  
Lesson 4 - Everyone has a Secret Garden: 36  
Lesson 5 - Gathering and Collecting, Sensing and Smelling 43  
Lesson 6 - Run Wild in your Imaginational Garden 52  
Lesson 7 - Finding a Sunny Spot 61  
Lesson 8 - Be Curiouser and Curiouser Rather than Judgemental 69  
Lesson 9 - Digging, Sowing, Feeding and Flourishing 77  
Lesson 10 - Enjoy a Garden Party 89  
Lesson 11 - After the Storm: Accepting the cycles of Life 97  
Lesson 12 - Feel the Earth Beneath your Feet 104  
Epilogue 113  
Selected Bibliography 115
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Front Cover- Garden of Life and Hope.................................................................4
Figure 2: Beauty Wisdom and Hope..................................................................................4
Figure 3: Flame Tree .........................................................................................................6
Figure 4: Where’s Sally .......................................................................................................7
Figure 5: Meet Me Under the Apple Tree ..........................................................................8
Figure 6: The Dogwood Tree............................................................................................11
Figure 7: You Are My Sunshine........................................................................................15
Figure 8: Strawberry Fields..............................................................................................16
Figure 9: Beauty, Wisdom and Hope ...............................................................................17
Figure 10: Alice Down the Rabbit Hole ...........................................................................26
Figure 11: True Colours.....................................................................................................27
Figure 12: Possibilities of the Garden Party.....................................................................29
Figure 13: After The Storm.............................................................................................31
Figure 14: This Sacred Earth...........................................................................................33
Figure 15: Essence of Love...............................................................................................34
There is a spirit in the Mountains that called me home after I had moved away for four years. I was lonely in this other town. I didn’t belong. I had no idea that following my heart-calling to return, would mean the beginning of The Women’s Room, bringing such special friendships to me. The little studio at the back of my house, where The Women’s Room began was unbeknownst to me, a women’s meeting place long before I came along. I’ve always felt that an unseen hand was guiding me here. This painting is dedicated to the many women of The Blue Mountains whose spirit has called me home here, especially those I have met through The Women’s Room. I feel at home here. I know this is where I belong. Through my friendships I have received the gifts of love, acceptance and strength that were not always received from family. I have found how to be at home within myself.
Introduction

What is *Flourish* about?

*Flourish* is a book about the story of my transformation and learning through The Women’s Room Community Group. It was here that I instigated a small creative group to initially explore the transformation of birth through creative practice but this soon grew to incorporate women of all ages wishing to explore their own metaphorical birth and transformation. The group grew from a small idea to further groups, a women’s story and art festival and into my pursuance of a doctorate within the academic community. *Flourish* would not have come about in this form if I had not had the intensity of producing the doctoral reports, and the result is a more considered and critical perspective than if I had created this work without my academic training. However, the book is not geared toward the academic community but instead aims to give back to the community from which it has come. *Flourish* is intended as a guide for anyone wanting to explore their own creativity, ecology, learning and transformation as an individual or within group situations, from small community groups, through to university level courses requiring creative experiential learning.

*Flourish* takes you on a journey of self-discovery of the inner life. Unlike many other creative guides, I do not stay with the self but work to move your creative energy into the community and instil a larger awareness of our place within the cosmos. My doctoral research, and personal reflection on my creative practice over the last ten years, has taught me that creativity is driven by our connection with life force energy, a divine force concurrently within and beyond ourselves. Being aware of, and connecting to, life force energy can inspire our creativity and remind us that we are indeed a unique spark in the cosmos. Our life force is creation in process and irrevocably bound to living and non-living matter, desirous of manifestation into distinctive and ever changing forms which are possible at this moment in time (Mackay 2014). The way we experience our particular expression of being will influence the way we fashion our life, and is the most creative endeavour we can pursue. Despite the challenges of bridging disparate worlds, *Flourish* is a testament to my roots in community practice and acknowledges my lived wisdom gained in grounded life experiences. Likewise it is an invitation for you to walk an inspired, aware and connected spiritual path, whatever your cultural traditions and beliefs.

How my creative practiced emerged

The Women’s Room was where my creative journey began in earnest. I began The Women’s Room Centre for Women’s Wellbeing in 2004 in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales, Australia. The Women’s Room Centre for Women’s Wellbeing was a women’s community art and spiritual group which came from a need to share my own joy and challenges of womanhood. This was coupled with a passionate longing to express myself through creative practice, as well as to explore the deep issues of life and transformations with others. It aimed to create a space for diverse women to explore their deeper soulful selves and connect with other women. The research aspect of this group began in 2008 and was finalised in 2013. The creative groups began in 2004, with an annual festival introduced in
2006. The organisation ceased operation in 2011. The Women’s Room began as a series of creative groups and courses but grew quickly to encompass a range of community groups such as The Arty Mothers group, The Wisdom Tree Earth Based Spirituality group, and The Women’s Room art collective. It also had strong associations through its annual festival with the Katoomba home-birth birthing community, local tribal-style dance groups and local Aboriginal Dance Groups.

As instigator and President of the organisation, I saw my role as bringing together diverse women through the sharing of stories and art in groups, courses, workshops and a community arts festival, with the aim of assisting women to find connections on some level, be that with self, others, community or their own spirituality. I thought that if I could just bring women together through the creation of a conducive space for inner life exploration, it would facilitate the sense of empowerment women had lacked in society. I felt that society had ‘divided and conquered’ women, effectively separating them from knowing each other’s struggles and thought that if women could share their stories they would feel less isolated and better able to cope with the more challenging aspects of their life.

Creativity as a manifestation of relationship with people, place and cosmos

Although I initially used the creative process with women, as my understanding of creativity emerged, I realised that these processes were reflective of many other cyclical life processes, such as pregnancy, birth and new motherhood, ageing, seasons, emergence and growth of plants and their eventual decay. I noticed that the creative process also followed a cyclical process of emergence out of chaos, forms taking shape and a letting go or acceptance of what had been created. In the creative process I witnessed, there was a great deal of striving, with only fleeting moments of recognition, knowing, contentment and flourishing. Despite this, these moments connected powerfully enough to the heart self to encourage the maker to pursue a sense of connectedness over and over again because it offered a feeling of wholeness even if momentary.

It should not be surprising that the creative process of human’s art making is similar to the creative process within nature and the cosmos as Carl Sagan poetically suggests that we are the cosmos’ creation reflected back to itself made of the same elements and star stuff (Sagan 1980). When in the flow of creative process it feels as if old knowledge is contained within our cells allowing a remembrance of ancient cycles of becoming and decaying, chaos and order. Collective cultural memories are stored deep within the unconscious self, so engaging in the creative process cannot help but reflect who we are, our relationship with people, place and cosmos. The creative process cannot be pinned down precisely to prescribed steps suggested by some creativity scholars because our making of cities, art, places, and relationships is a reflection of our cultural values and traditions unique to our peculiar relationships to people, place and cosmological worldviews.

While I focus more on the flourishing aspects of the creative process in this book, it is important to acknowledge that not all creative processes and practices will be life enhancing. We need to also consider how one individual or cultures flourishing can be at the expense of another’s. What comes to mind here is humanities historical tendency to glorify the opulence of the powerful and wealthy while silencing the hidden, racist, slave labour that made exploitation possible or focusing on the historical genius of male painters.
without considering the oppressive attitudes towards women which kept women from making art in this way. In our contemporary society, I am still concerned with how some art making is more privileged than others and how some voices are heard while others are silenced or some art genres are fashionable while others are dismissed as inconsequential. I am always astounded at how art history books individually name western artists but most Indigenous or tribal art works are known only by cultural group leading me to question how it is we have come to value some artists over others. Histories of power have given privilege to some artists and artworks but not others.

I hope this book of creative exercises and reflections helps you to consider your place in the cosmos, not just for your own flourishing but the flourishing of the place where you live, your community and our collective planet. If we are to be conscious consumers and producers we need to also critically examine what is happening in our world from multidimensional perspectives. It is not enough to only consider world politics of the powerful because this obscures the stories and the everyday politics and people like you and me. We also need to consider the lived material reality of our own lives, families and communities because this gives us intimate knowledge and connectedness with others that empowers us to address big picture problems. The creative process put forward in this book is a valuable practice for anyone wanting to awaken their awareness of humanity’s connectedness to cosmos and think through issues that deeply affect them.

Creative and spiritual practices are interrelated processes implicated in our wellbeing embedded within a complex synergic nexus of events and relationships. Rather than separated from our everyday lives, community or the cosmos. Through the exploration, unearthing and sharing of our diverse cultural understandings in community we can gain deeper insight, compassion and perspective into what binds us in our collective problems and hopeful solutions to the deep issues that affect us and our planet. Through my research at The Women’s Room, I found that creative cultural practices (the stories art and ritual that we do and make and the way that we enact these) are the manifestations of relationships with place, people, creativity and spirituality, which bring together value systems, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and gender. Creative process practised from a spiritual connectedness perspective is unique, grounded activisms in which we can all partake and which, if coupled with physical action, can powerfully influence the shape of our lives and the future of the communities in which we live.

The success of The Women’s Room lasted for five years engaging many diverse groups. It grew in its own shape and form, more like a plant’s organic process than purposeful brick by brick construction. The shape of The Women’s Room was made by the people who were part of this, the community groups, the individuals, the place where the festival happened, the things that were happening in the lives of the people at the time, the weather on the day of the event or group. It was a synergy of elements that coalesced to form the organisation and associated activities and how these manifested. The synergy of elements was ever-changing and so I/we needed continually adapt using creative strategies. Success was not counted as being something that continued on and on unchanging but that happened unevenly and sometimes unexpectedly. We were a highly creative and adaptive community, who questioned power structures, sought empowerment and grew with their own family’s needs and then adapting to what their needs had become. This may or may not have included the Women’s Room or the need to exhibit or perform in the festival. Some of the connections that I made through The Women’s Room Group have remained
strong, others were strong at the time and have moved on. Some I know would think fondly on our times together, even though we are no longer in contact. The point is, things change. You grow, others grow and move on to new adventures, and communities change. This raises other interesting questions about sustainability and if continuity signifies healthy communities or communities that do not wish to move with the inevitable cycles of life.

Sustainability viewed as a constant is not a precursor for success. My view on sustainability is that it is about cycles of birth, growth, decay and fallowness, followed by birth, growth, death and so on. This is not an endless cycle of repetition but cycles of growth, change and transformation within different relationships, art forms, contexts, places. It is almost like we need to learn anew again and again from different perspectives. These transformations are not necessarily major life events but small moments of change that are occurring all the time, even if we are not aware of them. We feel the big transformations when we have pressures of other life events happening around us, like the birth of a new baby, the death of a loved one, depression, first sexual experiences, falling in love, breaking up and accepting ageing. Transformations are happening all the time. Awareness of transformation is the result of a moment in time when the changes manifest into an event we can attach meaning.

Figure 3: Flame Tree

We need hope for the future……without hope we are lost to the deepest abyss. Not naïve hope but fiery hope that seeks to change from the almost impossible to the possible
**Letter to you**

So here we are, at the point of being curious, wondering how to live our life well and wishing to know how to craft a garden that will flourish. How can we live in this world in a way that honours our dark times yet also celebrates the luscious joy that visits us from time to time? How do we live a creative life, a passionate life, drawing on inspiration from the community garden to create our own world and begin to know our own cosmos?

I want to be honest with you. I do not have all the definitive answers for you. You have to work life things out for yourself with those you love and who you share your time with, day to day. But I can offer some suggestions. I can let you know what I have learnt about fashioning creativity, making your own life garden, being in a community and connecting to a sense of the divine cosmos.

In this book I share 12 lessons learnt through my own journeying and making of The Women’s Room Centre for Women’s Wellbeing; a grass roots community group that grew from my own needs and developed around the needs of the women who were attending between 2004 and 2010. It was an organic, messy process that grew into several groups and spread its seeds to influence the birth of new gardens, new groups. It was not an easy process. There were tensions and twists and turns but incredibly we created some spectacular and surprising moments in our workshops and groups. From these groups a community – ‘Earthspirit’ arts and ecology festival – blossomed where a diverse range of arts practices and families were welcomed for five years until our energy waned.

I have learnt about relationships, boundaries and limits. I have learnt about using creative practice to explore deep self and how this powerful process has the capacity to transform lives. I have learnt that there is no such thing as complete balance or even sustainability but that we are either working towards or are moving away from homeostasis. We are always in the living process of striving for balance but life is not still for long. I have learnt to let some things go and give other things the space to blossom. I have learnt about centring myself and decentring myself to disrupt and clarify my beliefs. I have learnt to trust and believe in myself and listen to my intuition even if sometimes it is not ‘right’. I have learnt that it is not always about controlling what happens in life, family or creative groups as these have a life of their own – everyone has their own agendas and their own secret gardens waiting to be fulfilled and discovered. I have learnt that the cosmos is cultural and everyone constructs and sees their own world through their own looking glasses. I have learnt how to honour loss, pain and grief, to sit still in these times. I have learnt that just as I thought I have it all figured out, I don’t, and it all comes back around again and I need to relearn the lessons in a new context, a new garden, or at least a different part of the garden.

I have learnt the importance of celebrating little things and letting the light come in. I have learnt that it is okay to shine, that there is no need to hide your talents, you just need to be discerning about who you choose to share your heartfelt self with. I have learnt that it is prudent to be thankful for those who have come before, the elders, the ancestors, as they have made possible life as it is here today. I have learnt that most of all we hide our own talents and shortcomings from ourselves; we deny and demean these. Some of the most
potent work we can do in life is to unearth these to ourselves so that they can be lived, be created and shared in our communities for the benefit of our communal knowing. I have learnt not to look down digging too often, that sometimes you just have to live, to feel and dream, not to look constantly at the road in front but to enjoy the glorious garden that you have made, whatever it consists of, be it rocky delights, mountain peaked heights, fertile lush valleys or soft bountiful blossoms.

So here we are again. And now I invite you in. I am offering to you a guideline, not a specific prescription. I want you to wander off the path a little, to get a bit lost and then to find your own way, to question and to be still, to find your central concern. After all, this is your life. I have mine and you, yours. It would give me real pleasure to wander in your garden if our paths are destined to meet one day. I want to know about your lessons as well, to know what your creativity and learning has taught you. I will offer what I know and lend a hand but ultimately it is your own bedrock that will offer you your best answers. For all of us to flourish we need to be inspired by each other’s stories, each other’s gardens. This is not a call to pleasure land. This a call to reveal the shit and the grit of life, to move each other to tears, if need be, to look into the heart of the matter, in the quest for wholeness.

Your story is as valuable as the next person’s because it is through sharing the messiness and glory of life’s garden that we learn to love ourselves and appreciate each other. This is how we begin to understand the many diverse gardens in the world that are waiting to be discovered – if we are prepared to be open to seeing, listening and feeling. The world needs your creativity, your unique perspective, to bring memory, hope and inspiration to those that will come after you. Creating your life garden guarantees nothing but it is a chance to bring a brilliance to our chaotic cosmos. Will you walk with me? Will you accept the offer? This, my friend, is up to you.
Lesson 1

Life is a Garden

Our life as a garden and the creative process is an ecology of emergence, where our life experiences, ideas, feelings, locations, relationships with inner self, others and life energy flow come together in a synergic nexus of expression. It is through stepping into the invitation of making that we offer ourselves the opportunity to find new perspectives in our lives and which can be healing. I have chosen the garden as metaphor for the creative process of life because of its rich imagery as well as its groundedness symbolizing the matrix from where all creation arises (de Zegher 2002).

The garden and the creative process are similar in that they are expressions of relationships. Both are dependent on the soil of existence fueled by spiritual creative life flow energy. Both thrive and flourish when fed and give great pleasure when in bloom. Both provide a space in which to explore the deeper questions of life and contemplate our past, present and future. Both are manifestations of scattered seed thoughts, which offer possibilities of emergence into physical form. Making a garden or an artwork, writing a song, performing a dance or sculpting an earthen pot may connect us to something beyond our self. Women from The Women's Room found that connection bought self realization, for others it was a community of other women, ancestral belonging or sensing Divine Life Energy (Mackay 2014).

Reaching deeply into the recesses of our sub conscious to create something out of seemingly nothing seems magical or even mystical because it brings to the surface the unacknowledged, the unseen or unspeakable. Some would argue that muddling in the creative imaginal process is not enough to make change happen (Bruce 2006, Eller 2000, Featherstone 2007). However, my doctoral research challenges this assumption, instead demonstrating how the creative expression of self can move from the individualistic inner life exploration to a critical creative activism in community. Like a garden our inner wisdom can begin with a seed but if nurtured with supportive others may grow into more than itself, also creating shelter for others to become strong.

Gardens and creativity are dependent on conditions surrounding them, on the shelter provided by other plants or people, where a conducive space can be created. Gardens can hide treasures yet undiscovered as well as difficult neglected spaces. How do we make a garden or a creative work that expresses our hopes and longing? There are ways of being that foster the possibility of a flourishing garden, like curiousness and risk taking, just as there are ways of being that are destructive to our creative process like self criticism and fear. Creating can elicit a feeling of wholeness, peace and positive emotional wellbeing and far from being flighty or irrelevant may be especially important in sustaining us in difficult times. Alice Walker a black womanist writer who wrote "In Search of My Mothers Garden" shares the story of how her mother created a beautiful garden as a way to find beauty in a difficult and oppressive life.

The Garden as metaphor recognizes that wellbeing is holistic and dependent on a range of
factors, not the least an often imperceptible feeling of being one with, at peace with or in union with. The women involved in my doctoral project have described how when they are feeling the flow of their creative process it can sometimes be felt as an ecstatic spiritual and deeply uplifting experience. Their making is not about a saleable product but an expression of their deeply held emotions and soulful connected self.

Like the garden the women often explained to me that being part of the creative process made them feel part of something bigger than themselves and connected to more than their own life concerns. Life as a Garden represents the physical and spiritual community that we inhabit and an interrelated ecology of possibilities that we create through our actions, not knowable in advance but experienced and understood in the process of becoming.
Sally was one of my best friends when I was a young girl. She died at a very young age but I feel that her spirit has followed me for much of my life. When I turned 39 I had an incredible urge to paint. I did not know what I wanted to paint except that I knew that it had to be on a very large canvas. I had no plan as I began to paint but followed my instincts. I needed to paint red and white. Flowers emerged and then a face. I became sad but did not know why. Thoughts of Sally came to me and I wondered why I was still alive and she was not. From then on the work emerged more easily. I felt as if there was a greater purpose to the painting but I did not know what.

This was an intuitive painting that I did the year I turned 40. I had no idea what I was painting but I knew that I had to paint with red and lots of it. It turned out that it was about my little friend Sally that I adored when I was a really small girl. Sally and her younger brother and mother were brutally murdered in the 70’s. I wanted Sally to have a beautiful garden to roam in where ever she was now. Her spirit had followed me for many years. This painting is now with her older brother and I was so happy that they could be reunited in
spirit.

I eventually gave this large painting to her brother. When I gave it to him he revealed to me how the large butterfly was very significant for him. I was stunned that I had created a painting that had tapped into deep symbolic meaning without consciously being aware of what I was doing. What do you think the symbols mean?
ACTIVITY

What You Will Need
A3 paper, coloured pastels, pencils or paint, natural materials or recycled waste such as plastic bottles, cardboard rolls, material, glue, tape

Stimulus
If you were to picture your life as a garden what would it look like? This is about your life so far not into the future. What is your ecology? What connects you to others? What has bought you to this point in your life. What experiences have shaped your life, your garden? What and who is part of your garden? Are there rocky parts, ordered vegetable gardens, lush fields or forests?

Create
1. Draw using oil pastels, pencils or textas your garden to symbolically represent important aspects of your life
2. Make a mind map of words and shapes to show the relationships in your garden
3. Make a sculptural model of your garden using natural products or recyclable waste either inside or outside, like rocks, leaves, flowers, grass.

Share
In groups of three take turns in explaining parts of your garden and what they mean to you. If you want to comment on someone else's work start with "it reminds me of" or "It feels like". This avoids disempowering the creator.
Workbook

Personal Reflection on Life as a Garden

What where prominent or repeated symbols in your garden and what do you think they might represent?

What do you think your depiction of your garden tells you about important aspects of your life?

Further reading
Is there anything you would like to change about your garden and why?
Lesson 2

Start In your own backyard

When you have been a stranger to yourself for some time, been busy with life or out of touch with your community, it can be valuable to reorient yourself to what is important to you. In our exuberance to begin our adventures we might look past what is right in front of us because it may seem more exciting or beneficial to look elsewhere. The importance of starting from where you are is that it takes account of what and where you are standing right now and the histories associated with your place. Conversely, when you have been immersed in your own self-reflection, bound to family and children or have reached the limit of your own community and want to reach beyond, starting in your own backyard can help you build a bridge to where you want to go.

I discovered through my work at The Women’s Room, and in my subsequent research into community groups, that when beginning any new quest it is important to start from what you know. Acknowledging where you stand right now is important as it begins with what is ‘in here’ rather than what is ‘out there’ and places you in the centre of your learning. When we begin to reflect upon our experiences it connects us back to deeply emotional and primal knowledge held within our own memory cells, which we may have forgotten. Connection to our inner self has the potential to remind us of the matrix of life from which we have come, linking us to histories, stories and places that have come before us. Delving into our own matrix and histories makes possible a grounded perspective which is mindful of where you have come from, what has led you to this point in your life at this time, and allows an assessment of your responsibilities to yourself, to other people and places. Digging deep in the soil from which we have come, getting to knowing our inner selves, can make clearer to us what we need to do in the present, be that to remake our identities, reclaim our histories find our sense of belonging or potentially free ourselves from past oppressions.

However, digging up your inner life is not without its own challenges and dangers. Digging can bring unwanted and unexpected feelings that may be overwhelming, especially if you are not ready for the learning that is to be had from discovery. Digging into your life, like digging in your real life garden is hard work where the satisfaction most likely lies after the digging is all done and the plants are planted rather than while doing it. I say this to warn you that a deep enriching life does not stay on the surface and that flourishing most often requires effort. Perhaps after the sweat and blisters of digging in the harsh sun, it is the cool drink admiring your work that is the sweetest creative work. Another pitfall in deeply spiritual creative process is to assume our experience is the same as others experiences. I have participated in several workshops where I have been asked to meditate upon a time in my childhood, the facilitator assuming that this would be a trouble free time. For me this is a distressing experience and always leaves me with a sense of unease. I mention this because like most situations in life we may find it difficult to imagine what life might be like for others and do not consider the effects of what we ask others to do in the name of the creative process. If you are a facilitator then I ask you to consider with care what you are asking students or fellow travellers to partake in. This brings us back to the argument for beginning with the self. When we reflect upon times that have been difficult for us then we can develop empathy and understanding without righteous paternalistic know-it all-ness.
Starting with yourself does not mean you stay cloistered within the inner life or the personal. It is just as vital to carry reflection on personal experiences forward into the community that you are living with right now. If we stay in the personal there is the danger of becoming trapped in our own perspective without moderating our own ideas against others’ realities. This is especially the case where our own reality impacts on the flourishing of others. In other words, we need to question if we are benefiting at someone else’s expense. Alternatively, we need to be cognisant of others’ actions which may impact on our own flourishing and take steps to mitigate untenable or destructive situations.

