

Ngali-Ngalim-Boorroo (For the Women)

NANCY NODEA

"This painting, I'm doing behind me, is about our people, before us. You know. How they bin¹ living, in caves and in paperbark humpies and when they used to get bush food, like a boob nut - you see that boob tree standing there [in the painting] - they used to crush it and grind it. Seeds. Good eating. That's what they bin full up on, boob nut and all that. Bush tucker. Might be minyjarra [native plum] and all that. Minyjarra they used to crush it too, little bit, make it like a damper too.

That's the olden day story, before us. When I bin young we bin come the station way. We used to still go out with our people, bush. Learning us all that thing, like bush tucker and all that food, goanna everything, turkey, kangaroo, bush potato."

Gija women of Nancy Nodea's generation were born and grew up on their traditional country, albeit as it had been carved up by pastoralists who arrived in the East Kimberley in the late 1800s. Since this time, cultural and social change and seismic shifts in government policy have meant younger peoples' lives in the semi-suburban town of Warmun are radically different from their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Senior women often speak about the desire to teach their young women what they feel is important. For decades they have been working to transform these ideas and insights into action. Art has become one way of actualising the kind of connections, conversations and change that they see as necessary and urgent. These women work in ways that are often unacknowledged and overlooked by people within and outside their community. Their work has seen immense

¹ Bin is a Kriol word that tells you the speaker is referring to an action that took place in the past



Nancy Nodea, video still from Ngali-ngalim-boorroo, 2014, courtesy Warmun Art Centre

success and very deep failure. But regardless, it continues. They understand that younger Gija women face realities, dynamics and challenges that are both inextricably connected to and drastically different from those they themselves have lived through.

The paintings and videos that form *Ngali-Ngalim-Boorroo (For the Women)* are part of a diverse and ongoing project that has been developed by senior Gija women at Warmun Art Centre. Over the last year and a half these women, including Phyllis Thomas, Mabel Juli, Shirley Purdie and Shirley Drill among others, have lead a series of bush trips to different parts of Gija Country in order to share time with and teach their young women what they feel is important.

MABEL JULI

"We followed them old people, for give us good. What they talking, you know, make you good inside, la² your giningi [in your heart]. Open your heart. Makes you really good. Not here [in Warmun]. When you here la [at] home, you don't come good. You really - you know - you don't know what you do, la [in] this place. You have a lot of trouble in this place, for all the ngali [girls], you know. And we want to try take all the young woman out la bush, you know lirrarn [teach] all [of them] all that. Make them understand, and they don't want to do nothing here when they come back and making mess, humbug you know. They want to be good, just like old people. That's really good."

² The word la in Kimberley Kriol is a preposition that translates variously to mean 'in', 'at' or 'on'



Mabel Juli, video still from *Ngali-ngalim-boorroo*, 2014, courtesy Warmun Art Centre

Aboriginal women's lives on cattle stations consisted of hard, unpaid manual work in the gardens, houses and stock camps of white station managers and their families. Although it is a period that older women describe as being a product of violent displacement and characterized by brutal inequity, they also speak of it as a time of autonomy and continuity. Gija people seized opportunities to access their Country and to practice ways of being in and seeing the world that have sustained and supported Gija people for countless generations.

In the mid-1960s when the Whitlam government passed legislation demanding Aboriginal pastoral workers be awarded pay equal to that of their white counterparts, Gija people were forced to leave the stations, and rendered homeless refugees in their own Country. This period is known as the second displacement. In the following years, a very small plot of land that was not under pastoral lease - the rations depot and telegraph station of Turkey Creek - was transformed into a community for Gija people to call their own. Warmun is now one of the largest Aboriginal communities in the East Kimberley and one considered 'viable' according to criteria insisted upon by government, their arms and agencies. For this reason it has been afforded infrastructure that is shaping it into a small town with its own freedoms, pressures, constraints and complexities. This is the world which younger women have grown up, learnt to navigate and survive in.

BETTY CARRINGTON (speaking to a group of young women)

"Well, we like to teach you mob, take you mob out. And what I feel, I like to hear you fellas talk Gija language. I like to hear you fellas singing little bit of a joonba [a song and dance cycle]. Dancing joonba. That's we own culture, black fella culture. We bin born with that. I bin learn all around here, when I bin little, singing corroboree, dancing. Well I'd like to see you mob do that. And hunting. Getting bush tucker. And I like to hear you fellas jarrag [talk], Gija. That's why we have this Gija program, for you mob to rangga [listen]. You can learn. I jarrag Gija for you mob all the time at camp, all around."

