





Foreword

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I am honoured to contribute the foreword to this unique book of Noongar and Yamatji mothers' stories by a group of wise women who have taken the time to share their experiences with us. As I read these stories, my heart went out to the women, their mothers and grandmothers, their children and grandchildren. They tell of forced removals, of the impacts of the Stolen Generations – the powerful cultural genocide that has cruelly robbed them of the ability to birth on **Noongar Boodjar** on their own terms. They tell of racism, neglect and lack of empathy or understanding of the historical laws that affected all Aboriginal women and still do today. That the Western Australian Government laws – in particular, the Native Welfare Act – were still being implemented during my lifetime (I was born in 1946) still amazes me. The WA Aboriginal Child Health Survey, conducted in the early 2000s, quantified the extent and impacts of the forced removals of children from their families from 1900 to 1975. Between 40 and 60 percent of all Western Australian communities reported such removals. The impacts in terms of intergenerational trauma, loss of cultural practices (including birthing) and denial of

access to and use of language have been profound and explain much about Aboriginal people's circumstances today. Along with massacres, marginalisation and ongoing racism, the Stolen Generations policy accounts for almost all of the poor outcomes still experienced by many Aboriginal people, including poor physical and mental health, lack of educational opportunities, substance abuse, domestic violence and child maltreatment. If we **Wadjelas** had been subject to these laws and life disruptions, we would have similar outcomes. Colonised First Nations populations globally have similar outcomes, in spite of being very different peoples. Further, due to ongoing systemic racism, an absence of understanding of Aboriginal family kinship, and punitive child protection surveillance and practices, current maternity care is still not serving Australia's First Nations mothers and children well. Inequitable social determinants and application of the law, among other factors, have led to health and social disparities being disproportionately felt by Aboriginal women and their families. These circumstances have also resulted in higher rates of incarcerated Aboriginal women, often when they are pregnant, rather than systematic recognition of the role of prevention and early intervention – key to reducing the anguish and deaths which have damaged the lives of so many.

The capacity for survival and the cultural strengths demonstrated by the women storytellers, often including those of their mothers,

Aunty Madge Hill, Birthing on Noongar Boodjar Symposium, 2018.

‘This is a unique book of Noongar and Yamatji mothers’ stories by a group of wise women who have taken the time to share their experiences with us.’



aunties, grandmothers and families, is all the more extraordinary given the depletion of many families and communities by these laws. The resurgence of Noongar and Yamatji languages, the valuing of culture, the education of **Wadjelas** and particularly the emergence of outstanding cohorts of highly educated Aboriginal professionals, researchers, leaders and others is so exciting and bodes well for a reversal of negative trends and an improvement in health and wellbeing for all First Nations populations. The challenge of becoming educated in the dominant culture while keeping strong in one's own culture as well is enormous, but Aboriginal women and men are doing just that. They are not only excelling in medicine, nursing, midwifery, psychology, social sciences, mental health, child health and public health but in history, agriculture, science and all areas of endeavour. Suddenly, as climate change, bushfires and land management challenges confront us, mainstream culture is keen for First Nations knowledge to help solve the problems that our greedy and exploitative ways of living have caused.

Professor Rhonda Marriott and her team at Ngangk Yira Research Centre for Aboriginal Health and Social Equity epitomise this. They are highly successfully in the 'white man's world' while running an agenda supportive of Aboriginal families and children to national acclaim. With this book of stories, along with other research being done, the Ngangk Yira team are giving voice to the oldest living culture on the planet. It gives me goosebumps (is there a Noongar word for goosebumps?) to think about that. In spite of the attempted – and nearly successful – genocide, the Elder and Senior women are able to tell it how it was, how it is and how it should be, for them and their families. The Australian First Nations response to the 2020–21 COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how effective giving power and a voice to Aboriginal people can be. As far as we can ascertain, their outcomes were among

the best in the world: six times fewer cases among Australian First Nations people than among the rest of the Australian community – a complete reversal of the gap! The reason for this was that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professionals led the response for First Nations communities.

I hope that this book will inspire you. I hope that First Nations people will read it and say ‘Yes, I can. I am a healthy Aboriginal person grounded firmly in my culture while succeeding in the dominant culture, and my birthing stories will influence and enrich my and others’ life and work.’ And I hope that **Wadjelas** will read it and be inspired to learn, to have empathy and to oppose the racism which is so detrimental to First Nations families and communities. Congratulations to all of you.

Middar Yorgas next to the **Derbarl Yerrigan**, Birthing on Noongar Boodjar Symposium, 2018.





Introduction

AUNTY DOREEN NELSON

Noongar Elder / Co-Editor

Since the beginning of time, people have had many significant roles and personal experiences throughout their life's journey. Traditionally, in Aboriginal society, cultural knowledge and information was passed down through generations. The stories told by the Aboriginal women in this book highlight the importance of the cultural and educational role of Aboriginal women in the birthing process throughout the Noongar Country of Western Australia. They also describe these women's own personal birthing experiences in sometimes very isolated and difficult situations. It is considered by health specialists to be high-risk for Aboriginal women to give birth outside the hospital environment. However, some of these women talk about their experiences as being very natural.