If we wish to be a flourishing, healing force in the world we need to look at healing ourselves first. When we look to heal others first, without looking at our own inner conundrums within our place and community, we risk a paternalistic ideal of “Do as I say, not as I do” and replay an historic hierocracy perpetrated upon those that need fixing based on misguided moralistic standpoints. In a quest to liberate others we may end up disempowering and damaging those we are trying to assist. We may hold expectations of others that we ourselves cannot carry through. If we neglect our own backyards we may instigate much positive growth for others but our own needs and relationships will be brittle and broken. This reminds me of those who volunteer hours at community service but neglect their own family or give generously to distant causes but ignore the homeless in their own streets.

When I began my doctorate I wanted to look at women’s groups across the world, and in the capital city where I lived, because I thought that perhaps our little women’s group was relatively small and inconsequential in the bigger picture and would not satisfy the requirements that I thought an impressive doctorate needed. While this is a common mistake for doctoral students, I learned that the local living and breathing but small group held rich meanings that I was able to understand well as I was an insider within this community. Looking into your own backyard allows insights and intimacy that looking into and over another’s backyard cannot. The more you look into your own backyard, your own house, your own inner life, your community, the more you may begin to realise and appreciate how complex and intricate and richly rewarding it can be to really look and see what is in front of you.

I started with my own need when I began The Women’s Room. Through connecting with other women, my place and finding out where I belonged, I learnt about myself through my creative practice. I used my own experiences because this was what I knew – it was familiar and safe to me. I was assured with my teaching because I had done the work physically, mentally and emotionally. While there was much reflective practice, thinking and theorising, mostly it was grounded practice from which I drew my strength and confidence. I encouraged other women to share their own experiences and stories as well, to build up a library of wisdom and knowledge. The benefit of this was twofold. Firstly it built a community from the ground up, binding us together in our shared experiences, and secondly it opened a supported space for us to feel curious enough to critically examine our own histories, responsibilities to self, family, community, and in relationship to our place. Building capacity in yourself and your own community strengthens that community; it is empowering and gives voice to ideas which otherwise would remain silent.

Starting in your own backyard is not just about staying with what you know but beginning with a level of self-awareness about the place we inhabit and taking account of our histories. Looking inward or to what exists close around us may be more difficult at first.
than looking to fix someone else’s life on distant shores but it gives us the opportunity to figure out what is truly important to us in a deeply philosophical way. When we take the time to connect to ourselves, to listen and feel part of the greater flow of life, it is my hope that we will not be looking to dominate, appropriate or colonise others in another faraway place but understand and love ourselves enough to be generous towards others and create flourishing spaces.

How:

- Look to your own problems before trying to tidy up or meddle in other people’s backyards. If everyone attended to their own communities there may be more understanding of how the daily reality plays out for people and place. Start step by step and keep things relatively simple and easy to manage.

- Value your own material before jumping in to hold up others’ knowledge, creativity, talents as better or more valuable than what you have to offer. In my case this was recognising the knowledge I had gained through experiencing women’s business such as birth, motherhood and the creative process.

- Learn about the place you are at now and see where this takes you as opposed to seeking something unattainable ‘out there’. There is a rich life in here and surrounding you but that is strange uncharted territory for many of us who do not want to examine too closely the inner self.

- Learn about your inner self, family, community and their histories. What has the land been used for? Who has been in a relationship with it? In control of it? This will tell you a great deal about who has held power and how to untangle yourself from this control and power, or how to challenge this inequality if need be. Develop a sense of belonging and appreciate the beauty of where you stand now. Tell your histories and stories of who you are and where you have come from. Even if this is a difficult place and ultimately you need to move from this space, acknowledge that there have been lessons and reasons for being there.
Story and Art Meanings

Wait for Me under the Apple Blossom Tree

acrylic on canvas

I look for you here, I look for you there
You are around but I don’t know where
Are you by the mountains or right next to me?
I’ll think I’ll just rest, wait a little and be
But all the while, I’ll be dreaming of your beautiful smile

The artwork is called *Wait for Me under the Apple Blossom Tree*. The tree is full of gorgeous pink blossoms at the peak of flowering. If you look closely, the tree is an ephemeral shape.
of a person with a heart, indicating the loving energy that the tree holds. The tree is alive, unashamed of its aching beauty and is an extension of the woman who also wears the same pink blossom colours as she sits with her back fitting comfortably into the curvature of the tree. The tree is central to the woman. It supports her and is a favourite place for her to sit and ponder, yet she looks over the hills in the distance, seeking what is over the deep valley, watching for her lover to come for her.

Some may see this image as contemplative but when I painted it, it was full of longing to be somewhere else. I was looking out to the Blue Mountains and beyond and I was hoping for something in the distance, in the past or even in the future, to come to me. This imaginal transport of the mind can bring to the surface what is needed in the present and can fuel a journey of exploration. However, in this painting, although the love and inspiration that she seeks is all around her – in her own backyard – she looks beyond, waiting for love, passion and inspiration to find her, when she could have love if she would turn around and see that is surrounds her already. This painting was chosen to show that while looking elsewhere you might miss the love, opportunities and commitments around you. If you begin to know your own backyard then, if and when you want to traverse mountains and valleys, you will have been grounded by the solidness and love of home.

A bird doesn’t sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.

Maya Angelou

Yesterday I was clever so I wanted to change the world.
Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.

Rumi
Activity

Mapping your place

Centre
If in a group, form a circle. Close your eyes. Take in three deep breaths and exhale completely each time. Relax your shoulders and jaw. Unwrap your feet so they are firmly on the floor. Place your palms upwards in an open receiving gesture to keep the flow of energy going. Now imagine your own tree, in detail. Notice its bark, its roots, leaves, the way it grows. Walk around your tree three times, feeling the texture of its trunk. Sit down comfortably by the base of the tree and rest. Look out around at your surroundings and notice what you see. What is your landscape like?

Stimulus

Home, place, local
When you feel ready, open your eyes and bring to your mind what you have seen: your local place, home or a place which is familiar to you.

Create

Choose from:
1. Make a map of your place. On your map include aspects of your suburb, town, village, holiday place, landscape. Notice natural features like trees, rivers, creeks and mountains as well as human structures. Place groups of people that are in your life.
2. Annotate special, meaningful aspects of your local place. Add a few words to explain why these are important to you.
3. When you have finished your map think about why you have included the aspects you have.

Share
Find someone to share your map with and explain and explore this with them. Be open to hearing what connections they make and what seems to be prominent on their map. This might give you a clue as to what you value, or what is dominating your life or is providing barriers and challenges in your way.
Workbook

Personal reflection on your own needs at this stage of your life.

What have you noticed about your local place that you had not previously paid much attention to?

Which aspects of your map have you have foregrounded or are more central, and which are more distant? How does this represent your relationship with these aspects of your life?

Which areas of your creative life or your inner life do you feel you would now like to focus on? Write a list of ten potential areas you would like to explore.
Lesson 3

Creative flow is a nexus of who we are

The creative process has been described as flow by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991) but this is not how I have experienced my creativity. As an experiential practising artist and as someone who has facilitated the creative process with women in creative process groups for a considerable period of seven years and then at university for another three, I feel comfortable enough to be able to make comment on my experiences of creative flow. Csikszentmihalyi (1991) describes flow as a state that is reached between boredom and anxiety, graphing this as x and y axes to demonstrate where the peak experience is most likely to be felt, somewhere between the two points. Csikszentmihalyi’s model is useful in that it gives us an understanding that creative motivation happens somewhere between stimulation and relaxation. However, it does not explicate intimate details about the actual experience of the sensations of flow or offer suggestions on how to get there. Instead of flow I have described the creative process to be more like an emergence from a matrix, the rich, but perhaps chaotic matter from which all life arises. In the process of making a creative work or in the attempt to elicit an experience of flow, or connection to energy as the women from The Women’s Room named it, I and ten women in my study describe our experiences as being more of immersion in a fully embodied sensory moment.

The creative process I have experienced is less like a step by step process and more like a mood that can be elicited to allow inner knowing to come to the surface. Sawyer (2013) claims that a scientific approach to creativity can be followed in a step by step fail safe method; however, he collapses the creative process to simplistic directives. While these directives may be helpful in understanding the broad signposts of creativity they do not really explain how the creative process is messy and chaotic and does not neatly fit into a step by step program. Researching about someone else’s experience can be crucial to come to new understandings but what is missing from some explanations of ‘creativity’ is the embodied lived process experienced in participatory making and creating on a regular and sustained basis. Sawyer and Csikszentmihalyi describe what they see and are told is the creative process, rather than what a person in the moment of creative process would feel or experience through their senses. These accounts therefore seem to lack for me a certain depth, possibly because the critical aspect of what it feels like in the doing of making is missing. Also missing from these accounts are the cultural and social aspects of creativity. Creativity does not happen in a bubble but is influenced by a person’s locality, family background, traditions, religion, spirituality, education and gender and how these affect the way we experience the world.

The perspective from which we view the world is highly influenced by our habitus and what we believe, which in turn effects how we choose to express ourselves through language, song, food, behaviour in social interactions and approach our creative practice. This is why I prefer to call the things that we make ‘creative cultural practices’. Culture is at the heart of creativity and creative flow is the nexus where all aspects of our lives intersect to manifest into an artefact or idea, such as a dance or painting, or an understanding of something in the making moment. If you attempted to replicate the artwork at another time in another place it could be similar but it will never be the same, because you, the artist, will be different on another day, in another frame of mind. Similar to Derrida’s (1978) concept of difference, our perceptions are always in a state of flux.
Although there are no set formulae there are particular strategies that the research showed were helpful in engendering the creative process. I refer to a creative process, which may at first suggest that there is a series of steps – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 – to follow; however, the creative process is not as neat as this series would suggest. Using process to describe what occurs in the making of a creative piece is more accurate than product or skill but perhaps is still a little misleading. Creativity and the creative process are more like tapping into a river (Maber nd), experiencing a spiritual sensory moment where connection to the flow of the energy of life happens (Mackay 2014). This has been described as the energy that animates all matter, that imbues nature with its growth, beauty and flourishing and which drives the cycles of life, like time, the seasons, the moon, the tides, our ageing, birth, death and renewal. In my article Art as a Connection to the Divine in Women’s Lives (Mackay 2014), I explain how several women experience the creative process as synergetic nexus. Karen, a Darug Aboriginal Australian, provides a clear example of how this nexus comes together.

... her making moment works best when she is surrounded by her family at the kitchen table, using her repetitive ritual process of ‘doing the dot’ where she communicates with her ancestors and becomes closer to God, to everything. Her universe is contained in the making of each dot. The painting of the dot is a synergetic coming together of all that she is; her relationships within community, her Aboriginality, her spirituality and her connection with the energy of ‘everything’ in the cosmos. The synergetic nexus of all the elements coming together at this moment in time make this particular creation possible. All of these elements that come together are contained within the artwork at that particular making moment. The nexus of synergetic elements becomes art in the making moment, which contains the energy and emotions women experience at the time of painting.

Creative flow is more than just a thinking process. It is an embodied, material and existential experience occurring in moments of ontological experience similar to Buber’s ‘sphere of between’ or Turner’s liminality (St John 2008). What I found in my studies is that there can be a reciprocal relationship between the making of the artwork and the experience of a spiritual feeling as well as the spiritual feeling being able to inspire an artwork at a later time (Mackay 2014). There are different kinds of strategies that artists, dancers and creative thinkers develop to help tap into their creative practice. Some like to plan in minute detail, and have a feeling of being in control of the work, while other artists use a more fluid, improvised approach (Ingold and Halam 2007), which draws on emotive responses (Gault 2007; 6) and body sensations linked to the material reality of place (Somerville 2007) and culture, rather than linear, logical methodologies. Abstract thought, visualising new perspectives and the imaginal play an important role in the beginning of creative doing. However, the way I have come to my painting, drawing and clay work is through a dialogical relationship between the spiritual energy and my actual doing. Similarly so did some of The Women involved in my research project and uncovered in ‘The Ancestral Connections’ interviews.

When gathering and collecting for the beginning of my creative work, I need to be alone at first. In this phase I need to focus, centre, perform my own made up rituals that help me to get into ‘the zone’, a form of concentration that is intimate but distant. As my artwork progresses, I can paint while talking to several people without being distracted. Sometimes this is even helpful as the splitting of my attention seems to be a useful device for creating the world between worlds where there is an attentive focus on the artwork but also a vague

Research Output 6 page 27
awareness of what surrounds me. This vague awareness assists me in my painting at an advanced stage of the work, possibly because I am already certain and clear on the direction and being a little bit distracted by another’s conversation actually ensures I do not become too tight or controlling with the painting. Instead the fuzzy state allows a flow of energy to enliven the canvas, through each brush stroke, capturing my mood, energy and emotions and possibly even capturing bits and pieces of the moods of the people with me. This reminds me of the wonderful film directed by Alfonso Arau called ‘Like Water for Chocolate’ (1992) based on the novel of the same name written by Mexican novelist Laura Esquivet (1989). In this film the emotions of Tita are infused into her food, causing those who eat it to feel as she does. Works of art made at The Women’s Room were also thought by the women I interviewed to have emotions embedded within them and which were later accessible to the viewer.

I have also found that ritual actions play an important role in creating the atmosphere in mind, heart and place that paves the way for the first actions of creating. I might light a candle, sit quietly, play soothing music, or loud music if that is the mood I am in. I might sing loudly or look through the collection of sketches and objects that have inspired me. I may go for a walk on my local bush track and absorb the stillness and sound into my being, which then becomes entangled with my own thoughts as they come in and go out of my mind. There seems to be, for me at least, the need to be active but still, quiet but surrounded by sound, aware but with a loose focus. Perhaps what I am describing is the liminal space, the in-between, or perhaps it is a space where the internal dialogue between body and ether emerge to be heard and felt in a rhythmic to and froing. I do not usually just start whatever creative project that I am to work on, but need to warm up. I need time to tune in to allow the central concept, image or idea to emerge out onto paper or canvas. At this stage the work can be pretty rough but I do not become discouraged because I know from previous experience that this is just the initial capturing of the fleeting image, thought or idea. Later, the image will develop into itself in an organic way, through my relationship with it.

The way artwork was approached in our creative groups at The Women’s Room, reflected who we were and what we needed at particular stages of life. For example, while I do not like to tightly control my artwork in the early phases, I tighten up some parts of the work as it progresses, yet am happy to keep rough bits. Similarly in daily life, I am not overly controlling or mind mess, but I do have particular aspects of my life that are tightly controlled, like protecting my children. A friend once described painting and drawing to me, when I was frustrated at not being able to draw like her, as being similar to a person’s signature in that it reflects the person’s style, the way they write, their background, all rolled into one scrawly name. The way we approach painting and creating, too, is a reflection of our being, our habitus and our cultural dispositions.

I have described creative work, when undertaken through tapping into the creative flow of life energy, as three types: spiritual, intuitive channelled and expressive symbolic. I have called this approach the SPICES art framework (Mackay 2014). Witnessing SPICES artwork being made over a period of seven years in my community arts practice, I noticed a correlation to the repertoire of artists’ work and their final artefact which was influenced by the way it was made. While I mostly looked at artworks such as poems, paintings and sculptures, I also viewed dance performances of the women who were part of the 2009
Earthspirit Ancestral Connections Festival. Depending on the purpose of the artwork, the women of the research project would use one of three approaches.

The spiritual approach could be rather pragmatic and focused on symbolising what would be important at the later ritual. For example, a clay icon which could be made to symbolise unwanted aspects of the self, might later be thrown into a fire to symbolically burn and heal a problematic issue. It is important to note that the concept of spirituality has purposely not been tightly defined as what was spiritual for one woman, would be different for another. Instead, spiritual has been defined as that which transforms or rather then life energy which has the power to transform. I explore this concept further in my article “Art as a Connection to the Divine” (Mackay 2014, 2015). In one group session, we made woven bark protection mats while talking and gathering materials, not in any special spiritual or ritual way but so it could be later used in a bush ritual. The key point is that the making of the artefacts is not necessarily the subject of a spiritual experience, but the intent may be for this object or idea to later enhance ritual or spiritual practice.

A second way I have found art work to be made is by using an intuitive channelled approach. Intuitive art making entails a relaxed open body–mind connection which invites new thoughts and images and is a process of expansion. In this approach to art making, little is edited. Creating is usually fast paced, intuitive and responsive and bypasses the logical reasoned critical thought processes for a sensory thin slicing (Gladwell 2005) or brain storming (Osborn 2007) type of working. Artworks are not planned; writing is more a stream of consciousness, continuous and not controlled. Whatever emerges is accepted as being a rightful part of the artwork. The focus is not on consciously making the product perfect in a technical sense but on removing any blocks or barriers which the critical mind can use to prevent the flow of ideas and actions.

A process which starts with a rush of passion, excitement and enthusiasm until it peaks and then wears itself out is the usual pattern of the intuitive channelled artwork. There is also a sense that the artwork has come from another source, channelled from the cosmos, or from within the unconscious self. This kind of approach to art is suggestive of a creative agency, which lies at once within and outside of the art maker. Some artists describe this as a connection with the inner self, others as an unknown force that guides the work. There is a sense that the work produced would not have come alone if this creative force was not tapped into. Art makers describe being in a trance like state, a flow, not having to think of what comes next. Art made with an intuitive approach is where the connection to the divine energy or entity is felt most strongly. Other instances of intuitive art are transpersonal process approaches such as art therapy (McNiff 2004), which intuitively express the inner emotions into an external form that is not overly concerned with technique or end product.

Finally the third approach that I witnessed in my research, was an expressive approach to art. Expressive art implies partial planning with rough sketches but with plenty of room for personal innovation. The expressive approach concerns recapturing the ecstatic feeling experienced during a kind of flow or peak experience. The expressive approach to art is more concerned with communicating a spiritual ideal. The artists describe the expressive approach as being one way to process their emerging cultural or spiritual ideas or previous experiences of divine connectedness. The expressive approach lays on a continuum with the intuitive channelled approach as it also offers an experience of connectedness through
the process of the making; however, the initial memory or idea that is to be expressed has passed along with the initially intensity. Expressive art draws on the emotional intensities of the artist’s feelings, which may be captured and infused into the creative work.

The SPICES approach was a way of capturing the divine flow of life energy. The term ‘divine’ is used to describe the energy which animates life and has been known under different guises. This force stretches back to Plato’s ‘aether’, Aristotle’s ‘first mover’, Kepler’s ‘vis motrix’ or ‘active force’, Pasteur’s ‘infinity’, Einstein’s ‘god within’, Russell’s ‘breath of life’, Shaw’s ‘life force’ and Bergson’s ‘Élan Vital’ (Herman 2014). The life force is referred to by some spiritual feminists as a ‘Cosmogenic Goddess in all things’ (Raphael 1996) or ‘woman energy’ (Christ 2003) and by feminist Jungian analysts as ‘elemental spirit’, ‘Wild Woman archetype’ (Pinkola Estes 1992). The women from The Women’s Room embraced a spiritual feminist Divine Goddess as one manifestation of the divine energy in their artworks but would just as likely draw upon other diverse cultural manifestations of the divine as well such as ancestors, Shiva and Shakti, God, Earth, and Love (Mackay 2014). Sociology of religion scholar Paul Heelas (2008) argues that many new forms of spirituality draw upon ‘life force’ and that they should be taken as new forms of religion in what he terms ‘inner life spiritualities’.

While connection to a sacred divine energy assisted the women to explore their inner life, it became a postmodern search for cultural identity and belonging (Mackay 2011). When art is experienced as a mediator between the self and the divine energy it may capture a glimpse of this greater, all-encompassing energy, where the self and the divine energy conspire in the making of the artefact. The making of art was not necessarily a direct divine experience but was explained as a capturing of a small moment, a hint of a larger power, because the artwork could only hold a part of the large universal divine energy. From a cosmological point of view, Sagan (1985) suggests that “the beauty of a living thing is not the atoms that go into it, but the way those atoms are put together”. If we consider the making of an artwork a cluster of living atoms working together to come into existence then it is understandable how an artwork can encapsulate different qualities of energy and can reveal a woman’s emotional energy at the time of painting.

I use a range of strategies to elicit a creative flow and develop the creative process:

1. Getting in the zone
2. Having an inspirational experience like traveling, discovering new things, learning, connecting with like-minded people, being in nature
3. Broadening the mind through experiencing the new to create to brain pathways
4. Connecting to the senses and allowing these to be felt wholly, fully
5. Noticing and gathering
6. Letting things come and go
7. Following your nose, senses, instincts and hints, but mostly passions
8. Meditation and centering and focusing
9. Ritual. Personal ways of inducing a trance like or altered state. Cards, candles, tea, music, preparing to open your mind
10. Fuzzy vague visioning
11. Doodling, writing, stream of consciousness
12. Doing the work of painting, drawing and holding no expectations
13. Holding on to a fleeting thought and then going with that
14. Being flexible, able to respond and react
15. Don’t panic: this will make you freeze. It is better to walk away for a few minutes and come back later
16. Once established keep working through the rough, ugly and tough patches of your work/creative process
17. When it is finished it is finished.

My creative process

Meditation
I start a simple cleansing and protecting meditation, where I ask for guidance. Sometimes I complete a full chakra meditation.

Inward/centring
I focus on what I want to achieve, my theme, my main question.

Doing/acting
I begin. I do the work. I work through the process which is not ever easy step by step, even if this appear to be to someone looking in from the outside.

Communicating, being with
I begin to lose focus and as I struggle with trying to make the paint do what I want it to I engage in a relationship with the work where I begin to dialogue with the canvas, the paint, the brush and the movement of these together. I begin to think and reflect on other aspects my life while painting.

Immersion and connecting
As I get deeper into the work I being to understand what I need to do. I become one with the paint. I do not have to think as logically as I did at the beginning. I work more intuitively.

Flow matrix, nexus
The artwork begins to emerge and elements that I have not consciously meant to place in the work appear. It contains my feeling and emotions at the time of the making. I cannot hide this as it is visible on the canvas. I can choose to paint over but often I allow them to be visible. This is the intuitive flow of making and creating.
Making moment

The moment when I am completely immersed in what I am doing but I am not really aware of my surroundings. I have become the paint, the canvas, and I work as if within the work. I am aware that this is happening but feel the flow of life energy and the work feels rather effortless. This is how I feel when it is working, however it is important to point out there is often much frustration and sometimes an artwork does not want to come out easily so it becomes a struggle. This is also part of the process and needs to be accepted, even if difficult.

Emerging

The work comes together in a cohesive whole and unconscious images are highlighted or disappear into the painting. The hidden elements are made more obvious and I am confident that the painting will be finished. It now has a life of its own.

Coming to the end

I keep working on the smaller elements. Finishing here and there those aspects which need reworking. I am so intimate with the work it is as if my nose is only inches away from the canvas. There is the real danger of overworking the artwork and I sometimes have to redo a whole section. I have to know when to let go and let the work be what it is meant to be.