It is important to understand that the energy that has created *Ngali-ngalim-boorroo* is only the latest incarnation of decades of dedicated work. In their efforts to fully take up their roles as teachers, carers, providers, healers and creators, senior women work teaching in the school, in their homes, in drug and alcohol and therapeutic programs and at the art centre using storytelling and art as tools towards these ends. They carry their responsibility to mentor and guide younger people happily and with humour but often heavily. The systems that younger women are obliged to master and move within as they negotiate school, work, accessing healthcare etc. often only admit elders as expert knowledge holders in ways that are bounded and conditional. They fall short of really seeing and honouring what it is senior Gija women know, what they do and what they have to offer their own community. In this way their authority is often undermined. *Ngali-ngalim-boorroo* has been led by these women and they have worked through difficult obstacles to continue to speak to their young people with conviction and with love.

Betty Carrington, video still from *Ngali-ngalim-boorroo*, 2014, courtesy Warmun Art Centre





Phyllis Thomas, video still from *Ngali-ngalim-boorroo*, 2014, courtesy Warmun Art Centre

PHYLLIS THOMAS

"When we bin young it bin hard for me fella, When we bin kid we used to follow old old people, and they used to make us carry our own swag, billycan, we bin always carry them. They used to give us that paper bark, mernda. We call it mernda, paper bark. Put a blanket, pillow, everything and carry them.

We'd go to another place and find billabong water. Old, old people bin always say, "Right, all you kid, you fella go. You fella go cut a tree, and get a grass and chuck 'em long one in the water." Gerlgayi-girrem, means we used to roll that spinifex. Goorndarri. Goorndarri means fish and he used to get stuck in that grass. Grab him. That kind we bin learn, me fella.

We never feel lazy with the old people. When we used to get lazy we used to get a hiding for doing that. We never follow anybody mates, we used to be self. Another one go got his family, another one go got his family. But we bin learn, go bush. We bin walk got a [on] foot. Gerlgayi³, hunting for bush tucker, that kind me-fella bin learn. We bin learn, go back work for gardiya [white people] la station. Wake up, sweep up, washing dishes, milking cow, milking nanny goat, all that sort of thing we bin learn. Carry water from a well in a bucket. We never had a pump that time, we had a well.

And never even go near young boy. They bin keep us out me fella, girl and boy. Girl for self, boy for self. Otherwise we used to get a hiding, if they used to find us talking with a young boy. We bin learn different way, hard way me fella. But this time we see 'em young girl, young boy all mixed up. But me fella, we bin have it hard way from old old people.

We never wait for anybody, we bin learn different way. Not go for one fire from another people. We used to make our own fire....

Goondarrim-boorroo, marra yarra, that mean 'go out fishing'. Or go rolling spinifex, but gardiya [white people have] got a dragging net. But we bin chuck a long long stick and get a spinifex, any kind of grass, mix it up. That's the way we bin learn, me fella."

When these senior Gija women share their knowledge of Gija language, Ngarranggarni (Dreaming), dance, song, story and of their Country, they show their magnificence, their fierce love of their place and each other, their mastery over complex knowledge and its expression. In these things they are experts; sharply insightful, capable and fleet, precise and practiced. These women have the power to change the weather, to talk to spirits, to feed hungry bellies with fat fish and sweet honey, to weave stories and sing songs that will wake up the Country, to show the way to Ngarranggarni places, to find water and the best fishing spots, to cut the right kind of wood for cooking and for making smoke that will keep mosquitoes off sleeping babies. This process draws from what they themselves were taught and fills it with their confidence in its potential to impact problems that their community shoulders and that sometimes seem intractable – drug abuse, undirected rage and depression, suicide and early death. When they are on their own country, these senior women exercise the authority handed to them by their own elders and call up their memory. They cast it out towards the future they want for their young people and for women to come.

SHIRLEY PURDIE (speaking to a group of young women)

“Ngali-ngalim, we do this for you fellas, young young girls. Take you fellas, show you fellas bush life, hunting, dancing corroboree, any kind, singing, teaching you fellas story. That’s why we’re doing this. To learn you about the trees and explain to you mob what country means. That’s what’s important for us. We gotta keep that story going.

I’m sure you fellas will all be interested, and you can pass it on when you mob have your kids and when you mob come to be grandmother, and great-grandmother.

When I go to a waterhole, I barrayi la [speak in a special way to] Country. I talk:

Berrem noonanyge boowoorr-yoorroong-milim daam-birri. Ngoowan ganginy bimbir-rijbe ningoowoom-yoo yoowoorriyangem ngenengga daam.

‘I brought them here, people from country to the north. Don’t you mob fail to recognise them. They’re our countrymen. I am speaking to this country.’

Well my Aunty Winnie and my Dad bin learn me how to talk like that.”



Shirley Purdie, video still from *Ngali-ngalim-boorroo*, 2014, courtesy Warmun Art Centre

Words by Nancy Nodea, Mabel Juli, Betty Carrington, Phyllis Thomas and Shirley Purdie extracted from interviews recorded by Nancy Daylight, Margaret Joshua and Asayah Nodea in September 2014 in the Media Lab at Warmun Art Centre. Full text compiled and co-authored by Anna Crane and Alana Hunt.