Before colonisation, Aboriginal grandmothers were the traditional midwives. These women had the skills and experience of knowing what was the best practice to use. They also had knowledge of what kinds of bush medicines to use in labour and following the birth. This traditional cultural practice of birthing is very comforting and alleviates the pain and discomfort of childbirth. Midwives would massage the mother and stay with her throughout the whole birthing process. It was a natural process. The women also talk about the importance of family support, and how stories and knowledge are passed on as an educational tool, and

how it connects them to Country. One example is the practice of burying the placenta on Country.

It is hoped that this book about Aboriginal woman birthing on Country will be a great educational resource for midwives and for young mothers who may not have support while giving birth to their babies. We also hope that recognition will be given to the Aboriginal ways of doing things, and to the Aboriginal midwives who played a special role in 'women's business' in the past. We would like to highlight the importance of acknowledging the birthing processes of the women of today, and how very different they may be from the traditional practices of Aboriginal women in the past. This book is only the beginning of collecting more stories and information from all women, now and in the future.

'The stories told by the Aboriginal women in this book highlight the importance of the cultural and educational role of Aboriginal women in the birthing process.'



PROFESSOR RHONDA MARRIOTT

AM, PhD, RN, MIDWIFE

Director, Ngangk Yira Research Centre for Aboriginal Health and Social Equity / Co-editor

The inception of this book came from Aunty Doreen Nelson, at the 'Because of her, we can!' 2018 NAIDOC Week celebration at Ngangk Yira. Aunty Doreen declared that the birth stories that had been shared by Elders and Senior women at the Birthing on Noongar Boodjar Symposium earlier that year needed to be preserved as a legacy for their families and as an educational tool for midwives.

As a midwife and a Kimberley girl whose grandmothers and aunts come from a long line of strong and proud Nyikina women, I am very honoured to co-edit this book with Aunty Doreen Nelson and Associate Professor Tracy Reibel, and humbled that the twelve authors have entrusted us at Ngangk Yira to host the 'gestation' of *Ngangk Waangening: Mothers' Stories*. These stories, which remain the copyright of each author, are powerful and real and provide a window of reflection into the life of each mother as she shares her moving, lived experience. We are honoured that each woman has shared this small part of her legacy of lived experience for you to read and to learn from.

During the Birthing on Noongar Boodjar research project, many of the midwives we interviewed¹ asked for something such as a brochure that would direct them to what they needed to know when supporting Aboriginal women and their families. This book provides all of that and more, as we 'hear' from these wise grandmothers who share deeply personal aspects of their life journeys.

My own birth, in 1950, was in the Derby Hospital, where my mother was treated well. Derby at that time was a small remote town where everyone knew one another, and families were close. Mum tells me that she felt supported throughout her labour by the midwives, the hospital Matron and the doctor. Her biological mother – my grandmother – however, never knew or met my mum or me because of the complicated Native Welfare Act enforced on Aboriginal women who birthed children to non-Aboriginal fathers in the 1920s, when my mother was born (1928). Tragically for Mum and for us, my mother was forcibly removed from her biological mother in her early years and forbidden to have anything to do with her. When I read the mothers' stories in this book, I am tragically reminded that my own mother's story also needs to be told before it is too late. This book is the beginning of Ngangk Yira's and my personal commitment to facilitating a critical legacy that we will continue to support for other Aboriginal women.

When we reviewed the collection of mothers' stories, five key groups of themes emerged: cultural birthing; family involvement in birthing; cultural birthing practices; exclusion, segregation and child removal; and hospital births and clinical care. These echo the themes that emerged from the Birthing on Noongar Boodjar research project.²

I am passionate about the importance the learning opportunities presented in *Ngangk Waangening* offer to midwives and midwifery students to assist them develop truly respectful, thoughtful, woman-centred care for Aboriginal women and their families. I ask that midwives ask Aboriginal women and their families what they need and how you, as midwives, can best support them. My dream is also to see in my lifetime a maternity services system in which staff do not have to consciously think about how they can offer a culturally safe experience for Aboriginal women, because Aboriginal women and families



‘These stories are powerful and real and provide a window of reflection into the life of each mother as she shares her moving, lived experience.’

always feel culturally safe and respected, and their needs are provided for and valued. Aunty Doreen, Tracy and I believe that the learning opportunities embodied by Valerie Ah Chee’s beautiful artwork *Kabarli Katitjin* (‘Grandmother’s Wisdom’), together with the twelve personal stories contained in this book, are sparks that, if enacted in practice, will fuel the necessary individual professional accountability for change.