Earth

I need time to reconnect to real time as I have been in a surreal space. I need to ground myself before I come back into the rush of the world. Sometimes this is as simple as cleaning up and looking over my shoulder at my work ... sometimes I get drawn into working on it again but need to walk away.

Back to real time

For me I am grounded by the reality of having a large family and their issues bring me straight back into real time. I need to attend to their daily needs. If you do not have family I would suggest you go into a café or shop and talk to someone who is in the rush of life just to shake you out of your reverie.
Story and Art meanings

The Dogwood Tree and the Water Bearer

Acrylic on canvas

The woman is at the centre of the painting and depicts a water bearer for the astrological sign of Aquarius. I painted this for a friend, Shirley Gilbert, as a way to say thank you for helping me through a difficult time at work. The central position of the woman is symbolic of the individual being placed at the centre of the creative process. You are the expert of your own life and if you tap into the creative flow of life you can also tap into your own inner knowing, allowing the creative process to flow out of yourself. This is possibly the lesson I needed to learn at the time of painting, however I did not realise this at the time. It
is only now as I reflect and write this that I have made that connection. The river represents
the flow of energy and the woman’s hair her creativity and spiritual energy as it comes from
her and then flows into the river. The merging of the river and the woman’s hair shows that
although the creative process may seem to begin from the woman it is part of the larger
creative energy available in the world. The river and thus the creative energy is influenced
by what flows into it and what landscape it flows through. Similarly, the creative energy
experienced in the process of making, living and being does not stay with the self but is
influenced by what moves within you, surrounds you and the environment in which you are
placed, like the seasons or your culture. The moon is full, shedding light on the water,
alluding to the fullness of our potential. The moon illuminates our way into the future. The
lilac flowers and the cornflowers represent the spiritual connection with the creative
process, purple often associated with spiritual enlightenment. The dogwood tree represents
remembrance and strength, referencing the ancestors that have come before us and the
sacrifices they have made for us to be living in the present moment of time. Shirley has a
strong affinity with her Aboriginality connection to land and ancestors is part of who she is.
She was also born under the sign of Aquarius, the water bearer. She must constantly walk
two or more worlds, two or more spiritualties, and use her creativity to negotiate these
tensions.
Activity

Stimulus

Find a quiet place or at least still yourself to find the quiet place within yourself. You might also want to place a central object to represent centering yourself, like a candle, an icon anything to represent what you would like to focus upon. You may find music helps you relax and let go of mundane concerns. You may need to experiment to find what helps you to get into the zone. Take in 3 deep breaths. Notice the spaces in between the breaths. Relax your body shoulders, jaw. Focus on the centre of your body, just under the breast bone. Some call this the solar plexus and it is believed that this is where your core energy resides. Imagine that this is bright light and release any pain of negativity for now that you feel within your body. Be gentle with yourself. If you have never done this before you might be skeptical or feel strange. That is ok just focus on breathing in and out. Call on your spiritual ancestors, your God, Goddess, universe, cosmos, or what you find is special or sacred to you and ask if this energy can guide you in your creativity today. When you are ready, focus on your intention, like what do you want to create today? What is the life question that is important to you at the moment? Listen, but do not judge. Hold no expectations. This is play, an experiment. The product is not important but the process and feelings are. What are you feeling? What are you seeing in your mind’s eye? What is your heart’s desire right now? What is perplexing you?

Create

You can choose to write, paint, draw, use clay or perform your story. Think about these questions

18. What is your back story? Who are you? Where have you come from? What have been some of your defining moments in your life, good or challenging? What is the story that is important for you to tell today?

19. On a canvas choose colours to express how you feel. Use your hands to move the paint around, feel the texture and notice how the colours blend. You could also use a dry brush circular technique to create ‘clouds’. Notice if any images emerge. Try turning your painting in different directions. If you notice anything continue to work with that and see what you notice.

20. Create a collage from magazines, cloth and craft materials to represent an important issue in your past.

Share

First in pairs and then in groups of four share your stories. You might choose to reflect on the process and discuss any difficulties that you had with relaxing, meditating or remembering aspects of your story. Also consider who or what have been instrumental influences in your life up until now.
**Workbook**

Record a personal Reflection on the major influences on your life story.

Describe a time when you felt completely at peace, at one with your surroundings or life energy at that moment or that life changing moment?

What actions, places or experiences have you found helpful in tapping into that bigger life energy?

What would you like the next chapter of your story to be?
Lesson 4

Everyone has a secret garden

If we want to explore our intimate lives, our inner life, if we want to understand what makes us happy, sad, angry or frustrated, if we want to know about our own secret lives ... we need to dig!!!

Why would you want to dig around in your life? What good would it do?
Some people don’t want to know. They plod along in life, layering upon layering their complexities without ever digging. This could be a satisfactory way to live and for some it may be preferable to uncovering difficult parts of their psyche or past lives. Sometimes things are best left alone, at least until a space opens up and you feel strong enough to explore the hidden parts of your garden. There are times in our lives when we want to explore our inner life – our secret garden. It may be that we are ready to look, we want to know more about ourselves. It may be that we need to look to our deeper self for answers in a time of difficulty, to find strength in loss or growth in the realisation that our actions have caused harm. Perhaps we are stuck in our lives and need a way to create momentum. Perhaps we are cast in a situation where we need to act now – forced to examine our shadow aspects in times of personal crisis. These neglected places are not something to be ashamed of – nor would I want to suggest that it is possible or even desirable to rid life of all complexities and secrets.

Discovering your secret garden, your inner world, can be a joyous and ultimately rewarding experience. When you venture into the world of the unknown with an open mind, present in the moment of discovery and absorbed in the act of doing, unlikely connections are often revealed. The repetitive doing, the rhythm of walking, working, digging, drawing, weeding, coupled with the open mindedness of discovery on your new journey in your secret garden, may open up a wondrous space you never knew was possible, or may fulfil a deep longing for reconnection with the once forgotten parts of you and your past. We need constant creativity because it creates momentum even when still and prevents dried up bitterness with life. Connections to seemingly unrelated aspects of your life can come alive when you venture and explore your secret garden. When aspects of your creative process, your life or situation are revealed in that ah-ha moment, it has the power to propel you in to new and more rewarding journeys in your life, your creative practice, your community group work. Creative process is not a set of skills that can be learnt but a way of being, feeling and approaching the world.

Making and creating can be life-giving activities that contribute to deeply spiritual and emotionally charged inspiration. When I think of the joy and sometimes the relief of creative discovery there is more than a sense of satisfaction. There is a sense of elation. This reminds me of the story about a well-known lookout in The Blue Mountains, which can be accessed via walking or by car or tourist bus. The view from the lookout is beautiful, attracting busloads of tourists who are drawn to its beauty. Although they see the beauty, they are prone to forget it and move on to the next destination, some even commenting it was not worth the drive and they can’t see why it is considered an iconic attraction. Contrary to the tourist is the traveller, the bush walker, who takes much longer to get to their destination. She has had to scramble over rocks, move away branches and has found the journey physically challenging. When she reaches the top of the climb she turns to the
view. To her it is not just beautiful but spectacular and she feels exhilarated. So too with digging in your secret garden or making a creative work. The journey might not be easy but the challenge is part of the contrast needed to feel the sensation of reward and elation.

When discovering your own place, your own inner world, your own creativity as if for the first time, even if you have traversed the metaphorical journey many times before, there is an intimacy with knowing the local, the grounded and what is right in your own backyard that is at once shocking and deeply nurturing. That is why digging deep in your own secret garden is one of the best places to start your journey of creative inspiration. Yourself, people and places may be close to you and seem mundane but once we learn how to look and seek, see with the inner eye and with curiosity, we may find a magical well of creative inspiration and wisdom. There is an intimacy with the once known that aches for your return, to be rediscovered, re-loved and recovered, coupled with the excitement of newness that sparks our imagination and anticipation. Having a connection with a place that had historical significance to you or your ancestral family adds meaning to its discovery and integration into your new way of being. Noticing the way you hold your hand, the way your eyes twinkle, or a curious smile you share with your never-met grandmother in an old family photograph can offer a sense of connection and belonging to the world with meaning far beyond the new and a lineage which reminds you of your family’s survival.

Of course, not all connections to the past or present are welcomed. Some will bring pain and challenge, shame and rage, fear and anxiety. These too are part of who we are. We all have these dark parts of our garden but some have more than others. Some have been oppressed, victimised and marginalised in this time and place of history through no fault of their own. These deeply distressing parts of our secret garden pose the biggest fears and challenges. However, there is hope of recovering or reclaiming the aspects that overshadow the possibility of flourishing. Keeping the secret aspects of your garden hidden, stuffed down or covered over can be debilitating and disempowering. Silencing your inner voice for too long can crush your inner spirit and perpetuate the disempowerment that you have experienced in community. So I urge you to dig. Dig slowly – or quickly – when you are ready, and with support. Bring your secret garden to light if only for yourself. It does not have to be the centrepiece of your life. You do not have to share it widely with the world if that is not what you want or need to flourish, but you may just find a hidden treasure that sets you free and inspires your creative soul.
Story and Art meanings

You are my sunshine

Acrylic on canvas

This is my daughter Amelia. She has really sparkly eyes and is a blessing in my life. She is my only daughter. Since she could write she has been writing me notes of love. I don’t always get to return love notes to her. I want her to know just how much I love her.

Figure 7: You Are My Sunshine

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy when skies are grey
You’ll never know dear
How much I love you
Please let’s make our sunshine all day (old folk song reinterpreted)

I painted this for my daughter to show her how much I love her. She is my sun: bright shiny, happy and flourishing. She is surrounded by beautiful flowers, symbols of pre-creation and fertility. She is central to the painting, looking straight at the viewer. The title ‘You are my sunshine’ make reference to the popular song of the same name, often sung as a lullaby to children as an expression of pure love. Origins of the song date back to the 1930s and have strong associations with American hillbilly music as well as the state of Louisiana. Original verses have been associated with lost love, while some suggest a maudlin control or even racism towards slaves of the American South (Grassy 2009). In my version I have used the lyrics as a lullaby to remind me of the times I rocked her to sleep in my arms.
The image has a magical, nursery story time feel to it and also alludes to the nursery rhyme ‘The cow jumped over the moon’:

Hey, diddle, diddle,
The cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon;
The little dog laughed
To see such sport,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

The old English nursery rhyme is a nonsense song which supposedly dates back to the 1500s. There are various theories which attempt to explain the origins and meanings of this rhyme, some referring to the intrigue of the Elizabethan era royal court and a secret love triangle while others refer to Hathor (cow) worship in Egypt. The point for our exploration of creativity is that language and poetry are used to both hide and uncover a hidden secret. The painting of my daughter similarly both conceals and reveals the deeper meaning behind the image but it is necessary to dig and seek to understand. The painting can be enjoyed by feeling the emotions that I have imbued into it when making but like a secret garden it also has hidden joys and challenges. My daughter was not easy to conceive and she has been the remaking of the tragic relationship between my mother and me.

The ‘Everyone has a secret garden’ lesson is about finding your hidden talent and passion, your unacknowledged treasures, dreams, desires and difficult parts, neglected bits. It is about embracing all of these aspects of the self and finding your central question. So ask yourself:

What is important to you?
What is core business for your group?
What are your aims and your purpose?

Your hidden garden contains the complexities of pleasure and pain, joy and challenge, the conflicting tensions that often occur in our life. My daughter releases stars in one hand and butterflies and flowers from the other. She holds in her hands both the past and the future hopes for planet and cosmos. In her left hand she releases butterflies, symbols of beauty but also transformation. The movement of the butterflies swirling around suggests potential for change. The swirl is reminiscent of time and seasons, the ancestral cosmos from which we have all come. She is part of the human chain of existence. I have a special relationship with her as she was not easy to conceive and represents for me the hope of restoring the broken mother–daughter relationship of my childhood. In the quest to heal this rift I have experienced much joy and love with my daughter and my hope is that this will continue on with her children.

**Videos**

Alan Watts: What if money were no object – YouTube video
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnFUDVpFwFQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnFUDVpFwFQ)
Activity

Stimulus

In this activity we want to focus more strongly on what is important to you. What is your passion? What sends chills of inspiration up and down your spine? Is there anything that you would like to be exploring in your life that you have felt too shy or afraid to do? Are there any people that you admire or aspire to be like? Are you passionate about a social justice issue or cause in your community that has burned within you but which you have not done anything about? Is there a creative pursuit in which you have wanted to dabble? What excites you or feels nurturing to you? In this activity we want to work with that feeling and stimulation. Alternatively, some people do not feel a passion for life or inspiration at this time in their life because they might be dealing with shock, loss, grief or depression, which in its own way overwhelms us with different kinds of emotions. If this is the case you might use this activity to give yourself permission represent this emotion and express it to others.

Create

Choose from one of the following:

1. Inspiration painting and poem. For those of you who feel ready to express their longing. Using a large canvas and choosing a single colour that you love, quickly sponge paint on the canvas to completely cover the surface. Experiment with watering the paint down or making a thick texture. If you want to add another colour blend this in now. Next add your own image in the centre of the painting showing what you need to focus upon right now. It doesn’t need to be a perfect representation, just the essence. Use inspiring quotes from those you admire and add these around your image. Step back for a moment and think of one word or phrase that is at the essence of your artwork. Use your word or phrase as the basis of your poem. Looking at your artwork write five more lines about what is important to you right now. Add this poem to your artwork.

2. Reminisce and remembrances walk. If you are not ready to physically create and you are feeling a little stuck, go for a walk in a place that you find peaceful and nurturing. You might want to go on your own, with a trusted friend or a small group. If you are familiar with walking meditations then you could start this process (see appendix). Otherwise just take in three deep breaths exhaling fully after each one. Bring to mind times in your life when you felt excited and filled with hope. Conjure images of kind people and loving words that anyone has said to you or you have felt. You may want to remember funny things about a time or person. If you have lived a harsh life, try to remember one kind experience no matter how seemingly insignificant. As you walk allow yourself to revel in these positive feelings, or cry for the loss of these times. When you feel ready, imagine how you might one day feel like being in the flow of life again. If after your walk you feel like writing, jot down a few notes about what you remember about your memories. You could even make a photo wall of good times.

3. The wishing tree. Make a tree-like structure using either recycled materials, natural materials, wire, clay, craft materials or paint a tree on a large sheet of cardboard. Make paper leaf shapes or, even better, find real leaves. On each leaf write a wish you have for yourself, someone else, your community, the world and the earth. Write as many as you like and then tie these onto your tree.
Share

In small groups (maximum of six people) share one to three of your hopes for the future and what you want to now release. If you can, write them on a piece of paper and burn them. Ask others you trust if they can suggest any options, actions or steps that might help you towards your journey.
Workbook

For your personal reflection, record your thoughts on the three most important things in your life right now.

Digging deeper:
What are the issues that you want to address in your life right now?

What excites you so much that you would like to spend more time doing it?

How can you set aside moments in your life for creative practice and contemplation and what is important for you?

What is your secret hope for your future?
Lesson 5

Gathering, collecting, sensing and smelling

This lesson is about immersion, curiosity and noticing what is around us. We also consider the external influences that impact on your garden, to give greater insight into aspects of your world that have been hidden from view. Immersion into your surroundings will clarify barriers and unique qualities that have remained undiscovered until this point in your life. By digging around in your metaphorical secret garden you may have stumbled upon a main question, theme or topic which has preoccupied you. When doing the initial digging around you may have found delightful and important parts of your life garden, discovered goals you want to achieve as well as aspects of your garden that are filled with difficulty or neglect. In creative terms we are talking about ‘getting your eye in’. Noticing might begin with the conscious state but we will now move to awaken the unconscious through using the senses and tapping into your intuitive self.

We can learn what drives our creative impulses through reawakening our sensory self – which may have been buried, lost, forgotten or suppressed. By becoming sensitive to our environment it becomes easier to connect to our emotions and bring to the surface our richly symbolic unconscious inner life. The way to become acquainted with your intuitive self is to learn to listen, observe and absorb through the senses while waiting for your body to respond to the emotional cues that it feels. For some this may take some time. When we learn to develop focused attention through our creative cultural and spiritual practices, the mundane world can come alive, heightening our experiences through our senses of sight, touch, taste, sound, smell and our sixth sense of inner perception. When you are new to this way of knowing, it is important to slow down, remove distractions and focus on one sense at a time. Cultural practices I have found helpful for entering a creative state are meditation, walking in the bush, tuning into ‘the zone’, lighting candles and burning incense, singing, playing and listening to music, drumming, dancing, looking into fire, painting and drawing, using clay, or many kinds of repetitive actions which can calm, are rhythmical and instigate a disconnection from distractions while focusing attention on the task or idea of the moment.

In my paper Art as a connection to the divine in women’s lives, I discuss how the creative process can be induced through connecting to the energy that animates life (Mackay 2014). Women who were at the centre of the study described how they could bring about a liminal state, a world between worlds that is at once part of this world but also stretches into another imaginal world. Being in this liminal space made possible their beginning creative activity but also entering into the creative process could also bring on the liminal space. How we enter our creative space will be different for all of us, but focusing upon our emotional intuitive senses was commonly used to assist artists to tap into what they termed ‘creative life energy’ or ‘divine energy’. Connection to this energy enabled a feeling of connection to the inner senses and immersion into the space we are in the process of creating through doing. St John (2008) also discusses how the liminal can enhance the sensory through his research into participants’ experiences of the electro trance dance movement, where mostly young people gather to dance to electro music with heavy drum beats. Although seemingly very different to the creative process that was at the centre of my study with women’s art making in community groups, what was similar was the spiritual
and sensory element experienced in the liminal space. I found similar emotive and sensory experiences were consistently described by participants in what I term ‘Art in The Making Moment’ (Mackay 2014). In this moment, artists felt connected to a greater energy that encompassed everything in their past lives, in their present, in their future lives that had not yet been considered and which opened artists to future possibilities for creative work. This last point is vital to the current lesson of connecting to the sensory self and how important developing emotive and sensory sensitivity is to the creative process.

Through reawakening our sensory self, our world can become richly imbued with meaning. Once seemingly unconnected disparities can suddenly make sense. Connections and meaning can be made where none could be seen before. Becoming attuned to our senses can be learnt and developed through activities that focus on the senses. If you live in a big city you may have needed to learn how to shut out extraneous noise so as not to be overwhelmed by the multitude of cacophonous sounds in which we are immersed. Sheer numbers of people, the sounds of clanking cups and footsteps, the drone of air conditioners and generators, train wheels squealing on steel or trucks rumbling and puffing in stop-start traffic can overwhelm or excite us. It is no wonder then that we have learnt how to selectively listen, see and feel. We can become experts at shutting out rather than opening up to allow in the sounds, scents and emotions that surround us.

Becoming sensorily awake in our world is one important part of the creative process. Even in the apparent chaos of city life it is important and possible to find solace and the rhythmic heartbeat of subtle sounds. However, I have found when I am overwhelmed that I need trees, the bird song of a kookaburra or black cockatoos, fresh sweet air, the earth at my feet or the salty windy ocean to help me listen to the subtle sounds of the earth turning and my own inner voice. When I can hear my inner voice I am more likely to be inspired in my creativity. I can hear, feel and see more clearly the ideas and sensations I want to portray in my artworks. Yet I know of other creative people that work better surrounded by the daily clank of family, or are inspired by the grunge, excitement and culture of the city and others still need the almost complete silence of the red desert country or a deep mossy valley. Whatever your metaphorical garden might be, when you feel life, rather than think it, colours return to life, new sprouts can shoot and growth can occur and creativity flourishes. Women that came to The Women’s Room, often told me how they ‘tuned in’ before and during their creative work by using cultural creative practices like meditation, music, being with family and so on. When in the moment of connection with the flow of life they felt an awesome embodied experience of oneness with everything which they described as peaceful, stretching into the cosmos, connected, elated and incredibly positive. Some of the women used this awakened state to create their artworks; others used it as a reference point to play over and over again in their mind to draw on its positive emotions for inspiration and hope in the struggles they faced in their daily lives.

While I am advocating a reawakening of the sensory self this needs some qualification. Reawakening our sensory selves needs to be matched with our personal needs for stimulation or calmness. Once again, these are individual needs that can only be determined by consulting our own sensory being. We need to check our needs and feelings at particular stages of the day, the week or phases in life. As many have argued, modern life is a fluid, ever-changing experience (Bauman), so we need to become adept at knowing where we are on the path of emotional health and what we need for our wellbeing. Unless we take some time to check where we are on the spectrum of sensory overload and

Research Output 6 page 45
stimulation, and what we feel we need for the day ahead, the week, the year, or even the next five years, we can become disconnected from our emotional selves. This can result in us feeling stuck, empty, deprived, bored, cynical, overwhelmed, unable to empathise and decidedly uncreative, unable or unwilling to take risks, becoming vulnerable, or opening up to new ways of thinking. All of these are imperative qualities needed to develop creative thinking and making. It is also important to acknowledge how our cultural sensitivities influence our wellbeing and the way we respond to the world around us. The community in which we have been exposed filters into our consciousness in ways that we may not have considered and these are often taken-for-granted assumptions that we do not easily see. For example I was reminded on a recent trip overseas that Australians do not have an extensive culture of making a variety of quality breads. Throughout Europe bread is a staple food that is rarely packaged and sold in plastic. Instead it is so widely consumed that it is baked fresh in an array of sizes, seeded coverings, shapes and forms. This is possibly due to traditions and access to grain farms but so does America and Australia so why do we not have this tradition. Australia does not have the creative expertise traditionally passed down the generations for bread to be made in this way. Bread is full bodied crusty and hearty with no need for butter or margarine but oil and vinegar instead. There is no reason why in Australia that we could not become creative bread makers but we accept and continue buying our mass produced bread in plastic. Our bread example shows us that we may become accustomed to ways of being and fixed in our own perspectives. Australians are adventurous travellers, and tolerate great distances because culturally we are used to of spread out cities. My point is that we will be attuned sensorily to cultural experiences that we take for granted and need to decentre ourselves if we are to become attuned to seeing differently.

Developing sensory awareness can help us to perceive life from multiple perspectives. This in turn is a critical skill to develop in contexts where adaptability is needed or problems need to be solved. In our current globalised world where competition and consumerism is the modus operandi and where the powerful and wealthy control much of the decision making, being able to move in and out of multiple roles and perspectives can deepen our understanding of what is occurring in the world and our place in it and may help us to act as agents of change for social justice. Creative process and developing sensory awareness opens previously unthought-of solutions and helps us to unearth seemingly impossible solutions (ref). Competing tensions between groups, communities and nations are usually based on individuals, groups and nations believing their way is the correct way, each exerting their own form of power in the form of domination, violence, resistance or coercion to achieve their goals. Being sensorily aware helps us to develop the multiple points of view required to cultivate emotional intelligence, and embody knowing and empathy (ref), which may be more effective in negotiation and peace building than perpetuating the conflict and competition model that currently dominates global communities and educational institutions, and which infuses into each of our most intimate relationships.

