

## Thesis abstract

# Olagija Research: A collaborative journey in relational truth-telling

Lillian Tait

Abstract of a thesis for a Doctorate of Philosophy submitted to Macquarie University, Australia

*Wen yu lugumbat stori yu garra gu ebri lil  
bush trek weya ola stori im be.*

When you're searching for stories you've got to go along every little bush track to where all the stories are located (Rhonda, 14 May 2019).<sup>1</sup>

This thesis stories a collaborative truth-telling journey led by Ngalakgan Country and Ritharrngu sisters Margaret and Rhonda Duncan with settler doctoral student Lillian Tait. Our research journey has taken us from Urapunga community on Ngalakgan Country in the Roper Region of the Northern Territory across the Top End of Australia, along 'bush tracks' and highways, into board rooms, living rooms, and deep within the colonial archive. It has been led by Margaret and Rhonda's questions surrounding their father's mysterious origins. While captivating, many of the stories encountered along our journey do not feature in this thesis, rather they have been written into a bi-lingual book titled *Lugubatbat Stori: Our search for the truth about our dad* (Duncan and Duncan, forthcoming), written primarily for younger generations of family. This thesis, on the other hand, documents our approach to doing collaborative

and anticolonial research guided by ethics of relationality, reciprocity and care.

The thesis documents our approach to looking for stories by engaging with Country, storytellers and archives; telling stories through art that centres Ngalakgan Country, sovereignty and survivance; and, telling stories through words via co-analysis, co-writing and co-translation. This work is one part of a larger journey of reciprocity, which builds on existing relationships between co-researchers and extends Masters-level research. Such process unsettles academic norms of doctoral research as a discreet and isolated journey.

Our research contributes to growing calls for greater truth-telling about Australia's past and present. It offers a community- and Country-led methodology involving co-creative multisensory methods for engaging with place, people and stories across, through and as time. Truths are understood here as stories in and of the land — they are plural, unfinished and always in emergence. I argue truth-telling needs to go beyond telling to doing through an ethical agenda that is:

- relational: centring relationships between people and/as Country in decision making and research practice;
- responsive: attending to the situated and diverse needs of people, place and time, which is by nature, subject to change; and,

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Tait has asked that we note the names of her collaborators Margaret and Rhonda Duncan.

- recuperative: intentionally wrapping painful stories with love in order to weave generative stories that connect people with their responsibilities to and as part of place and time.

Dr Lillian Tait  
POLIS: The Centre for Social Policy  
Research  
Australian National University

E-mail: [lillian.tait@anu.edu.au](mailto:lillian.tait@anu.edu.au)

URL: Currently under embargo