No book ever comes into being without the support and passion of like-minded people, and we are privileged that Aunty Doreen Nelson, Associate Professor Tracy Reibel and Jade Maddox so passionately assisted in shepherding this book into the world: Tracy for her wonderful writing and visualisation skills; Jade for her culturally respectful relationships with the Elders; and Aunty Doreen for her wisdom, guidance and vision. Without Aunty Doreen’s, Tracy’s and Jade’s insights and actions, this book’s gestation would have been much slower! We are also privileged that Valerie Ah Chee agreed to create *Kabarli Katitjin* especially for *Ngangk Waangening: Mothers’ Stories*. Valerie is a truly amazing artist, and her story of the painting provides a beautiful introduction to the inspirational mothers’ stories contained within.

Each storyteller in this book shares with you incredible insights, and I now invite you to read these empowering stories of strength and resilience. If you are an Aboriginal woman, I hope that you are inspired to tell your story and to encourage your mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, daughters and granddaughters to also share their stories with

their families, so that they do not become lost in time. Your stories are your legacies. This is true for all those mothers-to-be who are yet to ‘collect the souls of their babies and return to this world together’, as Valerie Ah Chee quotes from an anonymous author in her explanation of *Kabarli Katitjin*.

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- 1 Marriott, R., Reibel, T., Barrett, T-L., Bowen, A., Bradshaw, S., Kendall, S., Kotz, J., Martin, T., Monterosso, L., and Robinson, M. (2020). ‘Midwifery knowledge of equitable and culturally safe maternity care for Aboriginal women’. *Birth* 47(4). December. <https://doi.org/10.1111/birt.12525>
 - 2 Marriott, R., Reibel, T., Coffin, J., Gliddon, J., Griffin, D., Robinson, M., Eades, AM., and Maddox, J. (2019). “Our culture, how it is to be us” – Listening to Aboriginal women about on Country urban birthing’. *Women and Birth* 32(5): 391–403, October. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wombi.2019.06.017>



Elders Birth Story Poster Session, Birthing on Noongar Boodjar Symposium, 2018.



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TRACY REIBEL

PhD, CF

**Principal Research Fellow, Ngangk Yira Research Centre
for Aboriginal Health and Social Equity / Co-editor**

Since 2018 I have had the privilege of walking alongside the Elder and Senior women who have contributed their stories to this book. The women's wisdom, knowledge, strength, humour and willingness to share their stories has revealed so much to me about their connection to their culture, to their families and to each other. Along the way they have invited me to join in yarns, and the knowledge I have gained is immeasurable. I feel honoured to have been able to work with the women and with Aunty Doreen to shape the content of this book, drawing in their voices to focus on and highlight the learning opportunities their stories present.

Bringing a child into the world is an experience that women never forget. How they were treated, whether kindly or not, remains with them throughout their lives. The women's stories gathered here are a testament to that. Their stories are a reminder for all those involved in the care of pregnant women of the need to reflect on how keenly women feel and remember their birthing experiences. It is crucial that midwives, doctors and others consider what they can do in their roles to facilitate the best possible birthing experiences for the women they encounter – especially Aboriginal women, who absolutely deserve, like all other women, to be treated with respect and kindness. When you walk with an Aboriginal woman during her pregnancy journey, ask questions sensitively and listen to her responses. What for you may be an everyday routine is a life-changing experience for the women you support and care for. A safe

birth is not one that is just clinically safe; it also needs to be culturally, spiritually and emotionally safe.

When the concept of this book was first put forward by Aunty Doreen, we knew how important it would be. With the support of the Western Australian Government Department of Health – in particular Wendy Casey, Director of the Aboriginal Health Policy Directorate, and Tracy Martin, then Acting Chief Nurse and Midwifery Officer with the Chief Nursing and Midwifery Office – the funds were provided to underwrite the publication. Both Wendy and Tracy regarded the publication of *Ngangk Waangening* as an important educational resource to be used across the health system and in university settings – bringing the lived experiences of these wise women to the attention of those responsible for providing care during the highly significant life event of child-bearing.

To have an idea is one thing; to have the means to carry an idea to fruition is another thing entirely. At Ngangk Yira we are immensely grateful for the ongoing support we receive from the Elders who generously collaborate with us in our research and advocacy endeavours; to Aboriginal communities across Western Australia for their willingness to be involved in our research efforts; and to the network of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal colleagues who tangibly contribute to everything we do. No journey is walked alone, and the leadership that Professor Rhonda Marriott has brought to creating Ngangk Yira and promoting a highly collaborative research environment is something in which I am very honoured to play a part.

Finally, I pay tribute and respect to my friend and colleague Jade Maddox. You teach me every day, challenging my thinking and keeping everything we do firmly situated in Aboriginal culture, with knowledge and perspectives that demonstrate a finely tuned antenna clearly signalling how we should go about our business. You are a superb **mooditj yorga**.

Smoking ceremony,
Birthing on Noongar
Boodjar Symposium, 2018.

‘It is crucial that midwives, doctors and others consider what they can do in their roles to facilitate the best possible birthing experiences for the women they encounter.’