If we use our newly developed sensory awareness well we can learn how to sniff out con artists, political leaders who are being dishonest or potentially dangerous situations. We can quickly identify inequality and imagine what it would be like to walk in another’s shoes. We can see the problem and visualise a plausible solution. We can taste bitter tears of joy and feel elation when another triumphs over adversity and we can sing wholeheartedly
when we find a new way to solve old problems. When we tap into our inner sensory selves we are also more likely to feel connected to the bigger picture in life.

Focusing on the landscape of our inner world has been argued by some to be narcissistic and unable to create any meaningful change in our world (Bruce 2006, Featherstone 2007). However, I would argue that focusing upon the inner spiritual life has the potential to content us, not just in mind but in body and heart, to the greater forces in the world where we become part of the big picture. Through awareness of the subtle forces at play, the earth spirit, and the flow of life energy, we are more likely to be able to consider the connections between what is happening at the local personal level to the larger worldly concerns as we begin to consider our place and purpose within the cosmos.

In our quest to know ourselves and the ideas that we want to explore and express more readily it is helpful to gather and collect. By gather and collect I mean we should use our senses like snuffling, following our intuitive hunches, asking questions, listening and observing or, as Clarissa Pinkola Estes puts it, “nosing out the facts” of the very things that we are interested in; this becomes our research. When we think of research, we usually conjure up images of scouring pages of books, frustrating internet searches, lab coats, serious frowns and potentially dull academics (most are pretty interesting when you get to know them). But research, when directed by passion and purpose, is exciting and immensely satisfying. Researching for our creativity might include finding out how we can create our own life the way we want it to be, our own community group, a creative space in our home to paint, dance, sculpt, a flourishing garden on a balcony, or a community garden space, an arts festival, a video production, dance, song, sculptural work, group project, novel, poem, academic paper, environmental strategy, activist group, cultural gathering, cooking, food festival, craft project, café design, scientific experiment, maths problem, moral dilemma, strategic scenario; even figuring out how to balance the family budget starts by collecting. We can collect like-minded people, artefacts that fascinate, intrigue or have meaning to us simply by noticing what we are drawn to.

While thinking of your main questions, aims and goals you will need to collect ideas, tools, materials, skills and dig into history, but whichever way you go about collecting it needs to be led by an underlying inspiration and intuition. Many people would vehemently disagree with what I am suggesting, arguing that objectivity is needed to ensure validity of your digging and researching. I would argue in return that even hard sciences are driven by someone’s initial passion and desire to make change happen for the better. Intuition is about seeing, feeling, hearing, tasting, touching and knowing through embodied wisdom. It is not mysterious; rather it is a nexus of conscious and unconscious knowing through being hypersensitive to the field with which you are very familiar. Expert art critics intuitively know when a work is a copy and not an original, not through mystery but through many years of observing, touching, and tuning into the micro styles of the artwork (Gladwell 2005). Gladwell (2005) suggests that thin slicing, a process where we take a small amount of information and make a quick decision based on senses and previous experiences, is just as effective as longer, drawn-out analysis. He goes on to argue that experienced scientists, artists or sports players have integrated important knowing into their unconscious so that they shortcut the usual process steps and “just know” how or what, quickly. Intuitive wisdom similarly is a way of knowing what goes beyond conscious explanation and while it may be touted as mysterious and flaky it is another valid way of embodied knowing through the senses.
Story and Art meaning:

**Strawberry fields**

**Watercolour on paper**

The green woman under the hill is releasing flowers and seeds to grow upward toward the sun. She represents the earthspirit, the energy that animates all of life, the creative energy in the cosmos which makes growth possible. When you tap into the depth of your emotional self you may begin to see things differently – from a new perspective. Things that have been invisible are now visible. Once you begin to use and see through other senses it becomes difficult not to see, feel and sense in this new way. The image shows that there are worlds within worlds represented by the earth women and the dancing woman. The earthspirit is animated – sleeping but alive. Her hair is the underground river. The river below signifies the subconscious; the knowledge, always there, can only be tapped into when listening to the sensory emotive self. The woman on top of the hill is dancing through the fields, collecting strawberries and reaping the benefit of the growth made possible by the fertile lands symbolizing that collecting and gathering are important in learning about the inner self.

To claim art and aesthetic ways of knowing as research is an act of rebellion against the monolithic ‘truth’ that science is supposed to entail.

Finley 2003
What you can do:

**Gather:** feathers, shells, articles, poems, colours, designs, ideas, people, books, images, dance moves, friends, puzzles. Check out Pinterest at [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). Activities need to explore the senses.

You could try these suggestions:

- meditation in the bush, listening for sounds
- blind trust walk
- smelling lemons, coffee, lavender, soap
- feely box
- fuzzy seeing (when you stare into space in daydream like quality)
- leaves collection and describing the colours
- bark rubbing and tree touching
- sketching the shoe from memory and then looking
- squelching feet in the mud
- clay work

**Activity**

**What You Will Need**
- pens and pencils
- fruit
- an outside place
- paper
- decorative box
- musical Instruments such as drums, xylophone, rattles, triangles, keyboard etc
- glue
- your body
- camera
- ink or paint

**Stimulus**

When was the last time you really listened to your body? This activity is about restoring a connectedness with your senses and bringing you back to awareness of the sensations that we often need to shut out in a busy world.

You can choose to approach this activity in one of several ways. You can use it to begin to feel again in simple ways or you can focus on your guiding question and then notice where tension arises in your body and then gently release this. You can also use this activity to gather or collect sensual objects of desire and inspiration. The main point is that you trust your senses on this one. You ask yourself, “How do I feel? Where do I feel it? Does this feel pleasant or stressful? What do I need to collect or gather to find out where I want to be, go or do?”

During the activity, tune in to your intuitive knowing and reflect on this during the course of the activity. We also need to consider the longer term ramifications of the stimulants we use to dull or enhance our feelings. For example it might feel good at the time when we drink coffee or alcohol but later we feel unhealthy overall. For now it is just about noticing.

**Create**

1. Start a gathering box. Go outside for a walk and look at things really close up. Notice patterns, shapes, colours, textures. If you are lucky to be walking in a natural space look for interestingly shaped rocks, leaves, bark and notice the variety of colours. If you can’t physically gather, take up-close photos to remind you of what was attractive and inspiring. You could also use your box to collect anything in life that inspires you – images of your project, quotes, scraps of fabric, people, cars, fashion ideas for your next creative activity.
2. Tutti frutti: Go to the fruit market and buy three or four different fruits that appeal to your sense of touch and look a good colour. Feel them before you choose them and smell which ones are the best. When you get home take each fruit one at a time and smell, feel and then cut open the fruit so that you can see the centre. Line the fruits up and look at each one carefully, noticing what you see on the inside. Draw, paint or photograph these shapes from different angles. Experiment with how different you can make them look. Next, squeeze the fruit in your hands and notice any pigment dye that is released. You could even use this as part of your artwork. Taste bits of the fruit, not just the sweetest parts but taste the skin and bitter parts as well. You could also use the half shapes of the fruit to make a stencil pattern when dipped in paint.

3. Sit quietly in any space. Close your eyes. Take in three deep breaths and exhale. Notice the sounds that you hear. If you are in a group you can call these out when you hear them. Try to notice sounds that you would not normally hear that are in the background. Find a sound that is pleasant for you and follow that with your ear. Imagine that you are with that sound. Make up an imaginary story that explains the sound. When you return home or to your class space try to mimic the sounds with your body or with instruments. You could make up a song or class instrumental. Alternatively you could dramatize your story.

Share

Find a friend or creative group that you feel would be open to your new adventures. Ask them to just sit and listen to your rambles; tell them that you just want a listening post rather than a critique. You could start on online blog or Facebook page dedicated to your explorations. Pinterest is a great site that allows you to gather your interests in one place, albeit in electronic form. (You can’t smell over the internet.) This is my Pinterest page: http://www.pinterest.com/karin0999/. Discuss with your friend or group what a few collected items mean to you and why they are inspiring. How do these items and experiences that you have chosen fit in with the larger issue of question that you have been exploring?
Workbook

Allow some personal reflection on what you have learnt about your awareness of your senses.

What is your strongest sense? Your weakest?

What blocks or barriers have you noticed that you put in place and which prevent you from feeling fully alive?

What new perspectives on old problems or ideas (new ways of seeing) have you found through gathering, exploring and experimenting?

How can you bring the experiences of your sensory self into your creative work? What new creative activities would you like to pursue?
Lesson 6

Run wild in your imaginal garden

The lesson I have learnt about the imaginal is to let it run wild. What kills creativity is fear, judgement and unwillingness to be wrong, stickiness, boredom, lack of inspiration, a high need for control, disappointment and inflexibility. What fosters the creative process is openness, inspiration, curiosity, wonder, risk taking, boundaries for safety, unfurling potential, action, movement, fluidity, doing the work, a willingness to remake, edit, and to try again. Knowing your work is not an end in itself, but part of a process, a lineage in time. Your creativity not only comes from your own inner processes and physical efforts but is built upon what others have done in the past. We cannot underestimate our cultural heritage in influencing our interpretation of symbols and the way we express these will be from what we have had available to us. When we embrace our passionate self and accept our creations we can accept that what we make is a gift of expression, even if we do not think it is ‘good’. What you think, make and do is of you. It is part of you and contains aspects of your being, your past, and your present, those that have influenced you and your emotional energy at the time of making. Your creative work is an expression of you at that particular moment in time ... a nexus of all that you have been and are which is contained in each brush stroke, movement, dance step, sentence, garden bed or computer component. Creating acknowledges that we exist. It is an expression of us making our mark in the simplest and most complex forms. These creative forms are not simply paint, ink, soil, muscle movement, cloth or theoretical propositions; they reflect who we are, what we think our values and beliefs. Your creation contains parts of your story. When we share our creative making we are letting others into our private inner life. We are asking to share meaning with them through the creation we have brought into the world. I think it is valuable then to question why we might spend much of our time and energy on activities that do not inspire us, that we are not passionate about, that are meaningless to us, those which do not nurture us towards our aspirations or do not foster what we hold as important and valuable in life. I think we need to question where we place our energy because if this is directed into pursuits that are soulless for you, draining or demotivating, the creative flow of life energy becomes stagnant and it is difficult to flourish.

Wallas’ model of the creative process from 1926 proposes four stages of creativity:
1. Preparation
2. Incubation
3. Illumination
4. Verification.

It is still taught as the basis for the creative process in university settings. My experiential reality of making a creative work leads me to question the oversimplification of Wallas’ stages. Creativity scholars have reworked and added to his model to include generative problem solving and distinctions between the stages approach in an attempt to understand the sub processes from a scientific perspective (Lubart 2010).

Creativity, like any activity, includes some skills that can be mastered but to focus only on these skills is missing more subtle parts of the process. Components of our creative process are held together by our emotive and sensory glue which in turn guides the creator to listen...
to important emotional cues. Often the sensory is dismissed as secondary, irrelevant or conveniently omitted and placed in the ‘mysterious’ basket (Boden 2004). From my research interviews with ten artists, through my own creative practice as well as my involvement with creative arts groups over the last ten years, I have witnessed how women participants used a deeply connected sensory emotive spiritual approach to art making (Mackay 2014).

The metaphorical approach, similar to that which I have taken in this book, has been roundly criticised by those like Boden (2004) who are sceptical of the inspirational and romantic perspective of creativity, as she sees this as an attempt by an imaginary elite group of artists to claim and cloister creativity as unique to them. Instead she claims that creativity is more a scientific mechanism that can be atomised and neatly separated into components. Scholars that attempt to atomise the creative process will, in my view, fail in their quest to unearth the holy grail or ‘magic’ of the creative process. This is, because creative process is a process embedded in thinking and feeling from above, below, around and within (Wuthnow 1992, Raphael 1996, McNiff 2004, Allen 2005). What is surprising about atomised accounts of the creative process is the dismissal of feelings, emotions and senses as if these are irrelevant to creativity.

Emotions and sensing have long been essential to artists’ art making and inspiration. The emotional sensory nexus alerted them to important cues and opened up a trail of investigation to follow for particular creative trajectories, which they may have otherwise overlooked. Boden (2004) seeks to demystify creative practice in an attempt to make this more accessible to more people. In doing so she constructs a dichotomy between the way artists approach the creative process, on one hand she the places the unexplained mystery approach and the other a scientifically explainable creative practice. However, Boden (2004) misses the point of artists use and drawing upon metaphor and myth, the purpose of which isn’t to obscure but to illuminate meaning. Metaphor and myth are not unexplainable mystery, but instead another legitimate way of understanding the world through a story framework. Stories are one of humanity’s oldest ways of conveying meaning and of making meaning which has the capacity to embody scientific knowledge, senses, emotions, ecologies of self as well as the not yet understood. Without a way to communicate our senses and emotions through language and metaphor our creative life would be a barren landscape. A more holistic approach is needed to fully embrace the way the creative process works, otherwise essential components of the sensory self are missing.

Maslow argues that before we can truly flourish, we need to have our basic needs met. According to his hierarchical pyramid model we need to feel safe and secure first, loved and have a sense of belonging and then we can develop esteem and become self-realised. His model is based on the ideology of evolution and progress that has permeated western thinking since the enlightenment period of the late 17th century in Europe and reflects a linear type of thinking of continual betterment and progress. A progressive step-by-step approach to creativity is still commonly used in school curriculums in many westernised educational systems; however, this misrepresents how creativity is often a chaotic immersion in sensations and ideas and is more usually experienced as an emergence or cyclical process, with recognisable phases of initiation, development and growth, a peak realisation and then a resolution where there is then a period of fallowness or decay.
When we give ourselves permission to run wild in our imaginal garden we can embody the joyous and invigorating rush of excitement that a new idea and new discoveries bring, which then spurs us on to want to do and know more. To live a passionate, creative life you do not need to wade through all the stages of creative practice and indeed this may be counterproductive as the creative person finds themselves demotivated to create through extensive focus on skill development rather than creative thinking and making. It is not necessary to buy the best materials, to have all the correct skills or to wait until you have enough money to begin what you want to really pursue. Creativity is not dependent on these things. Creativity is dependent on the expression of what is important to you. Creativity is a process of allowing yourself to follow the path that is intriguing and questioning to you and questioning why things are the way they are.

War, famine, desperation and displacement are issues that many in our world face and it would be facile to suggest that in these desperate situations it is possible to follow an unencumbered inspiration. Yet time and again even in these incomprehensible situations people continue to strive for what is important to them. Malala Yousafzai, a 16 year old Pakistani girl, was shot in the head by The Taliban after advocating for girls’ education, and yet still advocates through her writing. Activists strive for freedom and rights in situations which oppress. Women’s creative groups in developing countries show that flourishing and creating are not dependent upon a developmental progress model but that the creative process is important to everyone because it expresses who we are and what we have been through, the emotions we have within, our experiences in life and it offers ways to move beyond the almost impossible challenges of our life (Warin and Dennis 2005).

Far from being irrelevant or impotent in creating change in women’s lives (Bruce 2007 and Featherstone 2007: 43) my research found that spiritual imaginative and creative processes were powerful ways to unearth the inner lives of women and instigate a critical creative activism. Burns (2008: 349) specifically argues that imagining other possibilities is an important strategy for resisting and/or surviving “the messiness of global living”.

The imaginal is the capacity for symbols and reflections to come into existence. It makes possible these new forms but more importantly alerts us to what is thinkable (Shukartis 2009). While Shukartis (2009) the imaginal as resistance for the disempowered has been overplayed in what he terms “suburbanisation of the imagination” (2006) he still argues that we need to continue the imaginal and look for minor mutations to effect change.

Moments of minor mutation, while often occupying a seemingly insignificant role within the larger social fabric, act as a fulcrum on which larger transformations in collective imagination are initiated.

Shukartis (2009) draw’s upon Scott’s (1979) concept of the revolution within the revolution and interprets this as “the constant movement and transformation within” (p15).

For me this conjures an imagination within the imagination, with new possibilities ever present at each brush stroke, each step on my walk, and each line of my poem. Old ideas can spark new ideas, new paintings contain slight variations, old patches of neglected garden can be reclaimed and we can reawaken to ourselves that which has lied dormant or undiscovered if only by a millimetre, the idea always there but hidden by a thin sheet of paper. This reinterpretation through our imaginal selves makes relevant what has been cast
aside perhaps because its use could not be seen or it was just not the right time for it to come into existence.

Shukartis’ ideas on the imaginal are consistent with the approach of this book which sees the creative, the imaginal, as cyclical, limited, of being organic in nature, culturally bound but not able to be contained in step-by-step systematic reason. He describes the iterative process that I have experienced in my creative practice:

... the beginning and end may very well represent the same location, a nonplace of (im)possibility, containing seeds for a radically alternative present, continually folding over itself and refracted through patterns, modulations and intensities: spasms and shifts divided by recurrences and undercurrents.

When we allow our minds and our bodies to actually, physically, sensorially and spiritually run wild in our garden, we are free to think, play and make what we like. We may be influenced by our cultural bounds, our habitus, but the imaginal allows us to rethink, remake, reconsider and ask “What if?” When we can feel, as well as think, question, as well as accept, give in to ourselves and the place we are in at this present moment, rather than resist and be constantly elsewhere we are in the creative moment and embedded in the creative process. We are at this moment at the most creative because we have created a space that had not existed before, a space to think differently which opens further space for others to also think differently, even if this is only a small mutation as Shukartis suggests.

**Sayings on the page**

*People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think this is what we’re really seeking. I think what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.*


*In the creative process, the most meaningful insights often come by surprise, unexpectedly, and even against the will of the creator. The artist may have a sense or intuition of what might be discovered or of what is needed, and in some cases even a conviction, but the defining aspect of knowing through arts is the emanation of meaning through the process of creative expression.*

(McNiff 2008)
This free, open-hearted spirit spreads the love wherever she goes. Here it falls to the earth and plants itself in the ground, ready to grow into something more magnificent than we could ever imagine. The protectress Goddess tree in the background silently watches over her. If we stomp on this love or do not see it in the first place, it cannot impregnate and replenish the earth for our future generations.
There seems to be such a lack of love in some places, damaged souls that think taking from others will fill up their emptiness, stomping on others’ delicate shoots to help themselves feel powerful or just withholding their joy. I’ve experienced stomping at times this year which has withered my spirit. I have found my own generosity waning. I then become overprotective of my soul. I retreat to nurture and lick my wounds, jealously guarding its dimming light. One soul cannot survive alone. Call me naive but I just don’t get why some people are mean spirited, closed or spiteful. It is diminishing. If we can love ourselves enough we may find it easier to spread a little more love – the possibilities are mind-blowing.

I have been told and know in my heart, that trees, plants, flowers and rocks are of the same spirit as us and like us cannot blossom if not loved. I have made a promise that I will spread the word that whether human, plant or rock, when we cut one down, rip one out, eat one of its fruits we need to be mindful of this spirit, pay right homage and appreciation; not just take callously.

The image is called *Spread the love* and was created for the 2010 Earthspirit Festival and Exhibition held at Braemar Gallery, Springwood in the Blue Mountains, Australia. The Women’s Room community arts group organised a one day arts festivals and three week women’s story and art exhibition from 2006 until 2010. The *Spread the love* exhibition was to be the last that The Women’s Room would organise as we were struggling with maintaining the growing workload and our growing families. In making the artwork I was expressing how much joy the festival and exhibition had brought to us individually as well as to our local community. However it was time to let the idea of The Women’s Room go into the ether with love and allow each of the women who were involved to use what they had learned and spread their wings in new, passionate adventures.

The woman at the centre of the artwork is totally naked and covered in hearts, vulnerable and visible. Some of these hearts are placed at her chakra points. Chakra points are energy centres in the body which correspond to specific aspects of the body, emotion and spirit and have been used by practitioners of the Eastern tradition for centuries as access points to heal the whole body. Her Chakra points symbolise the loving, healing potential that she carries within her. She is not hiding her feelings and her actions are completely visible. Like the saying ‘Wearing your heart on your sleeve’, she is doing more than this; she is bearing her heart and soul in an act of giving. She is completely comfortable in her skin and has learnt to accept herself as she is right now. At this very moment she has nothing to gain and nothing to lose. She skips and dances creating love balls, throwing these into the air wherever she has been. She is grounded in love, not disconnected from the earth but completely resonating with it. At the core of the earth is a red heart, glowing, almost pulsating. The heart is the metaphorical earth seed, imbued with potential to grow many other hearts to ‘spread the love’.

Overlooking the heart woman is a beautiful tree woman watching and wondering how embracing all of this love and healing works out. She is cautious and curious, rooted in one place, stuck. The tree woman represents our resistance to freedom and creativity, fear of the unknown and uncertainty about embracing life in all its passionate glory. She would like to run wild and embrace her passions but she is scared of the unknown and the uncontrollable. However despite all her misgivings her groundedness is also important to remind us to come back to ourselves, to our roots.
While there is a sense of utter freedom, the creative energy is fuelled by the earth with a small portion of this captured in the dancing love woman’s hand and then thrown in the air. The energy of love seems to be magically pulled or created out of nothing but it has been made possible by the woman’s connection to the earth that she dances upon. Once the love ball is released the love doesn’t just dissipate but plants itself into the ground where it can grow more love.

**Activity**

**Stimulus**

This is the fun, juicy part of life creative making. In this activity the aim is to release any fears and really let go and enjoy the process of making and creating. It is now time to take risks and really explore fully your creative idea. In other words, you need to get right into it and not be concerned what others think.

For you this might be:

- singing your heart out,
- painting or drawing,
- furiously, dancing as if there is no tomorrow,
- writing what you want instead of what you think your audience want,
- approaching people that you have been too scared to approach before for help, introducing yourself to the place or person you really want to work with,
- diving right into your cause or beginning your community group.

This is not a time for timidity. It is a time to take a deep breath and go for it. The outcome or product is not the important part of the process. What is important is that you are creating movement and momentum. You are taking a step in dreaming your biggest dreams. Forget about the critics and stay true to what you feel is important for you to explore. Sometimes people are threatened by what they don’t yet understand or what is new to them. Trust me – they will watch you first to see what happens and then wonder why they didn’t also follow their passion.

**Create**

1. **Group Paint Swap:** You will need a leader/facilitator for this activity. Do not tell the participants in advance that they will be working on each other’s artworks. Surprise is a crucial element. Start with a blank sheet of paper and a paint brush. Ask each person to make a mark with any colour paint. There is no need to worry about what you place on the page. Continue working on the artwork for two minutes. Next ask the participants to move one place to the right and to begin to work on that person’s artwork. There may be complaints and cries of “I don’t wish to ruin others’ work” or “I don’t want someone ruining my painting”. Keep going, allowing that chatter but taking note of this for later. Ask participants to move again to the right. This time ask them to completely cover the white spaces in the painting. Next move ask them to completely change the painting. Keep moving to the right and offering new directives like “Try the end of the paintbrush” and “Try using only your hands”. On the final turn ask participants to make the painting theirs somehow. Discuss with participants the reactions to risk and challenge they experienced during the activity and the benefits of letting go of control.
2. Quick, large, abstract door painting: This activity can be done in a group or individually. The reason I say large is that it is more difficult to get caught up in the fine detail that can constrain us in smaller works as the largeness may encourage freedom of space. Some will find this overwhelming but still have a go at it. Procure a very large canvas. Better still, find a door that is no longer being used. You can pick these up for around $5 at recycling stations. Any large surface will work. Choose three colours of paint plus black and white. Bring to mind the current issue or idea that you have been thinking about or working on. Hold this central to your mind. Firstly cover the whole background in white paint. You can use sponges, paintbrushes, rollers or your hands. Work quickly. You only have 10 minutes to do this. Next scoop up amounts of paint in your hands and fingers to make patterns and designs on your surface. Keep working until you feel pleased with the colours and shapes. If you don’t like it wipe bits away and change it. You only have 30–40 minutes to complete the work.

3. Open project: If painting is not your thing, using similar principles to the previous activities (strong boundaries, limits of time) come up with your own creative activity. The important aspect is that it is fun, inspiring and done very quickly without overthinking. Suggestions are:
   a. Dramatic expression of your chosen theme (love, racism, hope, desperation, grief etc)
   b. Three minute dance expressing your story
   c. Three minute movie trailer video of a dramatic event in your life
   d. Collection of found objects arranged to address an important social justice issue
   e. Clay icon representing what you want to bring into your life
   f. Poem or prose expressing your longings
   g. Lyrics to your own song with melody
   h. Musical piece or remix of someone else’s music
   i. Cook up a new recipe
   j. Design a garden space
   k. Timed life drawing series

Share

If you are working in a group remember the rules of sharing creative works. There is a trust involved which needs to be respected. While we all have instant reactions to works it is important that we do not take ownership of others’ work by declaring things like “It is a frog” or “It looks like a shark or a monster.” It is important to allow the person who has created it to explain what they were aiming at doing. When commenting it is better to use the phrases “It reminds me of” or “It feels like”. This way you are leaving space for multiple perspectives without dominating. In groups of four to six take turns at sharing the process of what you have made. Explain the aspects that were easy and those that were difficult. If you are doing this activity individually you can do the same but reflect and write about your process on your own.
Workbook

Allow some personal reflection on what you have learnt about letting go of control.

- What this easy or difficult for you?

- Which project did you choose and why? Explain what you learnt from your process about yourself and about the creative process.

- What are you utterly passionate about? What inspires you to want to be, make and create in the world? What do you need to do more of? What do you need to do less of?

- Make a list of 10 things you could do to pursue your dreams or further your passions.
Lesson 7

Find a sunny spot

When you start your metaphorical garden full of ideas and hope, be that a new artwork idea, group, new relationship or job, it is important that you choose trustworthy supportive people to share your initial ideas. Your emerging ideas are like precious sprouts from a newly unfurling plant. At this stage if overexposed to harshness or under nurtured they will wilt and wither or fail to thrive. If you start in hostile territory, your dreams, ideas and concepts will become stunted, shut down, cut off, destroyed, shrink or die. I have learnt it is really important to be discerning about who you share your new ideas with and how much of your creative work you share at different phases of the creative process. I have found it best to start small and achievable with curiosity rather than self-criticism. Your work doesn’t have to have everything, be the best, the most outstanding. If you are doing it, then at least it is moving along, imbued with energy and has the possibility of gaining some momentum. You need a little bit of sunshine to get your creative life going and to sustain you. Sun provides the energy that powers the Earth’s systems: for humans it is the main source of vitamin D, for plants it is essential for the production of chlorophyll and growth. Sunlight creates rainbows through light refraction and fires our imagination through bursts of intangible colour. Sun creates warmth and heat which open seeds with the help of water and soil. Too much sunshine can be destructive, drying, cause drought. Artificial support coupled with not enough challenge or creative tension can create boredom, disempowerment and reliance on others. When encountering the first raging storm, if no independence has been fostered, like delicate flowers in an exposed situation, you will crumble and probably have difficulty recovering.

We all need to develop some strength by testing ourselves through difficulties and accepting criticism. Challenge can inspire creative thinking, risk taking and help us come up with solutions for survival. However, too much struggling to survive compromises wellbeing where emotions like fear, shock, anxiety, cautiousness or post-traumatic stress can cause an inability to cope with change or imagine alternate possibilities. Too much criticism can be deathly, soul destroying cutting you off from your desires. There is no flourishing in a weak stalk that has not had the benefit of supportive soil, sun and water.

Ask yourself:

Am I ready to talk about my ideas? Am I strong enough to face constructive criticism?
Can I share some of my ideas now and save some for a later stage?
Will the person or people I am sharing with appreciate what I am attempting to achieve?
Am I prepared for the consequences of sharing such intimate parts of my creative self?
In the past have those who I have shared with been overly critical?
If you are not ready for criticism do not share yet. Wait. Keep the enjoyment of your newfound work to yourself at first. Allow it to form in its own way. Be curious about it. Give yourself permission to accept your work for what it is. New ideas, images and thoughts can take time to work their way into your consciousness. If you are new to the unfurling creative process you may at this time doubt yourself and believe that you have nothing to offer. This is the exact moment when you need to continue and persist. If you don’t like what you have made by all means throw it out and start again. This can be part of the process. However, I often find that when I have made something at the time, whether a poem, a drawing, an
image or academic writing, I commonly have two reactions to it when completed. I either think it is the best thing I have ever made or that it is pretty tragic or needs to go. I have learnt through experience not to throw out these scraps and mistakes as they often hold the seed of an idea which does not make sense at the time but is the missing part in a future creative piece. On the other hand, when I revisited the creative work that I thought was outstanding, I could more clearly see its flaws and wonder what was so wonderful about this work. But even when I realised the work was not the genius that I initially thought and after cringing a little at my naivety, I tried to be gentle on my work and viewed it as a stage in my ongoing learning and understanding. In short, critical perspectives and self-reflection can be very helpful in understanding where you are in your process and assist in learning more about yourself and your creative work. However, too much criticism at the wrong moment can be crushing and stifling in your flourishing.

I have learned that it can be difficult for others to share your vision in the same way you imagine your idea in its full technicolour glory so it is important to nurture your vision in a sunny spot, with suitable soil and water. Creative ideas, like plants and people, need light and warmth but have different needs. You will need a conducive space for your own particular needs. There is no one formulae that works for all plants, people or creative group work. Some plants like more shade, some lots of water and deep rich soil, others can survive on rocky cliffs and in parched, windy conditions. Some like growing on mossy rocks hideaways. There are many beautiful diverse ways that we can grow. Some like competition, like plants that jostle to reach the sun for the limelight, while others flourish in the protection, needing a little more shade and yet others thrive on the intense heat of a bushfire to germinate their seeds. The key is to find out what you need at this time in your life, for it may change at different times. When vulnerable you may need more gentle sun; when bored, more challenge. You need to listen to your soul, your body, your heart and then seek these out.

To help instigate your creative ideas, begin your community group or follow your creative passions, seek out nurturing and inspiring spaces. For me this feels like warmth, and gentle sun, colour, glorious blossoms contrasted with rough and rugged textures, the smell of fresh rain on a dry day. If you are like me you need some encouragement. I do not flourish when stressed or harshly criticised. I need a little encouragement. There is a common myth that creativity and artistic ability needs struggle and challenge and can only be achieved by the pained lone genius. This myth has been fuelled by the domination and glorification of the male artist of the enlightenment period, who needed to replicate the female procreative capacity of birth to claim his creative capacity. Creative ability was marked off as a special masculine capacity that women did not have, and was also closely linked to salvation through suffering in the patriarchal Judeo–Christian religions. However, the creative genius is a myth. In my perspective we all have creative potential and the capacity for making great works. The lone genius is a myth because creativity can be inspired by both self-reflection and sharing with community. We do not exist in isolation but, like a garden, are reliant on the protection or overshadowing of the plants that grow near us.

The perennial question is always, “What makes us flourish?” Is it because we are ‘naturally’ gifted or because we have been ‘nurtured’ and taught to believe in ourselves. Or perhaps we have overcome adversity. Knowing what you need and learning about what kind of help and support, what kind of sunny spot you need, will help you to flourish. Give yourself permission to do things in your own way in your own time. We need to recognise our own
strengths and needs to fully flourish, to find our sunny spot and trust our own abilities, and
to seek out support and shelter when we doubt ourselves.
Ask yourself:

How can I nurture my own creative talents without standing behind someone else?
Who can I turn to when I need support for my creative endeavors without harmful
criticism?
Is there someone I can trust to be honest with me about my work? You don’t always want
to hear that it is fabulous when in your heart you know it needs work.
Where in my life do I continually place myself in a situation of being disempowered?
What are the first steps I can take in acknowledging my creative abilities?

Your ideas do not have to be excessively pampered or have everything that you think you
need for you to progress. Part of the creative process journey is to learn through doing,
using trial and error to inform the learning cycles. It is inevitable that at some point during
the creative process you will experience unlikely rough parts but this tension, far from being
avoided, can be very helpful in working out how to progress your creative ideas. There does
come a time when the ideas, experiences or challenges you have been working on are
exhausted and it is time to let these go. You may have worked through the challenging
issues in a group creative situation, or moved beyond the themes, colours and styles in your
painting, or perhaps the big questions that you felt so passionately about previously have
waned in interest.
The poppies or roses grow on a rocky mountainside. There are three sisters represented here: Hope, Faith and Beauty. They each have one of the gifts of Love, Acceptance or Courage. Love is surrounded by red flowers, Acceptance has the magic white flowers in her hair flowing into the valley below and Freedom is looking towards the Western sun. I give thanks to the women who have come into my life in some way. The three sister archetypes in this painting, symbolise the magic and power that we all hold within our own spirit which truly blossoms when we are brave enough to speak our truth and share our vulnerabilities with others. I am still learning how to do this.
Beauty relishes the flowers growing around her and delights in the eastern morning rays of the sun. On her head is the butterfly symbolising her ever-changing abilities of adaption. The second woman, Faith, is represented by the woman with hair falling down the waterfall and over her face. Hair symbolises dead old cells, old knowledge and what has passed before which now influences the present, representing the deep subconscious of her being. The water carries seeds from flowers down deep into the valley and the possibility for new life to emerge. She is faithful, solid and can withstand the eroding forces of water. The third woman, Hope, is difficult to see but she is vital to the integrity of the image. Her cheek faces the sun in the west. She represents hope at the end of the day through the fiery sunset, passion to ignite the fire of the creative process. Without hope we are lost to the abyss below in the valley.

The painting represents the pagan stages of women’s cycles of maiden, mother, wise woman; with the number three is symbolic of life’s mystery and things we do not know. The image was painted to honour the place of the Blue Mountains and the women’s energy held deep within its ancient ancestral spirits. It represents my locatedness within the mountains and my connection with other women who live here, past, present and future, as well as the Three Sisters rock formation at Katoomba. This formation is an important marker and keeper of the Aboriginal story of creation, which was originally seven sisters. The sunset represents the cycles of life, the day and the seasons, but mostly the hope that a new day will bring a new perspective, new opportunities and a better way to live in supportive communities.
Activity

Finding a sunny spot

Stimulus

This activity is about trust and discernment. I have had to learn the hard way that I cannot always share everything creative I make and assume that others will be respectful about my work and ideas. Unfortunately, some people take without asking or criticise without thought. When you are making your work, you have put heart, soul and effort into it. If you are like me and very open about inviting people into your world, and you are an emotional person, it is important to find ways to share your work without this crushing you. Be selective about who you share your intimate and important aspects of life with. Find a safe harbour or a sunny garden where you will be safe and nurtured, especially when you are beginning your creative journeying. There are many who would be happy to pull us down so avoid the critics until you are ready and strong. Identify who you can trust.

Create

1. ‘Who can you trust’ map. Using crayons or chalk pastels make a map of an imaginary flourishing garden. In this garden place all the elements that you want and need to foster your creative development. These might be emotions, skills, people, qualifications, experiences, tools of your trade. Next, focus on your needs right now to strengthen your inner self or your creative self. Ask what it is that you need to support you in your endeavors. Do you need a mentor, to learn a new skill, to practice? Do you need constructive criticism, or do you need someone to help make you accountable and follow through on your commitments? Identify whatever is important for your development add this to your map. Finally, write exactly what you would like right now, in words, and be very specific. For example, instead of writing ‘feedback’, write ‘I want feedback on the pitch of my voice rather than just asking, “Have I got a good voice?”’ Ask your mentor specific questions rather than expecting them to know how to help you.

2. Release the inner critic exercise. On scraps of paper write down some of the negative things people have said to you that have hurt you greatly. You could also write down names of people that you no longer need in your life and that have burdened you greatly. You could also write down negative self-talk you say to yourself. You do not need to show this to anyone if you do not want to. However, it can be a very powerful exercise to do this in a group and have others witness your releasing of this past baggage. On coloured paper write an affirmation of how you would like to be. This needs to be framed in the present positive. For example, you might write: ‘I acknowledge my strength and abilities without putting myself down’ rather than ‘I will not criticize myself’. In the former statement the action is already happening rather than sometime in the future and psychologically this is a powerful device. Once you have your statements perform a ritual burning of the negative. If you are in a group form a circle to hold the group energy. This works well if you centre yourself in meditation first and imagine all the negativity you hold within your body and scrunch this into an imaginary tight black ball. At the same time as you burn these negative statements imagine the release of this black ball into the ether and watch it disperse. Also state what you are releasing out loud and ask it to be gone from your life. This highly symbolic act alerts your body, heart and mind that you no longer want this negativity in your life. Finally, in a loud and commanding voice, call in what you need by reading out aloud your affirmation and then burning this also.
3. Safe harbor and sunny spot: Depict in any creative medium what your safe harbor or sunny spot in your garden looks like. Place in this what makes you feel safe and supported.

Share

In a whole group share your activity and explain to others what you have found to be a barrier to trust and sharing. Also state what makes you feel safe and supported.
Workbook

Record your personal reflection on what you have learnt about trusting your own judgements and trusting others.

Why do you think trust is an important aspect of creative practice?

What nurtures and supports you in your creative practice and your inner life?

Are you overly critical of yourself or of others? How can you practice more kindness towards yourself and generosity towards others?
Lesson 8

Curiouser and curiouse and less judgemental

Curiouser and curiouser is a clear reference to the strange and fabulous journey created by CS Lewis of ‘The Adventures of Alice Through the Looking Glass’ fame. In Alice’s adventures she comes across many strange, confronting, bizarre, infuriating and upsetting situations. As she ventures deeper into her journey she finds she cannot turn back and although confused, she never loses her curiosity in what she discovers. I like to think of the journey of Alice in my creative work because it reminds me that no matter how strange or bizarre the worlds I enter seem to me, how far off I have wandered or how dreadful I may think my work is, if I remain curious, keep going and do not judge myself too harshly, I can usually learn valuable lessons that are potentially transformational.

I have learnt that creativity as a process requires curiosity and less judgement. The creative process is an invitation to venture on your own personal journey even though it may be risky, scary or push you out of your comfort zone. Sometimes when we set out on our journey it looks easy. We may have watched others also take this journey and decide to follow what they have done but then when we set out we find our journey is not like theirs, as it is unique to us and our particular circumstances. There are many perils and challenges when we delve wholeheartedly into our creative work. If you have followed the previous lessons on running wild in your imaginal garden, then you will already be some way on your creative journey. It is often when things get tough or we feel stuck or unhappy with our progress that we want to give up because it all seems too difficult. The best way to avoid being stuck and instigate movement is to ask questions; distance yourself from your work and be curious.

When we seek we will find new knowledge, but sometimes not what we were expecting. So how do you cope with new knowledge and integrate this new learning into your own established ideas? When we are excited by our creative journey, our next step seems clear and movement flows, sometimes too quickly for us to keep pace. However, most creative endeavours do not come with a rush of energy, or if the initial idea does, the development of it does not, and this has to be worked through and built upon. This is usually the difficult stage. Similarly, if you have brought a new community group into existence there will generally be tensions and difficulties that arise through people’s diverse approaches to the creative process. When we allow the creative process to emerge rather than follow a series of prescribed steps we can become frustrated. This is why it is tempting to take the road that is well laid out, well-trodden. While following this trajectory may indeed prove very productive and even be incredibly useful at certain stages of your learning, it will not allow diverse, unusual and seemingly irrelevant aspects of your creative ideas to be interwoven into the fabric of your world. When we shut off from the strange, uncomfortable, unusual and weird we limit our thinking because it is not within our present understanding.

Limiting our creative work to only what we have known or done previously without our own rediscovery, remaking or questioning is to invite apathy and boredom. Limited thinking is a dangerous practice as it fixes conservatism to the point of immovable psychosis and psychic death. Acknowledging traditions, past ancestors and holding onto culturally important mores is not under question here; rather it is the inability to integrate these into a lived reality in fresh contexts in a way that does not diminish their essence. Also, when we

Research Output 6 page 70
ascribe to a narrow view, we cannot see others’ points of view. We are not able to imagine new possibilities and it becomes difficult to move. We can become stunted and stuck and limited in what we, our creative work and our very being can become. We shut down our emergence into a fully mature and flourishing tree to a bitter seed incapable of growth. Too often people feel they are not good enough, that their work is substandard or their lives and relationships are no good. Before the creative work or idea is even fully emerged it gets shut down by their own inner critic. I have found it incredibly helpful to develop the capacity for being curious rather than judgemental. Curiosity is a form of critical analysis but without quickly tearing your ideas down too quickly, so instead of describing your work as pathetic, hopeless, useless, try asking:

What if ...?
Why ...
How else ...
How does it make me feel?
What is the problem ...
What do I need right now ...
What happens if I leave it and come back later ...
What happens if I look at the work from another perspective?
Why do I feel the way I do ...
How can I move forward ...
Can anyone else help me?
What do I want/need?
Do I need to revisit a past time to find a new solution?
The image is evocative of Alice in Wonderland. However there is no Alice in the painting. The woman who is asleep under the tree with a book by her side is Alice’s teacher and she is possibly dreaming of other worlds. If you look closely you can see the rabbit hole where the famous white rabbit is supposed to have scurried away. The book and the rabbit hole represent the opportunity to seek imaginal worlds. Next to the base of the tree is an amanita mushroom, a psychotropic reference to the magical, shamanic and otherworldly hallucinogenic ‘trip’ experiences which can be brought about by consuming this type of
mushroom. The trip signifies a wildly imaginal journey of spiritual intention that is transformative; not a regular journey, jaunt or light hearted travel. The teacher leans on the jacaranda tree, which is in the full bloom of summer. Her dress and hair style is reminiscent of the 1800s and indicates that through journeying in the spiritual realm, time can be transcended, the imagination able to visit any time in history or future, or other parallel possibilities in the present. The character of the teacher alludes to aspects of our selves that guide us on our journey of learning.

The jacaranda tree is highly symbolic of knowledge and wisdom and is often planted on university grounds to symbolise the ancient scholars. The South American myth behind the Jacaranda tree relays how a beautiful bird with silver plumage, Mitu, came from the south and brought with him an Indigenous priestess. They perched in a jacaranda tree and the priestess became known as the daughter of the moon. The local tribe took to her with much affection and she gave them her wisdom. She taught them about natural wisdom, the healing plants and the sacred mysteries. She taught them how to propagate and to know the soul of trees and the soul of the jungle. Mitu, son of the sun, returned to the sky and the priestess daughter of the moon eventually flew back to the sky to be with him, the jacaranda tree remaining symbolic of wisdom. Although many universities plant jacaranda trees on their campuses because of their association with wisdom and study, I have not been able to find reference to this from the universities web pages. The longer version of this myth talks about the white western ways coming into the forest to take the secret knowledge without consent and perhaps the reference to this myth has been conveniently forgotten?

In my painting the jacaranda represents a deep wisdom, like the one in the myth that is lived and has a spiritual dimension which is associated with the context of knowing the land. My painted jacaranda tree is a warning that to misrepresent or take knowledge without the deep embodied knowing will lead down false tracks, rabbit holes and nowhere in particular. If the knowledge of plants, cultural traditions and spiritual practices are taken out of context these can dangerously be misrepresented and lose their connection to the essence of the Indigenous wisdom. In this way the knowledge is not based on integrated knowing but on separate bits of information that are disconnected from their holistic and passionate beginnings.

If you look to the hill in the background and the second jacaranda tree, you will see the Earth is in the shape of a pregnant woman lying on her back with her arm behind her head. The babbling stream flows between her head and her body, essentially cutting off her head from her body. This is also a reference to our creative passionate potential that, like the Amazonian myth, warns that if we cut off our embodied knowledge from our head knowledge both knowledges will lose vitality and meaning. The pregnancy symbolises the creative potential that is within all of us and links us back to the matrix from which all life has emerged. When we ignore our passions and inspirations we shut off our creative potential.

This painting is highly symbolic for me as it represents my journey of knowing and unknowing of my research projects for the Doctor of Cultural research, entering the unknown world of academia with all its hidden mysteries and ways I have had to learn. The stream and pebbles are cleansing, soothing, flowing, and represent the fresh perspectives I am seeking while also giving a sense that there is no stagnation through movement and
following your passions. Also, the stream has stepping stones to help me across to the other side. Strawberries or apples are in the basket symbolising bits and pieces I have collected and learnt about myself with love. The stream is lined with red poppies, symbol of Demeter and Persephone, but also of death. The red death flower is also a symbol of a psychic spiritual journey but also represents the potential for a psychic death if you stay too long or get endlessly lost in highly charged situations such as in the world of passion, study, creativity. The stream is deceptively shallow but it is still dangerous, particularly when navigating the slippery moss-covered rocks. The white flowers represent purity and eternity, while the watch held by the rabbit reminds us that there are many things out of our control and we have limits to our desires.

Turn your work over in your hands as if you have never seen it before. Take risks, questioning along the way, and listen. Be receptive. Not necessarily responding but accepting. Do not discard anything that you have made or move on too quickly. It might not be time yet and you might just find that your greatest mistake was your best work. That is you keeping an open curious mind.

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Just because you are struggling does NOT mean you are failing. Every great success requires some kind of struggle to get there.

Unknown
Dear Human

Dear Human: You’ve got it all wrong.
You didn’t come here to master unconditional love.
That is where you came from and where you’ll return.
You came here to learn personal love.
Universal love. Messy love. Sweaty love.
Crazy love. Broken love. Whole love.
Infused with divinity. Lived through the grace of stumbling.
Demonstrated through the beauty of ... messing up. Often.
You didn’t come here to be perfect. You already are.
You came here to be gorgeously human. Flawed and fabulous.
And then to rise again into remembering.
But unconditional love? Stop telling that story.
Love, in truth, doesn’t need ANY other adjectives.
It doesn’t require modifiers.
It doesn’t require the condition of perfection.
It only asks that you show up. And do your best.
That you stay present and feel fully.
That you shine and fly and laugh and cry
and hurt and heal and fall and get back up
and play and work and live and die as YOU.
It’s enough. It’s plenty.

Courtney. A Walsh
Activity

Stimulus

Sometimes we need to turn things upside down or look from the outside in or the inside out to gain a fresh perspective. When we are judgemental of our work, our life, or our creativity, we can get stuck. Take a step back, walk away and flip things on their head. Ask a friend for a new point of view or try something new. This activity is designed to help you see yourself and your work in a different way.

Activity

1. Acknowledge your wisdom. Imagine you are at the end of your life, and you want to give advice to yourself as a 16-year-old, a 30-year-old, or a 50-year-old. Write a letter to yourself acknowledging all the great things you have done. You can include regrets and advice about what you would do if you had your time over. Keep the tone of the letter gentle and loving. In your wise voice, give advice to your younger imaginary self. What would you tell yourself? If it helps, imagine you are talking to a close friend that you care about deeply.

2. Gratitude exercise. Sometimes it is easy to get stuck in our own failures and feelings of insecurity. A quick way to move out of this is by switching the brain into focusing upon what is going well or right with your life or in your creative work. Using watercolors, paint a rainbow-colored background roughly on your page. When that has dried, think of three small and three major things you are grateful for in your life and write these in black pen. You can doodle and add images to these but the activity is meant to be fun and quick. I have also seen this done in several ways. Some people share what they are grateful for on their Facebook page and receive feedback from friends. Other people think of three things every day that they are grateful for. You can start a chart of things you are grateful for so these build up and you can view these every day to remind you.

3. Teaching an old dog new tricks. Take a risk and move out of your comfort zone by choosing something that you are not that good at or have failed at previously. Write a list of 10 things you find challenging or would like to be more like or try but have never had the courage. For me, this might be singing in public, maths puzzles, remembering lots of trivial details, worrying about my teenage children, and challenging my fear of heights. Each week, challenge yourself to try addressing one of these. The point is not to succeed spectacularly at this activity but to encourage you to have a go and try new things and to be curious. Keep a diary recording how you felt and what you learnt each time you tried something new.

4. Share. In pairs, share your experiences from any of the activities and what you have learnt about why curiosity is important for creativity and adaptability. Discuss three things you are grateful for, three things you are not good at, and three fears or things you would like to try out.
Workbook

Record your personal reflection on what has been your experience of curiosity and where it has led you.

What seems like a mystery to you and what would you like to know about? What do you remain curious about?

When you have failed at something what has been your reaction? Would you like to change your reaction in the future?

What would you like to challenge about your creative work? How can you take the next step even if it seems risky?
Lesson 9

Digging, sowing, feeding and flourishing

This lesson is about acknowledging the cycles of the creative process, which also relate closely to the cycles of life. Implicit in this understanding is both the human nature relationship and the shape with which humans have told stories for thousands of years. Stories tell about our relationships with others, our trials, challenges, and triumphs. Importantly, stories would be insipid shadows if not for the inclusion of the setting, the environment, where all the action of the story takes place. The garden, the wild, the forest, is often implicated in the telling of a story to create a mood and set the scene. We often do not give a great deal of attention to the setting as it is often used, especially in children’s stories, as a way to introduce the story and then remains a background, while the characters take centre stage. However, the landscape in which our story is set, whether our imaginal story or our real life adventure, is ever present. We are in a constant relationship with our natural world and the cycles that make the Earth turn as they are also what influences our own seasons. The metaphorical garden in our life stories gives us important clues as to the mood of the place and people and so too we can glean a sense of our own and others mood through their use of language and the way they describe their own life stories.

Stories are one of humanity’s oldest art forms. All cultures have stories (Rushkoff 2013) and although these may vary in themes and form, the story cycle is relatively similar across many cultures’ mythic structures (Campbell 1993). Propaganda stories have built nations, sold lies and justified unfathomable oppressions. Stories are not naïve fantasy but powerful tools which are central to our understandings of good and evil or the complexities that lie between both ends of spectrum. Nevertheless, stories have also inspired imagined futures and are fundamental to human conceptualisation as turner so eloquently states:

*Narrative imagining – story – is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, and planning and of explaining.*

(Turner 1998)

After Joseph Campbell’s exploration of many cultures’ myths and story cycles, he recognised a similar pattern in what he has termed ‘The Adventure of the Hero’ (1993 P: ix). Campbell suggests that there are predictable phases in a story such as the departure, crossing of the first threshold, the belly of the whale, initiation, the road of trials, the ultimate boon, and the return (1993 ix). Highly influenced by the psychoanalytic work of Freud and Jung, he saw each of these stages as representing an aspect of the human condition, demonstrating the tensions that exist within the human psyche. While Campbell’s work is a helpful guide, there are some rather problematic stereotypes for feminists and cultural studies theorists. Although Campbell delves into the myths of the East he conjures these as the exotic ‘other’ reflecting the popular ideology of the early to mid-1900s which harked back to a patriarchal and Christian Western centric worldview. Contemporary globalised world views have moved beyond his now seemingly inadequate discourse, which casts women archetypes as ‘Goddess temptresses’ and men as supra-masculinised Christian heroes, leaving little room...
for women, or diverse ethnicities, to play the role of the hero. Nevertheless, aspects of his work remain relevant and contain at their heart some deeply evocative ideas about the nature of myths, stories and their ability to connect us to the energy of the cosmos. In my own creative work and in classes that I have facilitated at The Women’s Room I have reimagined Campbell’s ideas about the ‘Adventures of the Hero’ from a feminist standpoint in a course that I called ‘The Heroine’s Journey’. What is important about the journey is the acknowledgment that our life stories follow cycles and seasons reflecting the movement of energy in the cosmos in what Campbell calls the “cosmogenic cycle”.

The cosmogenic cycle is to be understood as the passage of universal consciousness from the deep sleep zone of the unmanifest, through dream, to the full day of waking, then back again through dream to the timeless dark. As in the actual experience of every living being, so in the grandiose figure of the living cosmos; in the abyss of sleep the energies are refreshed, in the work of the day they are exhausted; the life of the universe runs down and must be renewed. The cosmogenic cycle pulses forth into manifestation and back into non-manifestation amidst a silence of the unknown.

(Campbell 1993: 266)

Our creative process cycle is a reflection of the cosmogenic cycle. A flourishing garden allows nature’s cycles to ebb and flow rather than pushing for more output and continued unsustainable growth. Flourishing requires rest and recuperation, respects time and acknowledges the past, your roots. By reflecting on your story, your history, it becomes possible to understand why you are where you are right now in this moment in time. When we acknowledge our ancestors efforts to sustain themselves and bring us into this world, we begin to feel grace towards those that have come before us, where this grace follows us into our present life becoming the substance from which we draw inspiration and, deeply enriching our creative work, Like a flourishing garden the soil, the substance which forms the base of future growth, needs to be healthy, nutrient rich and able to sustain what we wish to grow. Like a garden, even a low maintenance garden, work needs to be done. We have covered how digging and sowing our garden can help us understand ourselves and our creativity in the previous lessons, but it is beneficial to revisit these and keep the whole cycle in perspective. In this lesson we add feeding and flourishing.

**Digging**

Digging is the visualising, seeking, questioning and unfurling work that happens before any action. It is an enjoyably exciting phase of the creative process if we are motivated and charged with passionate energy but it can also be difficult when we unearth things that we are not expecting and which may have caused us pain in the past or challenge our current world views. Digging is the preparation stage and is necessary in any creative work, be that a painting, a dance, a sculptural work, creating your life or creating a new life.

The digging metaphor relates to Wallas’ preparation and incubation phases of the creative process mentioned in lesson 6, yet the digging metaphor is more open, enough to conjure further imaginings. When we narrow down our ideological theories too much, we deny others the possibility of imagining their own visualisations of how life might be. My intention for explaining the creative process through metaphor, beginning with the digging, is to encourage imagining what digging means to you rather than impose my ideas of digging. When we leave ideas a little bit open and evocative we invite others in to co-create.
meaning with us to visualise what is meant in their own cultural constructions of what digging means and allow them to feel what digging is like from their past experiences. Digging to you might be tough, rough, dirty, earthy and physical or it might conjure up books and nooks in a library, or perhaps seeking through travel, and talking to others in the quest to find their sense of belonging, or it might involve walks in nature, alone time and staring into space. More atomised accounts of the creative process are not able to conceptualise that digging as a phase in the creative process might be not just a sub-process but also a meta-process which includes all of Wallas’ stages plus more, or less, depending on the drive of the individuals seeking. Hodge conceptualises the backwards and forwardness of creative discovery in his ideas on fuzzy logic and the ability for in-betweenness of two extremes to be a highly creative space. He states that:

*The rules of a metaparadigm, in many ways, contradicted the rules of the paradigms on either side. They always produced multiplicity, wild connections, cross-disciplinary leaps, and contradictions. What I called the rules of the metaparadigm was my independent empirical discovery of the conditions at the edge of chaos as described by Prigogine. All great scientists, I learnt, like great artists and ‘charismatic’ political figures (in Weber’s sense of the term) were experts in navigating at the edge of chaos, before the term was born.*

*At turning points in history, ‘great artists’ and political figures could grasp the totality, the set of contradictions that included present and past, and the movement between them ... Out of that understanding can come a clearer grasp of invisible currents of contradiction that are always present even in ‘normal’ times. Instead of disorder as aberrant, the breakdown of order, order is a condition in which tendencies to disorder are sufficiently under control to be temporarily ignored. It is never a choice of order or chaos, but each super-posed on the other.*

Like the relationship between cosmic matter and dark matter, creativity and chaos, the invisible force, tensions arising between opposing forces are just as important as the actions of either process. It is what is missing to us as much as what is visible that makes the creative process flow, stringing it along in an attempt at impossible resolution and which gives the creative work momentum. These cosmic tensions influence all of us in our daily lives and are what importantly moves us enough to remember the effects on our emotional selves and these are what become the powerful communicators in a creative work. I have found that when in the moment of creating, creative form cannot be separated from cultural meaning and emotion but that the superimposed complexity that Hodge alludes to is what provides the diversity, depth and interest in our creative work and relationship with the cosmos.

When we take the lived cultural meanings that connect our intentions of our creative work away through dissection and then attempt to sew fragments of the creative process and cultural meaning back together to make creativity happen, the links which made the work or idea cohesive are lost. Digging releases the tiny tendrils holding the soil of our existence together and makes it possible for us to trace the threads that hold significance for us in that particular moment in our lives. Digging allows us to untie and retie within the matrix, the context, rather than exhuming the bits and pieces and then expecting them to stick together where the soil has been washed away.

The digging phase for me when I am painting is different to when I want to write about my inner life. When I approach painting I might manifest in actions like clearing a space by
cleaning and putting away my paintst from a previous session so they are organised, put music on, look at previously collected images to inspire my new creation, sketch with loose purpose, doodle, find my old sketches and spread them out or place them on a pin board. I might put candles on, consult my oracle cards to get me in the mood, ask for guidance from the Goddess, ancestors or universe or perform a small ritual to focus my mind on what is preoccupying my thoughts at that moment. Sometimes I just imagine and think. If I have been asked to paint a painting for someone I use this time to imagine and zone in on them and their essence so this becomes embodied within me without having to consciously hold this front of mind when doing the work. When I write, the digging phase is more like asking questions, answering them as best I can, reading what others have to say, observing and commenting of life. When I dig for writing it is a very different process than digging for painting. The digging phase is one of the longest but it’s not really visible to people when the artefact is made. The digging phase is forgotten by many and so it appears as if the work has come from nothing but it has come from many invisible but felt and tangible experiences.

Sowing

Sowing is the phase of doing. The digging and preparation have mostly been done. Now is the time you feel like spreading the paint, moving your body to the music, immersing your hands in the clay, planting the seed in rows or scattering them randomly. At this phase of the creative process it is important to consider what the seeds (creative work) needs. Do they need neat rows? Do they prefer to be scattered or buried quiet deep? Holding a fuzzy logic idea of what you want, as described by Hodge (2007), is helpful. My reading of Hodge’s fuzzy logic explains how ideas are not constrained by a linear right or wrong with coexisting possibilities, where ideas have the freedom to become, emerge “in a space in-between that [is] neither one nor the other”. Holding a ‘rough’ idea of what you want to achieve through a visual image, a metaphor or a rough sketch does not constrain a creative work or an idea from many iterations either in the present or in the future. Similarly if we squash seeds too deeply into the soil compacting these so that emergence is challenged, the seed (creative work) may still emerge but slower, harder and with more struggle. Then again the seed may flourish in well bounded conditions. Fuzzy logic as described by Hodge (2007) allows for the possibility that in some conditions the seed (creative work) may be distracted, interrupted or change course due to the conditions which surround it at any moment in time. A dog may dig at the seed, like a child may interrupt their mother while she is having an inspirational thought, changing forever the trajectory of the seed (work). Taking this one step further, fuzzy logic can be understood in terms of lived experiences. When imagining how our lives might manifest we might have a general plan which can give us a sense that we are in control, that life follows an implicit order; however, our plans can be interrupted or changed through inconsequential or irrevocable events bringing forth openings for endless possibilities. Nevertheless it is still important to have a guiding light, a general idea of what you want, or what you are trying to convey. Knowing your trajectory is still vital, even if blown off course, for it is the goal which guides your work but is not necessarily the outcome.

Sowing the seed appears to others as the visible active aspect of your work; however, it also contains the unacknowledged invisible workings of your process, underpinned by your philosophical decisions of how and why you have made your creative work. The kind of aspects I might consider are whether I want to have three dimensions, chunky, earthy or
smooth polished or writing that flows poetically or is sparse. Often my decisions are not logically planned but are made without the necessity of conscious thinking. If I trust the unconscious process to unfold, creative flow can more easily transpire. It is only later when the work is done that I can really understand the import (or not) of what I have created with conscious reflection. These two different tasks are felt very differently in my embodied self with different parts of my brain firing. When in the act of creative doing, of painting, I feel immersed, fuzzy visioned, at one with it all, focused on what is in front of me but when critically reflecting or writing my brain feels sharp, hard, stretched. Switching between the two can be challenging but with practice can be easier.

In the sowing phase, your work is still not as visible as complete as it is in the emerging phase. Your creative work may be just a seed at this point as ideas may be yet to germinate or are still young and immature. While you may have the vision for it to keep going and see what might come out of it, others would only see bare ground – others may not share your optimistic vision. At this stage it is important not to share your creative work with many people, but to keep it ‘underground’, and keep it safe. Exposing your vulnerable bits would be like leaving your seeds out in the open air for a hungry flock of birds to gobble up. This applies to individuals as much as it applies to groups or community groups. Keep your ideas fluid but also cohesive at this early phase. Too many elements, pathways or seeds planted can crowd out your ideas and your creative work becomes strangled or overgrown making it difficult for you to retain your vision or purpose without despondency.

**Feeding**

This point of your creative work requires maintenance, and is perhaps the most difficult phase because it is about discernment. If you are working on any type of creative endeavour like a sculptural piece, writing a song or facilitating a community group you might ask questions such as:

- Who or what do you let into your group (work, piece)?
- What are the rules of the group/work? Who makes these?
- How do you keep your creative inspiration without burnout?
- What needs to be edited out?
- What needs to stay and be given more emphasis?
- If you leave someone or something out, why?
- Is your work geared towards women? Men? A particular social group? How can you justify this decision?
- Is there a need for your work?
- How can I work through the challenging aspects?
- Am I feeding my own needs or someone else’s?
- What is my purpose for continuing on with my creative work?
- Who can I talk to who will be able to advise me uncritically/critically?
- What will help me maintain my stamina when I want to give up?
These are not simple questions but deep philosophical thinking and doing spaces. For example, if you leave somebody out of your groups are you trying to strengthen a particular group because of past oppression or is this an oversight that does not consider the diversity within your community? Do you include mothers, young women, older women, men only, a particular ethnic group, visual arts, performance, and writing or are these genres too disparate?

Learning how to feed your garden and maintain a flourishing space is complicated and cannot be separated into neat steps because creative work and gardens are not closed systems but is influenced by potentially infinite factors that will change the course of action and how your garden manifests. How you feed yourself will come back to your philosophy and your needs. Some people will scatter thousands of seeds allowing random nature to decide who will survive and what will fade away. Others carefully control their creative process. I prefer emergence, a kind of vague rough planning that does not place too much expectation or pressure on my work. I might do a rough sketch to begin with or pick up one that I have made in a previous time for inspiration. I would then work with the rough idea, leaving the others for another time. I allow my central idea to come into focus but also do not cling too tightly to my outcome as I know from experience that I need to leave room for the work to change direction. Like a seed in a garden some ideas will emerge stronger and more willing to come up. It then becomes a philosophical decision. Do you choose the most prominent, strongest idea or concept or do you feed and nurture the smaller or more delicate shoots. I cannot tell you the correct way to approach your ideas for success; you need to decide because this might be the whole reason for the existence of this creative work – its uniqueness. It may be vital that you take the smallest spark of an idea and that it becomes the brightest. This may be the genuine beauty of what you are creating – nurturing the hidden, the small. You may be driven by an act of social justice or an act of hope to choose what appears to be the weak; however, you may see, feel, sense its potential for more to exist.

**Flourishing**

Flourishing is about process. It may be an aspiration but unlike Maslow’s developmental model of aspirational success, it can be experienced by those who have not necessarily progressively worked their way through all his stages of having the basics of life first and then progressing through to more complex aspirations. Some of us flourish on very little and have adapted to survive and thrive in harsh conditions. Others of us need deep rich soil and a sturdy trellis to help us know where to climb. Flourishing is talked about a great deal and used in evocative ecological terminology by Jantzen (1999) to illuminate how we become while Seligman (2011) has sparked an interest in the concept of flourishing as happiness in the positive psychology movements, but no one can tell you what it is exactly for you, for good reason. Flourishing is a little like wellbeing in that we know when it is not happening but it is difficult to quantify. What is flourishing for one garden would mean death for another.

While there are some basic elements which we can describe about plants flourishing, that might be needed, like light, moisture, nutrients, capacity to reproduce, support from a substrate, oxygen, carbon dioxide, it is the micro happenings which are not as easy to discern that influence a plant’s flourishing. Similarly in humans, like in Maslow’s model, we might all need food, shelter, love and belonging but how much and what kind of these we need to flourish is wildly different for all of us. Even when we supposedly have all that we
need and more, we do not flourish while some gardens, like people, seem to flourish on what would seem to be inadequate to the most basic needs.

All I can do is tell you what flourishing is for me and hope that you recognise bits of what flourishing is for you. Flourishing for me is when I recognise that my creative process is working. When aspects of my life or creative work come together in a moment of knowing or being I feel a sense of illumination or realisation of all that I am, all that I have been and all that is possible in the future. To me this is when we are aware of our flourishing, our success, our existence, and we hold a feeling of gratitude about our moment in the sun. I discussed the connection that fuels flourishing elsewhere as a synergic nexus of ‘art in the making moment’ which encapsulates all of who we are in the smallest brush stroke (Mackay 2014). Flourishing for me is like a butterfly, a chrysalis that is emerging from its carefully designed and constructed shell inch by inch. So much energy and effort, thinking and doing has gone into the process of existence and becoming from egg, to larvae to pupae, to the making of the cocoon and then emergence of the mature butterfly. Most of this process remains hidden, almost invisible or unnoticeable, unless we are looking or are the one actually doing the creative work. The work of transformation is occurring all along the way, tiny metamorphoses occurring in microseconds that are changing the egg into the butterfly. What we recognise as flourishing is the celebratory moment of release and the basking in the sun for a brief time.

I know when I am flourishing by how I am feeling. My emotions are a signal to my brain and my body that alerts me to whether I have strayed from my intentions too greatly and feel stressed and anxious that something is not working out right or perhaps my emotions will signal that I am on the right path and I need to just keep going. My point is that a discussion about flourishing without a mention of emotions which focuses only on the external look and thought processes of flourishing is a misplaced one. When we are disconnected from our emotional selves for extended periods or have suffered traumatic events our emotions can send us scrambled signals and we may need help and support from a trusted person to help us gauge our responses. Still, emotions, feelings and sensations are a powerful language from our body’s energy system which can tell us something important is happening and that we need to pay attention and listen.

In my experience, the flourishing of gardens, our creative work, and our lives are about relationships and connectedness. In popular wellness terms there has been a focus on ‘getting the balance right’, ‘happiness’ and conflating discrete core elements into what constitute flourishing, but I hesitate to use these phrases. While striving for balance and attaining flourishing may be the goal, nothing is ever in complete balance and harmony, not our life or creative work, for it is the tensions that exist which push and pull existence, and the possibility of flourishing, into being. In other words, creative work, gardens and life are in a constant state of becoming and are never in perfect balance.

If we consider, as I have, flourishing to be a cyclical process, we are either moving towards or moving away, growing or atrophying, like the moon waxing or waning. The toing and froing between the tensions provide the energy, which drives us to manifest our creative work into existence and in turn for us to flourish. However, the way we flourish, how we feel about flourishing and the way our personal flourishing appears to others, is in our own hands, hearts and minds, and acted upon through our small actions and the influences that shape us.
Story and Art meanings

True colours

I see your true colours.

Watercolour

Figure 11: True Colours
For all the women who hide their hips
Who long to have love brush their lips
For the tears of shame that fall endless like the rain
The pain, the blame, feeling like you’re going insane
There is a god, a goddess or ‘the light’
A garden of love that tames your fright
That glows from within when you don’t feel right on the darkest nights

So move your hands away from your hips, lift up your chin
Embrace your wobbly bits (or even show your tits)
Find your voice, sing your song,
Paint your picture, all night long

I’m not interested in the colour of your cloak,
Your hairy lip or how well you get poked from your bloke
I see right through all of that shit,
You’re more than the skin that you were born in
The crap you’ve been through makes you ... you
I see your beautiful star, I wish you could too.
All I see are your colours, the ones that are true.
Activity

Stimulus

Flourishing is not only a positive thing but contains all the ups and downs we experience along the way. It is a misnomer to suggest that flourishing happens with continual progress and positive outward expression of growth. When we see the outward flourishing success of other people we can assume that they have had a lucky break or been given a privileged start in life, which possibly may be the case, but we don’t often hear about the underlying reality or costs of that outward success. If we use the metaphor of the garden we may look at the blossoming garden and in a desirous moment assume this is a matter of simply planting, watering, watching and waiting to make the garden bloom and wonder why it does not flourish. Our flourishing is built on failure as well as success, trial and error, risk and stability. In the poem ‘True colours’ the line ‘The crap you’ve been through makes you … you’ reminds us that the challenging aspects of life influence the course of your life. The point of this is not to wallow in your past misery but to acknowledge that even the most difficult aspects of our life have shaped us. Flourishing is the nexus of all of our life experience that comes together in one moment of appreciation, knowing and embodiment of feeling that we are in the right place now. In this activity we explore and honour all of the complexities within us and hence our creative work. For our most important creative work is creating our own flourishing life.

5. Will the real you step forward? You are a star. You at the centre of your learning.

6. The Heroine or Hero’s Journey. Joseph Campbell’s work in transpersonal mythology shows us how we each one of us must face learning journeys in our life stories. In this activity you are the hero or heroine in an imaginary storyline. Plan a story about your adventures, trials and challenges. You are the main character. Others come in and out of your story to either thwart you or to guide and help you. In this journey you discover much about yourself, life and other people. There is a crisis in your life, a moral dilemma or a deeply challenging time in your story. However, through this difficulty you find a gift, a strength that you did not know you had which stays with you on your return home. You can choose how you make your story, such as a story board, an image, a poem, a video representation, in a dance, a ballad or in written form.

7. Get it in perspective, centering and decentring the roles in your life.

8. Make a series of five concentric nested circles on a page. Place yourself in the centre of the inner circle. Represent those things that are important to you by placing those in the closest circle and those which are less important further away from the centre. Plot the roles in your life that are prominent in your life right now in specific areas of your life. For example mother, father, student, singer, creative, friend, worker, dancer, spiritual seeker, gardener, film maker, daughter, son, aunty, neighbor, community member, curator, leader, mentor and so on. Represent those roles which you are placing the most energy into closer to your centre and those that you spend less time on in the further circles. Use different colours to represent roles and add the skills you have developed from having to undertake these roles. Annotate the page with new perspectives that you have learnt through having to move in and out of your multiple roles.

9. Flourish … standing by your work. An issue I have had to deal with, and that my children have inherited, is that of standing back and letting others take the limelight as we are internally a little shy (no one would know this as we look really confident). We may tend to be really
encouraging of others but do not ‘talk up our own work’. This activity is more of a challenge than an activity. If you are in a group situation each individual is to bring to the group five things that represent how they have come to be at this point in life. For example, you might gather up five artworks, three might be your best and one or two might be those that you consider to be your worst. Arrange these works in a mini exhibition and write down ten things you really love about your work. Then write down five things you learnt from the ones you don’t like. Display this prominently next to your work. Allow other people to write comments in a ‘comment book’. During this activity stand by your work and be open to talking to onlookers about what you like about your work. Also be curious about comments others make, even if negative just listen as a bystander, just store these comments for later. Be aware of being drawn into giving excessive attention to other people’s work rather than standing by your own work. When you walk away from your own work and focus on everyone else’s achievements instead of your own, you are abandoning yourself. Quietly stay with the process and see what happens.

Share

In groups of three share two things you have been wrong about and that you have learnt most from in your life. What are two or more strengths you have developed and are most proud of?
Workbook

Record a personal reflection on how your story has made you who you are now.

What is flourishing for you? Describe how you felt when you have experienced a sense of flourishing in the past.

What digging, sowing or feeding would help you to flourish?

List as many strengths about yourself as possible.

How can you put yourself forward? What do you need to flourish? Write down three actions you could take to let others know about your strengths and abilities and act upon these to make it happen.
Lesson 10

Enjoy a garden party

So you have journeyed far and wide. You have dived right into the creative process and come out the other end with some creative works of your own. You have written draft after draft, practised your dance, refined your song, gotten your hands dirty, learnt from trial and error and now the flowers in your garden are beginning to bloom. Creativity and the joyful feelings of completion and satisfaction at your ability and efforts to create are to be relished. Our world can seem fast paced, and in continuous momentum but what we do does not necessarily happen at a constant speed. Our garden grows continuously but some parts of the growth cycle take longer than others, some blooms lasting longer, others shorter and then atrophying. We can easily skip over or dismiss our achievements or miss the blooming flourishing feelings as we are pressured to produce the next piece of work, the next dance, the next blazingly fantabulous idea for our company. We need to resist efforts to rush us into the new creative cycles prematurely. Not only is it one of the more relaxed, calm and enjoyable moments when we realise we have accomplished something that took considerable effort but it is necessary for the continuance of our creative work. We need to replenish our energies and refresh our views. We need to give ourselves time to see things as others might, to enjoy a new perspective. We need acknowledgment of who we are and what we have done; otherwise our work and our life can seem pointless, purposeless and devoid of meaning. We need others to acknowledge and share in our joy.

We have focused greatly on the inner life, the individual within the community, but to remain in the internal world of the self can make us narcissistic. Like the character Narcissus, who becomes fixated with his own reflection and starves to death, we need to be mindful of not staying in the inward reflection aspect of creativity for too long. I have witnessed and experienced periods of total immersion in the creative process. Our problems and desires have the power to consume us so that we can become trapped within our own viewpoints and obsessions. When we stay too long like Narcissus, we do not have the opportunity to test out our ideas and gain feedback from others or benefit from their ideas and reactions. Sharing our creative efforts can feel risky and we may want to avoid being criticised, rejected or dismissed as false or rubbish. If you are shy or lacking in confidence it may be challenging to share your work and know when the best time to share this is.

While it may be important to keep your ideas safe and supported in the early phases such as gaining momentum with your new ideas, establishing your newfound identity, integrating cultural understandings and developing a sense of empowerment, it is important to recognise our need for being out in the world. There is a danger in straying into a shadow world that is unable to help us live in a material world. Staying safe, protected and nurtured can only help us for so long. Eventually it becomes time to take the risk of putting your creative work out and exposed for others to comment upon. We exist within relationships and to deny the relational nature of sharing is to deny the full cycle of the creative process. To flourish we need more than to merely exist, we need to thrive – to feel fully the range of emotions. A creative life is not one that stays contained and controlled.

Knowing when to step out and share your work is an individual task. If you have been following the lessons that I have offered in this book, you will have learnt how to listen to
yourself, to question what you need and want as well as the importance of support. You will hopefully feel more like you know yourself and be more in tune with your needs. In my endeavours to find flourishing, I am constantly astounded how quickly we can become far removed from the sense of connectedness with self or other’s time. We need to constantly remind ourselves to return to ourselves or we forget ourselves. Further to this if we stay too long within ourselves we forget others. Sharing is not only rewarding but essential for flourishing. The concept of flourishing that I have proposed entails recognition of our emotional self and the web of connections we create with the self and with others. We need to find a way to vacillate between the other–self–community nexus that works for us. Some people like to be on their own and are happy with few people in their life and are described as introverts while others are much happier when surrounded by people and are thus referred to as extroverts. However, the introvert/extrovert dichotomies are limiting and rather simplistic. What I have found in my personal experience and through the research undertaken with women in my community is that we experience stages that encourage introversion or extroversion. We move in and out of our need to be with people or alone on daily, weekly or life stages. Our creative process requires us to move in and out of our inner and outer worlds, to centre and decentre our perspectives. Otherwise the creative flow becomes depressed, trapped and stagnant. Alternatively, when we become addicted to other’s attentions or opinions of our work, we lose connection with the essence of our creative spark and trust in our own abilities. As individuals, we can become subsumed into the group so that our ideas disappear.

Sharing our creative works is the icing on the cake. If you work individually perhaps the main work has already been done in your own head, your own body, your own studio, your own garden. When we take the chance to share with others our most intimate creations we invite them to comment, relish and delight in our joy. We are able to enjoy what we have created again and again through sharing. Sharing opens a space for others to invite you into their world so we can learn how they think and make. The wonderful aspect of having a garden party is that we open ourselves to new and exciting ideas. Others can point out aspects of your creative work that you may not before have noticed because you were too close to the work to see other ways.

I once made an intuitive style artwork at a course I was facilitating that conjured my utopia. The image which emerged was of a long swath of beach with a little purple house on the headland, with waves cashing in to the shore. My husband looked at my painting for a few weeks after I had painted it while he was tutoring mathematics students in my studio space. He came to me and pointed out a mermaid diving into the shore that once seen I could not unseen. It was clear, not particularly hidden. I had not intended or known I had painted the mermaid and it was delightful that he had seen something I had not seen before. Later I set to remake my original work so that she was more intended. The invisibility of images that are in plain view but subtle has now become a hallmark of my work where I invite viewers to look for what lies beneath the surface and how the surprise of uncovering the obvious but unknown feels.

Sharing is something that has been instrumental in my creative life. My creative practice has been nurtured and fed in the workshops and courses that I facilitated at The Women’s Room community arts groups. The creative work that we engaged in here was more than just developing skills – it was about the way we created our lives. We would share our challenges, discoveries, and our stories and use creativity as a response to explore these
further. The making of the artworks in response to our daily lives brought up our spiritual ideals and experiences where we often would discuss how deeply we had been affected by our relationships with people and place. My garden party began in the backyard studio where women would come every two weeks to share their inner lives with each other. Together we co-created our group’s story and unique style of creative spiritual practice. We stayed happily in this place for two years while we became strong, confident and empowered within ourselves through sharing in our group. After this period we felt that this too was becoming too inward looking and we decide to take a chance and exhibit our work at the local community arts gallery. This turned out to be more popular and well attended than we had expected. Over the next five years our exhibition turned into a community festival with regular attendance and participation by local and community arts groups. Sharing was risky but through taking our work to the public domain we received overwhelmingly positive feedback. I do not want to glamorise the experience as there were many setbacks and challenges along the way; however, if we had never taken the gamble we would never have had the future opportunities that manifested for many of us who exhibited and performed. Our creative world expanded, women’s stories and art were heard and seen rather than staying silent in the private sphere of the home. Our garden parties (festivals and exhibitions) were a great deal of hard work and nerve-racking but completely enjoyable and exhilarating.

As our garden parties grew so did our administrative tasks, even though our pool of volunteers remained the same. Our time for creating became less. Many of us became exhausted. We had overindulged in our garden party, taken on too much. Some of us spent more time eating the cake (indulging in the outward aspect of sharing) while not having enough time to make up new and exciting recipes (creative connection). Many women had become strong, confident and empowered, making inspired artworks and stories in some of our creative groups, but we had reached our limit. Our exhibitions and festivals needed to change if we were to continue. We were burnt out and needed time to reenergise. We needed time to be able to focus on new creative endeavours. So it might be with your creative art group. Sharing is vital for inspiring your creative work, gaining acknowledgment and feedback; however, there is also an appropriate time for the party to stop and space made for the necessary reflection.

Ideas that I have learnt and found useful in the sharing of creative work, some of which have come from an art therapy approach, are:

When group sharing of story or art, respect that the perspective of others’ work may be different to yours.

Instead of telling the other person what you see frame your sentence as your artwork ‘reminds me of …’ or ‘it feels like …’

Do not take ownership of others’ work, let them explain what it means to them.

Create a set of rules which the group decides upon.

**Getting people together: basic ideas for starting groups**

Do what you are passionate about.
Nurture your creative soul, otherwise the hard work can be soulless.

Be open and accepting rather than too elitist, but learn to recognize when someone is not a good fit.

Encourage rather than criticize.

Include not exclude.

Invite more than you think you need to your party because many will not come, just because they have other things happening. Don’t take this personally.

Be organized.

Have an acknowledged leader that can guide but who is also willing to collaborate and co-create.

Hold firm control but leave space for innovation.

Institute some kind of bringing together, acknowledgement or ceremony at the start of the group sessions as well as a closing off of the energy.

Be open to new ideas but also have the courage to stick to what has worked as change for change’s sake can be disruptive and destroy momentum.

Have fun … otherwise no one will come or come back!

Check the basics like provision of food, fluid, air, comfortable seating, music, adequate light and space.

Share responsibility and delegate tasks with scaffolding.

Develop strong boundaries.

Know when enough is enough. It is good to have a sense of when you need to change or move on.

Develop a culture of reflection and evaluation.

The slipstream of group expression can carry us to places where we cannot go alone, learning how to create supportive environments that inspire creative thought.

McNiff
The woman dances with joy in anticipation of the day and night before her. She is nervous and anxious but also excited to meet new people and share the dance that she has been learning. We need special events to look forward to and in this painting she dresses in her finest clothes. At Garden parties there are always lovey surprises and things hidden beneath the surface. Can you see the man waiting patiently in this image? Who would you invite to your garden party or gathering? What activities would you want to do and what would you want to talk about?
Activity

Stimulus

Humans are mostly social beings. Even if you need lots of time alone to recharge most of us need others to reflect back onto us who we are, what we believe in and to share the joys and challenges of life. Before you begin a get-together or group it may be wise to consider what your expectations are about coming together. What is the main purpose for you of coming together? Is it for fun? To develop creative practice? Are you part of a class? And so on. Understanding why you want to get together will be helpful in shaping your ‘Garden Party’. Knowing your own needs will help you avoid getting lost in the crowd and feeling disappointed with unrealistic expectations. It is always prudent to dream big, but expect some disappointments. If things happen without any issues then celebrate but if things don’t work out the way you planned try to be philosophical … and learn from the experience. People coming together can be fun, exciting and energising; however it is also inevitable that tensions will arise when diverse desires and agendas compete for attention. Having a flexible outlook is critical but possibly just as critical is having a passion for what you are doing and wanting to share. What do you want to celebrate, share or bring together? What is your reason for wanting this? What are you hoping to get out of your experience? Is it going to be enjoyable and achievable?

1. Design your garden party. A few of suggestions to bring people together in celebration could be to start a group, have a small scale exhibition, or join a group exhibition. Start small and manageable. It doesn’t have to be a large or glamorous event. What is important is the relationships you will develop in the process so firstly find at least three other people who will come on the journey with you if you are starting your own group or exhibition. If you do not want to start your own group, do your research and find what is out there that might suit you. There are some times in your life when it’s important to follow your own creative directions and other times it can be better to join an already established group. Before you jump in and begin, spend some time designing your gathering or write down what you want to be a part of. Include aims, theme, where, how many, costs, who will decide or lead the group, rules, guidelines, and how you will celebrate with each other, the content that you will cover, how you will let people know (invitations), and the frequency of meetings or the date of the event.

2. Gather some friends and have an afternoon of creative fun. If you do not want to have an ongoing group or more formal style event then perhaps you can gather a small group of friends together to experiment and share your creative skills and ideas. The best way to go about this is to decide on a theme that suits your interests beforehand, such as water, fire, movement, carnival, exotica, trees, people, innovation, cosmos, and so on as well as genre such as painting, dance, clay work, science problems, sculpture, colour, tribal style dance, poetry, craft, cooking, gardening. Remember that creativity comes in many guises. Similar to the above, in activity 1, decide on where and when, send out an invitation so that you each are clear and commit to this time. Ensure you have plenty of food and drink with relaxing music. Create a circle and ask each friend to speak out loud what they want to gain from the time together. Make sure all the equipment you need is set up and then have some fun!!! Remember to come back together as a group and debrief on what you liked and would do differently next time … and if you really enjoyed it perhaps make another date for an afternoon of fun.

3. Make a portfolio of your work. If you are working alone then make a scrapbook or portfolio of your work. This can be as simple as sticking photos of your work into a book, or gathering your...
images in an electronic format in an album. A word of advice is to write a very small explanation of what the work is about or what this work meant in your creative development so it gives a context and story to your work. Once you have your portfolio share this with a creative online group. You can make your own social networking page or blog to share your work out there.

4. Share. When you have shared your work and celebrated with friends or colleagues, evaluate either individually or within the group, how the gathering or sharing went. What did you like? What you did not like? What else would you like to include next time?
**Workbook**

Record your personal reflection on how you allow celebration and joy into your life.

What benefits does bringing people together have for your creative and inner life?

What might be some of the potential challenges of bringing the different people or groups together in your gatherings?

Was the design of your gathering suitable for your aims?

What future community involvement would you like to explore and what role would you like to play in your community?
Lesson 11

After The Storm

The time just before a storm breaks is the most tense. We can feel the pressure within our bodies. The build-up can be unbearable because there is an element of pent up energy contained within the storm. When warm moist air rises and cold air sinks thunderstorms form. Latent energy in the form of heat is released as the air cools, which fuels the thunderstorm. I am using the metaphor of the storm as the inevitable outcome of differences coming together. Once we accept that tensions exist we need to deal with them. Once the storm breaks, there is a sense of relief.

Storms can happen internally within the self however this lesson is more concerned with the tensions that arise through being with others in group work, differences in opinions or creative divergent directions. In my experience of group work, there are phases or cycles just like our garden has ecological cycles. There is the excitement of the beginning, the anticipation and hope of what we imagine to come. New shoots, growth, the perceived freedom of maturity, blossoming and inevitable decline, failure of systems and death. Creative energy, as reflective of life energy, is never still and as I discovered, so too is the energy amongst group members and community festivals.

Groups, according to Tuckman’s 1965 article, go through stages of development of forming, storming, norming and performing (Bonebright 2010). The forming stage describes how group members initially come together and are polite, not wishing to offend; storming is when conflict and tensions emerge from differing opinions; norming is when group members accept each other’s idiosyncrasies and a sense of cohesion is experienced; and performing describes how groups come to a functional problem solving capacity. Another stage, adjourning, was added later to describe the stage of separating. Tuckman’s incredibly popular model has been used by businesses and therapists, and while critiqued by academic scholars remains significant.

The important aspect for our lesson is how Tuckman’s concept of storming relates to our metaphor of storming from the perspective of a creative arts process group.

_The second stage represents a time of intergroup conflict. This phase is characterised by lack of unity and polarisation around interpersonal issues. Group members resist moving into unknown areas of interpersonal relations and seek to retain security … ‘group members become hostile toward one another and toward a therapist or trainer as a means of expressing their individuality and resisting the formation of group structure’. In this stage, members may have an emotional response to the task, especially when goals are associated with self-understanding and self-change._

(Bonebright 2010)

While storming in Tuckman’s sense is similar to our ecological metaphor of storming, I noticed in my research of women’s groups that the experience of storming did not happen in the second phase but seemed to occur just before adjourment. The Tuckman and Jenkins (1977) model has been criticised as being based on out-dated hierarchical developmental models of group process, which in reality are more complex than the linear
process suggests (Miller 2003). The storming I witnessed at one of The Women’s Room groups did not follow a linear pattern but little mini storms occurring throughout the group process could change the course of the group at any time. In this case tensions built to the point where irreconcilable actions pulled the group apart in separation. According to McClure, “order–chaos–order cycle is essential for growth and reorganisation because without going through periodic upheaval groups cannot evolve” (McClure 2005: xi).

Although McClure argues for chaos systems theory complexity in group dynamics, there remains a clear evolutionary perspective that runs beneath the more visible surface conundrums experienced in the group processes and which was ultimately underpinned by a growth, developmental and decay cycle. The creative process and group process I was involved with also follow this order–chaos–order cycle sometimes, but at other times they do not. Sometimes there was no order coming out of the tensions but instead failure and death. I explore these concepts more fully in my article Flourish or fail: the myth of safe democratic spaces in women’s groups (forthcoming). Importantly, in my overarching argument, I want to raise questions about the sustainability of groups, and our societies obsession with sustainability in general which tends to deny the cyclical process and limits to life processes. Not all creativity or groups manifest into the ordered ways that have been suggested. Often groups do not form, do not emerge in the first instance, nor do they reform later but are lost. The energy that forms the ideas may remain, as in the cosmological universe, but the way this manifests into our material existence offers infinite expressions that may or may not fit into developmental stages.

I like to think of the garden as a metaphor for change within the cosmos, including the chaos and order cycles. The energy that drives our garden, that drives us on to want to flourish, is ever present within the cosmos but the way plants use the energy, the way we use our energy in daily life, in our creative process, how much of this is accessible within the garden system and the way this will form into lived reality, remains unpredictable. Similarly, with the social nature system, our energy remains imprinted where we have walked on the Earth, metaphorically and physically, through the people we have touched emotionally and influenced, in the places we have visited and the stuff that we consumed. Even if we have not physically been to some places the trail that links what we have created, bought or thought about leaves traces of ourselves along the way. When we are aware of the relationship connections between ourselves, the food we consume, the air we breathe, the art we make, the interactions we have, the gardens we grow, the storms we experience, we may tap into a greater cosmological energy which influences our emotions and actions. The webs of relationships associated with these experiences are influenced by energy in the cosmos and, like the storm, can influence our actions and their consequences.

Energy is not stagnant. To flourish we need to recognise that tensions are inevitable at each phase of our creative process, group, community or existence. Tension is part of life. The cellular processes within our body occur because of differences in pressure or resistance, allowing some chemicals through minute cell walls but stopping others. When the processes are functioning within normal limits, the body is in homeostasis. I studied for a time anatomy and physiology as part of a health science degree and found homeostasis a helpful term in my eventual work in the community arts groups I facilitated, as it explained clearly that although we might aim for balance, the work and energy of the body is in constant motion. Perfect balance is never really achieved but a more vague overall balance of “health” or “wellbeing” of the whole system is what is more or less in balance. There
may be moments when one part of the body is in homeostasis but another is not. The life cycles that we experience of growth, maturity and eventual decay similarly are part of the homeostasis picture, albeit on a larger scale. Everything must die and return and so energy is returned to the earth and the cosmos. I question, in my creative practice and society in general, the need for constant growth and progress and the fear of surrounding decline.

Individually we may feel unstimulated by too much sameness and this can create a tension within the self. Our creativity may be stuck, causing frustration. We may have been working on a project for too long, or in the same job without change for many years, which becomes unbearable if a new way to approach our work is not found. As this tension grows we may feel it pull apart what we know until we move forward to breech our secure, stable ideas. The tension before the storm may create a fear that we will forever be stuck in inertia, which creates a fear of being stuck in inertia and so forth. Cycles do not always have to be positive but can be negative as well and we may become stuck in a perpetual state of anxious or inane movement back and forth but without any real transformational change occurring. Like a seed, we need a level of momentum of energy to get us going. Groups can sometimes provide this momentum because of the gathering of diverse energies in a contained space. Our seed casing holds its latent energy tightly and will not open without a catalyst to assist the bursting of the barrier of the inner core which holds the potential of the seed to become a plant, for us to become deeper, richer human beings.

Like the birth of a child, becoming, in daily living, or in the creating of something into existence, is not a painless process. There is the necessity of challenge and tension to cause something to exist and then challenge to maintain the homeostasis. Joy and ecstasy can be the temporary result of breaching the bridge from one transitional state to another, from pregnancy to birth, from grief to healing, from failure to flourishing. I am not suggesting that there is a dichotomy where we can only feel and experience either/or feelings. I am suggesting that there is movement between the extremes of experience but that these do not always follow predictable patterns and while transformations are occurring all the time; it is only at the transitional events or moments that we feel them significantly in our material reality possibly because of a release of pressure and tension. At each new phase of growth there is stretching, fumbling, and reaching for sunlight, for love where energy is required.

Each phase of the creative process cycle is challenging in different ways. Beginning can be difficult, growing can be awkward and clumsy and storming is inevitable. Storming can bring much needed relief from tension and can blow garden seeds in new directions. Old dead branches are ripped off to reveal raw tears in a mighty tree. A fire storm can raze houses, gardens and trees, leaving them in complete, blackened desolation; however, the Australian bush needs fire to germinate. Storms can be devastating, emotionally. They can be represented by tragic events in your life or irreconcilable differences in a partnership, death of a loved one or a stormy torrid love affair gone wrong. Storms can just be a build-up of unrealised strengths within individuals or a group where previously silenced voices have become empowered, with further questions needing to be answered. Storming can be a blessed relief, bringing much needed moisture to a barren landscape – a barren depleted life.

After the storm you will never be the same. You will not see things the way you saw them before. You may feel crushed or empowered but storms are a way of liberating the energy.
within a storm in an intense burst. Storming may feel like the end of your world. Sometimes storms, people and events are completely out of your control. You may need to sit and wait until the storm has passed. Other times you need to run very fast to get away from the danger that storms bring. I would not recommend putting yourself in harm’s way of the storm, but some people do. They chase storms, looking for excitement and drama, but we must never underestimate the power and nature of the damage storms can leave and pretend that we have ultimate control. We can be taken by surprise by the power that storms can exert long after the storm has passed. I have learnt that if you want to embrace a creative life, storming is necessary. We can learn from storms, rather than wait for them to engulf us but we do not need to conjure them or make them happen by instilling false drama. We need to face the storm but we can do this in our own way. Storms are about accepting your power and responsibility, accounting for past actions as well as seeing the truth of others’ actions towards you. You may be the one storming, stomping your feet because you are not being listened to!

When groups storm and issues come to a head, it is a time to lay your ideas and feelings on the table in clear view. It is not the time for pretending that nothing is happening. Storming exposes us, like precious flowers in a garden, to the whirling winds and at this stage we need to hope that we have built up enough support from others and strength within us to get us through. Storms are nature’s way of weeding out old, uninspiring ideas, difficult or draining people, and to clear a space for new life energy. The best part about storms is that you usually find your strength and occasionally you might even be witness to the magic of a rainbow.
Story and Art Meanings

After the storm

Acrylic on Canvas

Figure 13: After the Storm

Sometimes we don’t know why it is storming around us. Sometimes we don’t want to get wet. Sometimes we grieve the past and are unsure about stepping into our future. The woman under the tree is not sure if she will stay under the protection of the tree waiting for the storm to pass or venture out and brave the storm. Sometimes we don’t want to face uncomfortable truths but then sometimes this is just what we need before we can grow and blossom. On the other side is the beautiful field of poppies, waiting to be experienced.
May you be protected when the need arises, to face your storm and so watch the blossoms grow after the rain. Mother Earth will always be there, solid beneath you.

**Activity**

**Stimulus**

When we are facing turbulence in our lives, relationships, family situations or creative work, should we run, be blown with the storm, or stand strong? Being strong without flexibility within the storm may be disastrous, like a tree that is strong but brittle and breaks in the storm. But a super flexible tree can bend in high winds and turbulence. Reflect upon a time in your life when you felt blown in all directions, inundated by heavy rain or completely terrified of the thunder and rumbling that storms can bring. What does your storm look like? How have you responded? The wisdom of surviving a storm is that you recognise the dangers and blessings in life. Creatively a storm can manifest as a doubt in your ability and the vulnerability about putting your creative self out there to be lashed by vicious tongues. What does your storm look like?
Workbook

1. Depicting your storm: honoring the dangerous life. Paint your storm in whatever colours or genre you feel are necessary. Dance a stormy dance, write a stormy poem. Do not hold back. Allow the power and the passion of the storm to move your work. If you feel it’s necessary, add elements of your grief and loss in words or pictures or movements. Infuse your work with acknowledgment of the danger of being in life and death moments.

2. Being still: recovery and rest. Imagine you have survived a storm. You are not sure if the storm is over but feel grateful that the winds and rain have abated for now. Depict how your body would find safety. Where is soothing and safe for you? For me it is curled up, or in a warm bath. Using clay make a symbolic representation of you, your recovery, safety and stillness.

3. After the storm: the gift. On a large canvas use many vibrant colours to show your emotions. Reach into your heart and paint how your heart is feeling. If painting is not your genre imagine that you have been in a dangerous experience, a dark time, and you are beginning to move beyond initial pain. What gift do you find under the rainbow? What difficulties do you still have to traverse? What are you grateful for?
Lesson 12

Feel the earth beneath your feet: reconnecting to your roots

The creative process is cyclical. However, just because the stages within the creative process cycle allude to a general tendency, it is never entirely predictable. The creative process which I have experienced follows stages but these are not fixed or prescriptive. Some scholars try to pin the creative process down to clearly defined steps that anyone can achieve. I, too, agree that anyone can be creative, but I do not agree that this can be achieved by following a prescriptive formula. Promises made to find creativity, develop success or tap a consistent well of innovative ideas or deliver greater and greater happiness misrepresent the nature of the creative process and the inner life. Many have focused on the positive aspects of being creative. What I mean by positive is the outputs, the products that we can see or benefit from and the material reality of the creative work, which are not necessarily the optimistic and cheerful aspects. Conversely there are negative aspects to creativity that are present but not obvious. The negative in this sense is the invisible, the unseen, the unknown micro events, the unpredictable, the negative space of a painting, drawing, without which the positive would not be contrasted. The negative space binds the positive stages, lessons or elements of the visible manifestation of creativity together and is contained within the energy of the person interpreting the text, attempting to implement the phases and lessons of creative process in this book, through the actual doing of creating the work.

We can never guarantee what events or understandings will influence the work; this is the chaos aspect. We can never really know, in an embodied practical way, how something is until we actually do it, feel it or experience it. I do not mean that this always needs to be a physical experience but I do think that it needs to have moved us spiritually, emotionally, in some way, to eat into our soul, to penetrate our outer exterior to our inner core. When we allow this energy within us, invite it to surround us, we can feel connected to more than ourselves. We can feel connected to the greater universal energy that animates all matter. Some would call this a religious experience, yet it is not associated with the dogma of any particular religion but with the spiritual energy that has been represented by sages, wise women, Buddha, Allah, God, Goddess, Holy spirit, Manna, Kundalini, infinity, ouroboros, the ether, and which has been described throughout humanity’s history. Some people feel this through listening to music which takes them away on an inner journey, some through surfing waves in the early morning spray, others through sitting on a cool mossy rock in the bush, during an early morning walk on a lonely stretch of beach, or sitting on a mountain watching the sunset with a lover. Others feel the energy at festivals full of people, colour, clamour, music and the cacophony of noise that reminds them they are part of a bigger universe than themselves. Some experience this through diving into crashing waves or floating in turquoise waters. Others prefer the stillness of the red desert air and the clarity of the stars above at night, the howling of wild dogs and the crackling of a fire. Some prefer cosy living spaces and candles.

I often wonder about our relationship with our natural environment and why we vacillate between the desire of ownership and fear, rather than sensing that we need to be in a relationship with nature. In the western world we pay much money for being near the beauty of nature, paying millions for sea views and mountain top vistas, a patch of land backing onto the bush or a balcony with a glimpse of the sea. Meanwhile there is a
persistent fear of nature, and a predilection to control its unpredictability as we scurry to keep the boundary between what we perceive as dirty, earthy, messy, scary, chaotic tightly controlled and away from us ‘out there’. I concur with Plumwood’s (2003) notion of a colonised nature just as we have colonised many indigenous people. Like the fascination of the colonialist on the tribal, or the male fixation on the female form in artworks, are we content to gaze upon nature’s beauty, rather than have a significant relationship with it? It is fascinating to me that we want what nature can offer but we are not sure what that really is. Is it the essence of the vista that we desire, its calming soothing energy, and its awesomeness which puts us in our place? In the desiring of nature are we driven by ownership over its resources and does this belie our philosophical positioning of our entitlement as human beings to own and control land? If we think we can control and own the land does that mean that we desire to control and own what is on and within the land? We battle to admit that humans are causing any impact to our climate and it seems as if we are overwhelmed by the denial of catastrophe and we are waiting for Mother Earth to save us.

Lovelock, Suzuki and others have popularised the idea of the earth as Gaia, the Greek goddess representing Earth as a living breathing organism, with the capacity to self-heal and balance natural systems. As a feminist I concurrently embrace and cringe at the symbology of the environment as Mother Earth. Problematic for many feminists is how the concept of Gaia is responsible for fixing the woes of Earth’s problems. The concept of earth mother sets women up as needing to be nurturer, carer, the ever-loving and pure giver able to cope with the pollution and rubbish which is thrown at her. Alternatively, these metaphor positions women, who sit outside of these romantic imaginings of mother, as being less than what society expects and encourages dualistic assumptions of women as either pure, benevolent mother–wife–carer or harlot temptress to be feared and dominated. These dualisms give little space for society to embrace the complexity which reflects women’s lived reality and cuts women off from their roots, their inner strength and wisdom and traditions associated with symbolic deeper meanings.

Some feminists have argued that the Gaia, Earth Goddess metaphor, can be used as a symbol for women to embrace empowerment and innate capacity for strength through their biological associating with nature, through birth and motherhood. The ‘goddess movement’ within Australia, America and the United Kingdom embraced the symbol of Gaia, mostly by women, to signify cosmological power or energy that resides within their bodies as well as natural cosmic bodies like the Moon, the Sun, planets and plants. Initially the Goddess movement was associated with Celtic pagan worship but spurned a broader feminist spirituality movement where patriarchal concepts of Godhead were questioned (Radford Reuther). The feminist spirituality movement was also associated with the feminist art movement which critiqued male control of the art world giving voice to the previously silenced everyday themes of domesticity (Chicago 1976), sexuality (Schneeman 1972), gender inequality (Guerrilla Girls 1998) and body landscape nature (Mendieta 1980).

The feminist spirituality movement was criticised by the radical feminist movement for excluding women of colour (Collins, bell hooks) and of lower socioeconomic status. A further development to the exclusion of diverse perspectives arose in the form of ecofeminists Mellor, Mies and Shiva, who forwarded the spiritual feminist movement to include a critique of power positionality within society which considered mechanisms of oppression through a feminist standpoint theory. Standpoint theory argues for the need to
consider viewpoints of those people, groups and natural systems from the ground up. While these viewpoints may be partial, together they provide insights from lived experience of the oppressed that would not normally be able to come to light as those in lower status positions do not usually have the power to voice their perspectives. Standpoint theory validates oppressed forms of knowing. Plumwood (2003), Merchant, Mies and Shiva furthered this argument to specifically include natural systems as being associated with what is oppressed and exploited.

Ecofeminists have provided a much needed critique of production, energy and natural systems which considers how the choices we make in creating our world are embedded within power dynamics which are not without consequence. For example, Mies critiques human made systems, such as capitalism and neoliberalism, which drive the exploitation of those who are associated with natural systems through control and ownership. Shiva discusses the importance of connectedness with land arguing that indigenous people who are reliant on the land that they live on for physical and spiritual sustenance have been made homeless by large corporations moving them off their land; while Plumwood (2003) and Merchant consider the exploitation of natural systems and the link with dominance over these systems to dominance over women. Although there would be disagreement from within the ecofeminist perspectives as to what constitutes energy and the role of the spiritual in the human nature relationship, what binds ecofeminists together is to advocate for harmonious ways to live with Earth’s systems and acknowledging the concept of a nonlinear non-hierarchical relationship with cosmological energy that drives Earth’s systems to advocate.

The relational aspect of ecofeminist perspective is differs vastly from a Darwinian progress model where life is seen as a series of evolutionary steps towards the more civilized and survival of the fittest. Instead ecofeminists view current issues as arising from the consequences of past unacknowledged inequalities and oppressions. Using an ecofeminist perspective is important as can uncover the historical context of the past power and inequality in relationships, webs and ecosystems An Ecofeminist perspective can critique traditional wisdoms and contemporary feminist perspective, which may have been cast aside as useless in the name of a patriarchal neoliberal progress model of efficiency.

Women from The Women’s room would often cite past matriarchal relationships as a lineage of women who have gone before them to draw on a perceived common strength for inspiration in reimagining how women can become empowered. Although each has envisaged the concept of land from different perspectives, there is a striking similarity between an ecofeminist perspective and indigenous perspective of land as central to our relationship with place. Shiva, Deborah Bird Rose and Somerville all consider the interaction between humans and the more than human elements of place and how these relationships are vital for a flourishing self and community. Anita Heiss, an Aboriginal writer, provides us with a refreshing insight on place reminding us that our relationship to place does not need to fulfil stereotypical traditions but can be had in the city. Heiss writes

“We have our own forms of self-identification and self-representation... that regardless of where we live we are strong in our identity”.

What I find interesting about Heiss’ concept of place is that it goes beyond a dependency of having a relationship with a pure, natural, traditional or wild place to a deeper
understanding of our own story and identity. I think it is the deeper energy that flows through us from our ancestral roots as well as our connections with a lived place and how we remake these in our contemporary world which is important in understanding and critiquing.

Feeling the earth beneath your feet and reconnecting to your roots connects us back to our history, our story and ancestral identity. Story and art are ways of expressing our relationship to others and place. The cosmos drives life and life drives the stories and experiences which we wish to express in our creative work. The creative seeker can connect to the energy that is in-between the unspoken spaces, between the visible and the invisible. I imagine but cannot know for sure but intuitively sense that this energy symbolises dark matter, invisible and perhaps intangible. We know it is present through the behaviours of the matter we can see and how we feel but not necessarily know it in a material sense. However, I have found it vital to seek out the invisible and feel this energy to inspire the creativity that I wish to engage in as this is the storehouse of transformative potential.

Once we have passed through our storm in our creative process, our test or travail as we discussed in Lesson 11, the world can seem open to us. We then need to negotiate this new unknown to us space. Dwelling in the in-between may feel unusual, even uncomfortable as if in loss. We might feel like a space has opened up to us, new but unfamiliar, exciting but overwhelming. The unknown may fill us with a sense of, ‘What now? What do I do? Where do I go? How do I step forward? How do I live after the challenges?’ or ‘how do I live up to that amazing experience of elation?’ You may feel free but not know what to do with your freedom.

At this point in the creative process after you have finished your project and before the next one begins there is a space where it feels as if nothing exists. This is like the space between breaths, the space between heartbeats, and the blue note in music, which is not really a note but is created by all the other notes surrounding it. Here in this space it is both the beginning and the end. It is where anything is possible. Often in this space, because extraneous elements have dissipated, certain clarity unfolds. This is where the known meets the unknown. Anticipation meets fear. Embrace this moment because it is a time to reconnect to what is important to you. Even if this moment feels fuzzy and uncertain, in hindsight, I recognise it being a time of clarity. If in this moment I feel uncertainty, stickiness, overwhelmingness, my lived wisdom tells me to stop, to sit again in the sun. I dig my toes into the cool moss covered ground, the rich earth of our existence. I close my eyes and feel. I feel the glorious healing rays of the springtime. I smell the rich moist soil in my garden beneath my feet. There is no need to rush. I imagine the energy of the earth moving through my feet, up into my spine, and emerging through my crown. I allow the energy to move through me again. You are not who you were yesterday.

To reconnect to your creative self, to wake up to your inner life, to begin the creative process again, I advocate being physically active, travelling, stretching our perspective, noticing, being curious, moving the mind, begin again at seeking. Not because there is a deficit in who you are or a need to fix your life, or in a frivolous quest to be insanely happy or well balanced. Not for intellectualism’s sake either. No. Being in the creative flow of live has the potential to be good for our wellbeing because it helps us to remember the magnificence of life and who we are. It helps to connect us to the life energy from which we have come and which has the potential to transform our everyday experiences into meaningful parts of the whole cosmological story. When we remember all of those who
have gone before us, our metaphorical roots ground us through a sense of belonging. Our spiritual ancestors are with us, urging us on, guiding us. Our children are willing us into the future to be part of their journey, to create life. The links that re-join you to your creativity are your own story. The lessons, challenges, joy, love, grief and frustrations contained within your body as little wisdoms, even if not front of mind, remain within your cells. The space before the beginning and after the end can feel exhilarating, empowering. It is a space where we can reflect on what we have just been through. This is the moment we realise we have done it, created it, finished it, survived. Listen to your emotions to guide you on what to do next. When we breathe in this moment, in the stillness, we can feel solid in who we have become and anticipate a hopeful opportunity to create who we are becoming.

**Video**

**Carl Sagan**

We are the way the cosmos can know itself.
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECuarAmpK00](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECuarAmpK00)

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**Sayings on the page**

*You don’t start with the corporation and ask how to redesign it. You start with life, with human life and the life of the planet, and ask, how do we generate the conditions for life’s flourishing?*

(Marjorie Kelly 2012)
We are part of the same processes, universal forces and cycles that our ancestors were part of. We look up at the stars, we gaze at the moon; we have come from the Earth. This Goddess of the Earth spreads her fertile flowers so that seeds may germinate. For me this also represents ideas, hope and compassion for humans to renew their relationship with their environment. I live in hope that more of us will develop a growing awareness of the preciousness of Earth's animals, plants other creatures, rocks and streams. The Earth is alive. The Earth is us. We are the Earth.
Activity

Stimulus

What have you forgotten and need to remember? What and who have you lost touch with? Is there anything or anyone that you need to reconnect with? This activity is about reminding yourself what is important to you. This activity is about reconnecting to your roots, your identity and belonging. It is about remembering where you have come from and what your initial purpose was. Sometimes we can get blown off course and lose track of what we set out to do. Like Alice from Wonderland we do need to eventually find our way back on course. Importantly we also will have changed our perspective by the time we rediscover the pathway we were on and need to keep in mind that what once was helpful to us may no longer be the case. That is all part of the journey; however, every now and again it pays to refocus and recognise what we set out to do so we can rechart our course. Reconnecting to your roots may give you a new sense of freedom and empowerment where before you were timorous and unsure. We may Rediscover the track we were walking on was the right track after all, even though we were led to believe it was not. We may have found our own way with the help of others or we may have found a completely new adventure. When we rediscover what we have lost sight of we can relive the simple joys of life with a new sense of empowerment.

1. Literally dig your toes into the earth. Take your shoes off. Walk on the earth, soft grass, moss, sand, river pebbles – whatever is in your environment that appeals to you. Feel, sense and close your eyes to heighten your senses. If you want to, now use your hands to do the same. If you can, make ‘mud pies’ (mud mixed with water). Respond to your sensual experiences, by making marks with your feet and hands, on paper. Write words to describe the feelings you felt. Alternatively you could use clay if no mud is available.

2. Your roots and branches – the nexus web of life. In any creative genre, create a tree that represents your connections to other people, places and community. In the roots of your tree represent those that have gone before you, in the trunk those aspects of your life that are currently important to you and in the branches represent your hopes and dreams and connections to those that inspire you. Add to your representation little wisdoms that you have learnt traditions that are important to you and spiritual practices that keep you supported and nurtured. Consider the links between places, people and culture which have connections to each other and link these.

3. Creative activism: don’t be a bystander in your own life. What is so important to you that you wish to change it? What burns at your heart in anger, frustration or absolute passion? What do you care so much about that it aches? How can you leave your place, your community, in a better state than you came to it? What can you do for your community to impact positively? How can you help your community to flourish? Why would you want to help your community? Here is an invitation to you to put some of your energy into an altruistic purpose. What if I was to tell you that you were the only one in the world that had the power to do anything about it? What would you do? How do you want the world to be?
a better place for our children? Change begins with change within you and your inner life. It is important that you start in your own backyard but you do not need to stay there. The aim of this activity is to fire you up and into action for a better life for yourself or collective action in your community.

4. Design a creative activism project to address your issue. First step is to identify what is really important to you. What are your values? Next step is to find out what is out there already. Narrow down what you want to do ... this is your cause. Your cause may not be grand and may even be about making change within yourself, or improving a relationship with a family member, or allowing more kindness towards those with whom you come into contact. It might be bigger, like advocating for youth, animals, nature or the disempowered and those who do not have the opportunity to voice their concerns. It is really important that your project comes from your own need and your own experience. If we act like we are able to fix our community’s/world’s problems without consulting with those who are experiencing oppressions or challenges, then we may disempower that group. If we act from a need that we share with our community we are more likely to understand the deeper concerns that need to be addressed. Be bold, ask questions, get into the community you are interested in being a part of and investigate. Next is to create a set of aims and actions. Remember to be curious while you carry out your project, document what you do, report on how you feel and what happens.
Workbook

Write a personal reflection on the transitional phases in your life.

How does transformation relate to the creative process?

How do you respond to dangerous situations?

How have you felt when you have survived a close call, a life or death experience or a long term challenge?

What can you do to move away from your difficult situation?
Epilogue

So here we have come to the end. I wonder what you have learnt and how far you have come. I wonder if you have taken to some of the activities and adapted these to make them your own. I have attempted to share with you what I know. It may be valuable to you or useless. It is what I have to offer. I have not held back. For now this is all I can give. After writing and writing for a long time as part of my doctoral work I am ready to come back to myself in a different way, through the visual and ethereal, through wondering and dreaming. I love words and images but these are not apolitical acts. Words and images can be used to harm as well as to uplift, to oppress to or to inspire. The way we are asked to use words is a political act which can exclude us if we do not have the ‘right’ words to say or know how to adequately put these together in the style that is required. I have wanted to challenge some of these assumptions about what is good deep thinking work and how this may manifest in diverse ways. I want to reclaim my own practice and feel once again the freedom of my own creative process. I urge you to reclaim your art, your life and invite love into your life. Define these in a way that means something to you. You do not need to be constrained by who or what others think you are.

I do not want you to think this is the end because in reality it is the beginning. I hope I have planted at least one creative seed for you, even if this is not the kind of book you would normally be drawn to. I hope this seed grows well. I do not wish to romanticize the creative process, for it can be perilous and risky. It can bring up unwanted and deeply buried parts of your inner life to the surface. It can create chaos where there was calm. We all need challenges to help us grow and flourish but also we need time to heal, to be gentle and, to rest. Our emotions, our senses and our spiritual connection to life is a powerful indicator of wellbeing and influences our thoughts and actions deeply. When we chose to disconnect from our emotional self we disconnect from life energy. For if we are of stone, if we are not moved, then how do we really change what we know needs to change and keep what needs to be kept. What can we do with a cold heart and a life that skims the surface of existence?
Finally I want to dedicate the ‘Essence of Love’ painting to all of you who struggle with life at times so that you know that life rarely goes to plan.

**Essence of Love**

**Acrylic on canvas**

I set out to paint a symbolic representation of what I see in my mind’s eye when I think of the “essence of love”. What I imagined was a simple orb that I intended to be light and lacy, glowing from the centre. The reality of this painting was very different. I could not make this “love” behave. It was not what I imagined. Here is my story which is a metaphor for the love in my life.

During the making of this painting;
Two of my kids and my husband were making their artworks for this exhibition beside me, interrupting me often.
My eldest son Jacob helped me with the shadow on the orb.
I had dark thoughts about people that I love.
I called a friend to tell her the truth.
I had to scrape off a red flower in the middle that was sickening.
I had to start again.
I was scared that I would keep stuffing it up.
The blue colours reminded me of the light I had seen when first making love to my husband.
The orb kept forming into a yin and yang shape which I didn’t want.
I added sperm headed red hearts penetrating into the ovum shape.
I added more and went too far.
I argued with my husband about his lack of kindness.
My 12 year old daughter gave me advice....”just keep going Mum; It will work out”.
My second son was hungry and hugged me.
My youngest son was making a clay sculpture of his beloved dead cat.
A friend rang in the middle of my frustration, now worried it was her.
My husband made me a cup of tea and gave me a kiss.
The blue paint tube was nearly empty....I cursed but found a darker one.
I asked for time alone, to have some space.
I contemplated my mess and took a deep breath
I began on the outer corners and worked my way into the centre.
This is where I usually stuff it up.
I was gentle here now, but terrified.
The many under layers would not be silent, pushing their way through.
I thought these under layers looked ugly but my husband and son thought these were the best bits.
I added the white squiggles....surely this was too simple.
I resisted adding more. I let it be.
I thought.....well love is not perfect; it looks simple but in reality can make you feel like shit.
The good bits come and go and come back again
So here is my essence of love......all of it!
Figure 15: Essence of Love
Selected Bibliography


Born, P. (2010) *Creating vibrant communities: How individuals and organisations from diverse sectors of society are coming together to reduce Poverty in Canada*. BPS books: Canada


